

# 9'11"01 (September 11)

Dir: Various, UK/France/Bosnia-Herzegovina/Egypt/Israel/Japan, 2002

## A review by Elizabeth Rosen, University College London, UK

Part of the shock of the events of September 11, 2001 was in the witnessing of them. Never before had an act of mass murder been instantaneously relayed across the world through the modern media. The immediacy which marks our contemporary media meant that the entire world could, and did, watch the destruction of the World Trade Centre in real time. And it is in large part due to the mass media -- which had been beaming images of the iconic towers around the world for years -- that so many people outside the U.S. felt a kinship horror when the towers came down.

It's easy for Americans, who have sometimes been insular as a nation, to believe that the pain which accompanied these insidious attacks is unique in quality and quantity. But there is an antidote for that solipsism, and French television producer Alain Brigand has provided it with his omnibus film *9'11"01*. Brigand gave money to eleven film directors from eleven different countries and asked them each to make a film about September 11th. Each film was to last eleven minutes, nine seconds, plus one frame. All the directors had to agree not to incite bigotry, but were given total freedom of expression otherwise. The results, for the most part, are quite successful.

The stories here range from the personal to the political, the devastating to the comedic. Brigand makes a shrewd choice in opening with Iranian director Samira Makhmalbaf's contribution. Set in an Afghan refugee camp in Iran, the camera lingers on five-year-olds making bricks for a shelter to protect them from the American bombing they expect imminently. A young teacher makes her way amongst them, calling them to school. The film documents this young woman's struggle to get the children to understand about "the important global event" which has occurred. But the children are distracted by everything from rumours that someone in the village has fallen down the well to a debate on whether God really kills people. "Don't be silly", one of the boys says, "God doesn't have airplanes". The resigned frustration registered in the teacher's face as she tries to get her pupils to maintain a minute of respectful silence is heartrending. In response, she leads them all out to look at the massive chimney of the brick kiln, hoping this will help them imagine the events in New York. This chimney, which looms over the children and from which black smoke pours, is a poignant reminder of another smoking tower, while the fidgety children, who cannot imagine anything of much importance beyond the camp borders, are remarkably effective metaphors for pre-September 11th Americans.

Like this one, several of the films serve as reminders that other countries and cultures are suffering tragedies of their own. The juxtaposition of their stories against the all-encompassing news of the terrorist attacks makes for fascinating and emotional viewing. Danis Tanovic of Bosnia-Herzegovina, for instance, focuses on a group of Bosnian women who march in remembrance of Srebrenica on the eleventh of every month. While the dejected

women listen to the news about the World Trade Centre, and resign themselves to the fact that no-one will take notice of them that day, one bereft young woman resolves to march anyway. When, in the final moments of the film, the other women silently join her on the square to show their solidarity, we are reminded that, though unheeded, the consequences of other massacres are still reverberating in the world outside of New York, and were, even on the day that so absorbed us.

Israeli director Amos Gitai makes the same point ironically when he re-enacts a car bombing in Tel Aviv, and the reporter trying to cover the story can't get on air because "something big has happened in New York". Gitai's film is shot in a single take, and the result is a feeling of dizzying chaos which amplifies the all-too-frequent horror experienced by Israelis when suicide bombers come amongst them.

Idrissa Ouedraogo's entry has, for some reason, been neglected by reviewers, and yet this filmmaker is the only one of the eleven who risked making a comedic film. His plot revolves around four teenage boys in Burkina Faso trying to capture a man they believe to be Osama Bin Laden in order to reap the reward being offered for him. The boys are hysterically funny as they stalk the Osama look-alike with a video camera, and then make plans to take him by surprise as he prays. As in any good comedy, plans go awry, but one of the reasons Ouedraogo's film works is because it makes very serious points with a light-handed touch. The reason the boys want the reward is because one of their mothers is desperately ill but can't afford the expensive medicines she needs. In a deft scene, the boys kneel in the dust trying to figure out how much the twenty-five million dollar reward translates to in their own currency. It's beyond their ability to reckon, and here Ouedraogo makes his poignant point: that the kind of money which is being offered for the capture of a single man could, put to a different use, help millions of sick and poor people in certain parts of Africa.

Other filmmakers, such as American Sean Penn and Frenchman Claude Lelouch, have chosen to emphasise the private, rather than the public. Each focuses on an individual who is only peripherally touched by the events of September 11th. For Penn, this is a story about an elderly widower who still lays out his wife's nightgown next to him in bed every night. Lelouch's story revolves around a deaf Frenchwoman in New York whose relationship is failing, and who is so immersed in trying to make sense of this personal tragedy that she never realises that the World Trade Centres are falling. Both these entries have mildly unsatisfying conclusions, either too ambiguous or too mawkish, but their messages are noteworthy, despite the clumsy endings: for the average person, tragedy comes in smaller, less dramatic forms than the one we witnessed on September 11th.

Three other directors choose to widen their scope to the political world. Of these, two work well, but the third, Egyptian director Youssef Chahine's entry, is badly written and ill conceived; a real pity since, of all the perspectives, the Arab one might have been a telling counterpoint to the actual event. More successfully, Indian director Mira Nair tells the true story of Salman Hamdani who went missing on September 11th. The American-born Hamdani was first accused by the F.B.I. of being a terrorist, then deemed a hero when his remains were identified in the rubble of the World Trade Centre six months later.

Ken Loach of the U.K. examines the hypocrisy of U.S. policy by letting Chilean exile "Pablo" recall the horror of Chile's own September 11th in 1973 when Pinochet overthrew the democratically elected Allende government. Loach relies mostly on old news footage to illustrate this portion of Chilean history, and the grainy, blue-tinted documentary footage of

that thirty-year-old event serves to emphasise the un-real, film-like quality of the modern media coverage which recorded the World Trade Centre bombing for posterity. If the device of the film -- which involves writing a letter -- is unwieldy narratively, Loach's refusal to soften his accusation of hypocrisy, even in the face of September 11th, is courageous and useful.

The most electrifying entry is also the most experimental. Mexican director Alejandro Gonzalez's piece is more rightfully a work in audio than video, but it is also the most disturbing of the films. For the majority of his eleven minutes, Gonzalez leaves the screen black. Over a swelling soundtrack of Mexican prayers for the dead, he lays the sounds of bodies colliding with the ground, radio reports of the attacks, cell phone messages left by victims, and the rumble of the collapsing floors of the towers. Intermittently, and almost too quickly to be registered, the director inserts flashes of videotape of people plummeting to their deaths from the towers. And then, just as the sound grows cacophonous, it suddenly stops, and the image of the towers falling silently fills the screen. The effect of these choices is to overwhelm the senses of the viewer and to "defamiliarise" us with images which we have seen many times and to which we have become insensible. Gonzalez renews our horror, reminding us not to forget what a cataclysmic attack this was. The film's single sentence epilogue is written in Arabic, and translated reads "Does God's light guide us or blind us?". Coming as it does after such an overwhelming assault on the viewer's senses, this pensive meditation has the effect of an electric shock.

After a year of justifiable outrage and grief, it is right that we be reminded that there are many other stories of pain and suffering, as well as many other perspectives on the events of September 11th, 2001. Suffering respects no boundaries of ethnicity or religion or nationality. We need to be reminded of this because only this kind of awareness will prevent other September 11ths from occurring.

# About Schmidt

Dir: Alexander Payne, USA, 2002

## A review by Brian Gibson, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada

Little critical attention has been paid to American cinematic satirist Alexander Payne, in stark contrast to the buzz over young U.S. directors such as Wes Anderson and P. T. Anderson, who also have only a few films to their credit. Perhaps satire isn't as acid on screen as it is in print, and Payne's Swiftian works certainly lack the zany quirkiness of Anderson's *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001) or the camera tricks of David O. Russell's *Three Kings* (1999). Payne's favoured setting of Nebraska can't help, either; a small state locale only bolsters the preconception that a movie titled *Election* (1999) must be a minor film. Yet, while Payne works with the same partners -- co-screenwriter Jim Taylor and cinematographer James Glennon -- his three films are so subtly different in characters and scope that I feel as though I have seen, in his Omaha trio of movies, a wryly sardonic, sweeping overview of the nation's foibles and flaws. *Citizen Ruth* (1997), Payne's bleakest satire, juxtaposes the hell of Ruth Shoop's (Laura Dern) life as a solvent sniffing indigent with the increasingly absurd (and far from altruistic) efforts of pro- and anti-choice camps to decide her foetus's future. *Election* is a whip-smart, perfectly paced satire of high school life and American politics, fuelled by sharp editing and darkly ironic voiceover narration. While Payne's films are notable for their refusal to take sides and to see every character as richly full of human weakness and moral compromises, Payne has been sharpening his focus without dulling his insights. *Citizen Ruth* saw a glue sniffer embroiled in a nationwide abortion debate, while *Election* culminated in a Omaha-wide scandal that forced Mr Macallister (Matthew Broderick) out of the state. But . . . *About Schmidt*?

On the face of it, *About Schmidt* is just that -- a film about Warren Schmidt, recently retired Assistant Vice-President of Woodmen Insurance in Omaha, Nebraska. Indeed, Schmidt's face often fills up the screen, the aged, craggy lines of Jack Nicholson's weathered visage confronting the audience. But from the first reel, as the camera takes in the stark industrial landscapes and rundown bungalows of the Midwest city, narrowing its gaze, frame by frame, on the bland tower of Woodmen Insurance looming over the flat, windswept metropolis, it becomes clear that Warren Schmidt is a man dominated, contained and beaten down -- by the loss of his job, by the annoying habits of his wife, by his daughter's disappointing fiancé, and by the purposeless, mundane days of his retirement.

Glennon first shows Schmidt looking forlornly up at the clock ticking the seconds slowly to 5.00 p.m. on his last day at work, Nicholson's bulky frame overshadowed by the dark, empty corners of his office. Panning around his house, the lens shows the bloated Schmidt reclining in his chair before the TV, dwarfed by the 1970s, Middle-American kitschiness of the rooms. As trapped on his way to the inevitable end as the wide-eyed bovine in a photo next to his picture at his retirement party, Schmidt later notices a man hosing down a mobile cattle shed during his wife's funeral service, and then, on the road to Denver for his daughter's wedding, he gazes out the window as a similar container rolls by, the eyes of fellow penned creatures

staring dolefully back at him through the holes in the metal. After his wife dies unexpectedly of a blood clot, Schmidt is engulfed by grief, slathering on her skin lotion and sniffing her perfume in remembrance, sprawling asleep in a house he never cleans, and manoeuvring his gargantuan Winnebago mobile home into a superstore parking lot in order to fill it with bulk purchases of frozen food meals. Throughout the film, the bloated Schmidt, swelling with billowing pants and baggy, too long coat sleeves, trundles and shuffles through overwhelmingly dull strip malls, sterile-grey city streets and folksy banquet halls. This is the world of *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) and *Fargo* (1996), as well as Payne's two previous films, but never has the Midwest landscape seemed so bland and stultifying, the super-sized surface of capitalist America masking the smallness of people's lives and minds. It is this savagely banal milieu that Payne mocks throughout, and that seems to fill Warren Schmidt with such ennui.

The hollowness of such a deadening world is masked, to hilarious and pointed satirical effect, by the wilful cheeriness adopted by almost everyone Schmidt encounters. His future son-in-law Randall (Dermot Mulroney) is always excited about his hopeless investment ideas, grins his way through their conversations, and reduces Schmidt to a look of helpless incredulity when he joins him and his daughter Jeannie (Hope Davis) for a hug. Jeannie's elfin features belie a daughter resentful of a workaholic father who never paid much attention to her, while the rosy-cheeked, twinkling features of the Mrs Claus-like Helen Schmidt belie a woman who was the housewife to the bittersweet end, remaining meekly in the background as she catered to her husband's needs. An ebullient Wisconsin couple laugh riotously at a pathetic joke Schmidt makes while visiting their mobile home at a trailer park; later, the wife expresses an earnestly Oprah-like concern for Schmidt that he misinterprets. And in almost every scene, the camera comes back to that tragicomic, haggard face of Schmidt, his weary resignation etched into every line, the downcast mouth, dishevelled hair and wispy eyebrows making him look like a Grinch who can barely repress his sadness and anger at the realisation that, as he says, "I'm weak and I'm a failure". For, after all of its satirical portrayals of Midwesterners, its mocking of American insularity, and its many deft comic moments, *About Schmidt* lingers as a touching evocation of one man's need for self-fulfilment, and his desire to transcend the everyday, numbing routine of his dwindling life.

Early in the film, after his retirement, while feeling so distant from his wife and daughter, Schmidt strikes up a correspondence with Ndugu, a Tanzanian six-year-old boy whom he sponsors for the Childreach organisation. While being put off by his in-laws in Denver, forced by convention and expectation to constantly suppress his true feelings about his daughter's marriage, and continually having his eyes opened after a lifetime of blinkered, small-minded views (upon meeting and talking to a Native Indian in a convenience store, he realises that "those people really got a raw deal"), Schmidt continues to write to Ndugu, his missives expressed in voiceovers. The letters allow Schmidt to vent his feelings about his marriage, his anger at the brash, unreceptive young man who replaced him at work, his resentment of Randall for not being good enough for "my Jeannie", and, early on, to express uproariously condescending and ignorant statements: "Well, I guess you probably want to go down to the bank, cash this cheque, and get yourself something to eat"; "Dear Ndugu . . . I recommend you pledge to a fraternity, young man, when you go to college." The droll contrast between the hollow Midwestern landscape and lifestyle, and Schmidt's naïve, ethnocentric assumptions about his African "son" provide the emotional core of the film, wryly putting the offbeat heart of Warren Schmidt in the right place. The letters also chart Schmidt's realisation of the emptiness of his life, culminating in his admittance that "I know we're all pretty small in the big scheme of things", and questioning how he has ever made "some kind of difference" to anyone. Yet a letter to Schmidt on Ndugu's behalf provides the

answer. Beholding his foster child's hopeful picture, the old man's expression crinkles into a sad smile as he wonders at this simple gesture of reciprocity and kinship. Looking beyond himself, off into the distance, his eyes gleaming with wistful sadness, Warren Schmidt has finally broken the insincere, empty surface of his existence and forged a connection with another soul.

In the face of blockbuster Hollywood films or sophomoric slapstick comedies, Alexander Payne has made a brilliantly dark, humanist tragicomedy. *About Schmidt* is a slyly excoriating dissection of the Midwest that is never harsh or grating, exposing the depth and emotion behind the façade of neighbours' "gee whiz" cheerfulness and friendly folks' homey pieties. Every scene and line is so authentic, and every character is invested with such complex idiosyncrasies, that Schmidt's road trip to Denver seems more like a documentary of Middle America and its foibles. In Schmidt's heartfelt search for truth and meaning in his life, Nicholson is note-perfect, reining in any expected "Here's Jack!" tics as he bristles with the tensions and repressions of a man slipping and fumbling into old age. *About Schmidt* is that most difficult of cinematic efforts to bring off successfully -- the study of an ordinary person in a banal world -- yet not only has Alexander Payne achieved a Prufrock-like work, brimming with a plucky spirit and mordant charm, but he has made one of the best, and funniest, films of the year.

# Bob le Flambeur

Dir: Jean-Pierre Melville, France, 1956

## A review by Ronald W. Wilson, University of Kansas, USA

Concerning the French gangster films and thrillers of the post-war period film historian Robin Buss writes, "The genre itself is like the framework of a traditional tale, which the storyteller can confidently adapt to fulfil or deny expectations and to suggest different levels of meaning. . . And, while gangster movies and so on are made with a particular purpose (usually to do with pleasing audiences and making money), there is no harm in suggesting that some may owe their appeal to their aptness for their time." (Buss, 1988: 43-44) Jean-Pierre Melville's *Bob le Flambeur* is an important film not only because it bridges a transitional period in film history between the *cinéma du qualité* and the *nouvelle vague*, but also because it is emblematic of the change in the post-war crime film (and post-war France) from the pre-war crime film (and pre-war France).

Written by Auguste le Breton (*Rififi* [1955] and *Razzia* [1947]) and based on an original story by Melville (this was his first original screenplay), *Bob le Flambeur* is set in the Montmartre and Pigalle districts of Paris, teaming with exciting nightlife, pimps, gamblers and policemen. The story concerns the ageing titular character (described by the narrator as "an old young man"), aptly played by Roger Duchesne, and his desire to commit one last heist, the robbery of the safe at the casino, Deauville. As in most heist films, a cadre of experts is gathered who meticulously rehearse the planned robbery. And, as is expected of the sub-genre, the robbery is unsuccessful (in this case, it never occurs). But Melville presents an ironic twist in this film. Bob is a compulsive gambler -- he even has a slot machine in his studio apartment -- who *always* loses. This is made clear in the beginning of the film when we see Bob make his nocturnal rounds from one gambling joint to another. When asked, at one point, by the young and very beautiful Anne (Isabelle Corey), "Do you ever win?", Bob simply replies, "*jamais*" ("never"). At film's end Bob has been gambling at the casino, as a ruse, prior to the anticipated robbery. Ironically, Bob begins to win, and win, and win. He eventually breaks the bank at the casino, thereby rendering the intended robbery meaningless. But Bob has ignored the time (always a crucial element in caper films), and the robbery is to proceed at 5.00 a.m.. The police have been informed of the suspected robbery and Bob's involvement, and both police and potential robbers meet outside the casino at the same time. A shoot-out occurs, and Paulo (Daniel Cauchy), Bob's friend and protégé, is killed. As Bob is being taken away in handcuffs, the casino employees begin to bring out his considerable winnings.

Melville's film has been regarded by many critics as a precursor to the *nouvelle vague*. In terms of stylistics and narrative structure it definitely predates those associated with New Wave directors such as Truffaut and Godard. Recently both Michel Marie in *The French New Wave: An Artistic School* (2003) and Richard Neupert, *A History of the French New Wave Cinema* (2002), have noted that Melville's cinematographer, Henri Decai, was important to the look of the *nouvelle vague*. Decai lensed several films by Truffaut, including the seminal *400 Blows* (1959), as well as films for Claude Chabrol and Louis Malle. In *Bob le Flambeur*

Decai's camera weaves around various nightspots and effectively captures the intricacy of Melville's geometric *mise en scène*. One of the most dazzling shots is the almost 360 degree pan outside the casino as the would-be robbers sketch their heist plan from inside a car. The on-location photography, especially at night, contributes to the atmosphere of the Montmartre environs, complete with neons, street lamps, and reflective windows. The documentary objectivity of Decai's camera compliments the almost clinical objectivity of Melville's narrative. The editing style of the film also anticipates the *nouvelle vague* in its use of self-reflexive wipes (horizontal and vertical) as frequent transitional devices between scenes. One can almost see the emergence of the New Wave in this genre film. In fact, a case can be made that the post-war French crime film was instrumental to the development of *nouvelle vague* aesthetics.

Prior to the Nazi occupation of France, the crime film was primarily associated with "poetic realism". Films such as *Pepe le Moko* (1937), *Le Quai des brumes* (1938), *Le Jour se leve* (1939), and *Le Dernier Tournant* (1939) represented an urban cycle which, according to Ginette Vincendeau, was "often set among the Paris proletariat or middle lower classes, with romantic/criminal narratives emphasizing doom and despair." (Vincendeau, 1993: 54) These films are noted for their atmospheric set designs and expressionistic lighting and camera angles. Vincendeau considers the period an important transitional one between German Expressionism and classical Hollywood cinema, primarily because many German film émigrés (directors, set designers, cameramen) first came to France before going elsewhere. The films have a very studio bound look to them, and most were based on literary sources associated with the emerging *policier* literature.

The post-war French crime film, by contrast, utilised small production crews and on-location photography. Production costs were considerably smaller, and lesser known actors, as well as non-actors, were often used. *Bob le Flambeur*, for instance, cost seventeen and a half million francs, whereas the average French film at that time cost a hundred and eighty million. These elements contributed to a grittier, more realistic look than was evident in the "poetic realist" predecessors. Another significant feature of the post-war crime film is the focus on a group endeavour. This is particularly true of the heist film. In addition to *Bob le Flambeur*, *Rififi*, *Le Salaire de la peur* (1953) and *Touchez pas au grisbi* (1954) all centre on a collective effort of some kind. This group is usually led by an ageing professional who desires a return to former days of glory, which of course is unachievable in a changed post-war world. The group, often, is betrayed by someone, either directly or indirectly. This betrayal ultimately leads to the downfall of the collective effort -- the heist.

Concurrent with the production of these films, the young critics, the so-called "young Turks" of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, were expounding their belief in a new cinema that offered new possibilities. Dismissive of the "tradition of quality" in French cinema, these critics proffered an *auteurist* approach to filmmaking that centred on the personal style of the filmmaker as artist. The post-war crime film provided them with early templates after which to model their own films. In particular, Melville's *Bob le Flambeur*, according to film historian Richard Neupert, offered "the New Wave a virtual menu of stylish low-budget devices to adopt". (Neupert, 2002: 71) These devices would inspire Godard, Truffaut, Demy and others.

The Criterion transfer of *Bob le Flambeur* captures Decai's exquisite black-and-white cinematography beautifully. It provides the viewer with practically a travelogue of Montmartre and Pigalle and its various denizens. This transfer is from the recent restoration of the 35mm master with the MTI Digital Restoration System. The jazzy soundtrack by Eddie



Barclay and Jo Boyer was also restored. The DVD contains many special features (a welcome staple of the Criterion Collection) including a radio interview with Jean-Pierre Melville and a video interview with Daniel Cauchy, who played "Paolo" in the film. In addition, the DVD booklet contains an English translation of an excerpt from Rui Nogueira's *Melville on Melville* (1970) in which Melville discusses the film and its production. For anyone interested in crime films, Jean-Pierre Melville, or a unique predecessor to the *nouvelle vague*, this DVD is highly recommended.

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# Donnie Darko

Dir: Richard Kelly, USA, 2001

## A review by Ross Thompson, University of Dundee, UK

Richard Kelly is already being championed by many as the next David Lynch, and although this comparison is not wholly accurate, it at least goes some way to explaining the mood of his strange and beautiful work, *Donnie Darko*. While I am a fan of Lynch's oeuvre, I must admit that his films are often so dark and disquieting that they may scare off viewers with their outré scenes of dangerous sex and sudden violence. Kelly infuses *Donnie Darko* with the same narrative complexity as found in Lynch's latest, the sublime *Mulholland Drive* (2001), but in comparison the film is a subtler, more personal affair. Lynch is often accused of remaining emotionally remote from his work, a criticism that was also levelled at Stanley Kubrick, and one that is not completely correct in either instance, but Kelly refuses to shy away from the more intimate of human emotions. Consequently, *Donnie Darko* is easy to enjoy but difficult to categorise, the kind of movie that reminds you exactly why you go to the cinema in the first place, then demands that you go again for a second viewing, if only just to figure out what on earth is going on in the protagonist's world. It is not that the conceits behind *Donnie Darko* are original, but that director Kelly has taken traditional cinema clichés and fused them together in a fresh, inventive way. Impossibly young, Kelly is barely out of film school, and therefore should be ranked alongside the likes of Paul Thomas Anderson, who unleashed the wonderful double whammy of *Boogie Nights* (1997) and *Magnolia* (1999) at an equally young age.

Despite the accolades and the inevitable hype that often accompanies the arrival of the season's "must see film", *Donnie Darko* is at heart a quiet and slowly affecting piece. Admittedly, it does start with a bang. By night, troubled teen Donnie sleepwalks through the streets of his 1980s suburban American town, beckoned by his imaginary friend, a foreboding figure who wears a six foot rabbit costume and answers to the name of "Frank". Thankfully, this shadowy, softly spoken figure has less in common with Dennis Hopper's psychopath of the same name in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986) than with James Stewart's harmless invisible friend in *Harvey* (1950). That said, Frank does warn Donnie that the world is going to end in less than a month. While Donnie sleeps safely on a nearby golf course, the first sign of this imminent apocalypse occurs when a jet plane's engine crashes into his bedroom at his family home. Donnie's life has been spared, but that does not change the fact that some kind of Armageddon is going to take place in twenty-eight days.

Donnie's experiences could be logically explained as the product of nightmares, or as a side effect of the medication he takes after previous episodes of paranoia and rage. They could also be read as a metaphor for the state of the American condition during the early 1980s, the timeframe within which *Donnie Darko* is set. The American public were deciding between George Bush and Michael Dukakis for their President, but the memory of global war under the auspices of the Reagan administration still lingered. For many Americans, it really did feel as if the sky was falling in. But then, logic takes a back seat when Frank tells Donnie to carry out a series of tasks, such as flooding his high school, in order to warn the people

around him of the moment of doom that is bearing down upon them. When these so-called "dreams" have repercussions within reality, we realise that Donnie is not insane, or asleep, but caught up within a larger existential conundrum that spells disaster for our antihero, just as he is falling in love with a fellow classmate and finally adding some balance to his life.

This action takes place within the first twenty minutes of *Donnie Darko*, during an expository passage that sets up the mood and themes of the film, but then Kelly changes tack again by toying with concepts of time travel and predestination. If this skewed storyline sounds messy and unappealing, then that is because I am not selling it very well. Indeed, I wonder if I could adequately describe *Donnie Darko* at all, for it is the kind of film that one needs to see, experience and then re-experience. During a recent interview, Kelly commented that he was influenced by the art of Dali and Escher, and by the films of Terry Gilliam. *Donnie Darko* is equally complex: a narrative maze that frantically ping-pongs between the discussion of quantum physics, the existence of God, and the sexual relationships within the Smurf village. Thankfully, this filmic experimentation is tempered by a wicked sense of humour, albeit one that is dark and pessimistic. Secondly, between its black and white holes, *Donnie Darko* builds to an emotional finale that is as rewarding as it is challenging. Provoking discussion long after the audience exits the theatre, it will thrive by way of word-of-mouth, ironic for a film whose central character struggles to communicate with those whom he loves.

Admittedly, aside from *Back To The Future* (1985), the 1980s-set teen angst time travel film is a pretty limited sub-genre, so one would be forgiven for questioning how Kelly made it past the first studio pitch. It no doubt helps to have a production company such as Drew Barrymore's Flower Films backing your work. Barrymore also stars in the film, and convinces as one of the few high school teachers who works hard to make an impression on the students. The only time that the other characters who float through Donnie's world are not anaemic is when they are small-minded. Bizarrely, Patrick Swayze excels as a motivational speaker who may convince some with his nonsense about love and self-discovery, but has his fair share of skeletons hanging in the closet at home in his mansion, skeletons that Donnie, and Frank, are determined to expose.

However, such extended cameos are finishing touches that enhance a film that is already dense with possible interpretation. Of course, *Donnie Darko* has its flaws: some of the jokes feel forced and unnatural, and Kelly's sudden mood swings between genres can occasionally be disorientating. But then, this is perhaps intentional, a clever way of forcing the viewer to experience Donnie's own lack of emotional and mental equilibrium. Relative newcomer Jake Gyllenhaal is outstanding in the role, creating a vivid, multi-layered performance that is a million miles away from the likes of *The Breakfast Club* (1985) and *Pretty In Pink* (1986), those ridiculous, mullet-filled teen dramas that were churned out during the 1980s. *Donnie Darko* may concern itself with the same issues of love and reciprocation, but where it excels is in its suggestion that the lives of ordinary people can be upturned by extraordinary events. Like the best films of David Lynch, and the best fiction of Canadian author Douglas Coupland, director-to-watch Richard Kelly suggests that strange things inhabit the worlds that lie beyond our own, behind the white picket fences that mark out suburban American towns. Occasionally, these forces manage to break through, and in this instance they have brought a fortune-telling rabbit and time-travelling entities. Why did nobody think of that before?

At the end of *Donnie Darko*, Michael Andrews' haunting reinterpretation of the Tears For Fears song "Mad World" plays on the soundtrack, the lyrics of which tell "The dreams in

which I'm dying are the best I've ever had". It's a fitting confession for a beguiling picture that is moving and unsettling in equal measures. Mental snapshots from *Donnie Darko* will stick with you for weeks, and that can only be a good thing.

# **The Edgar G. Ulmer Collection Volume One: The Strange Woman; Moon Over Harlem**

Dir: Edgar G. Ulmer, USA, 1946; USA, 1939  
Volume Two: Bluebeard

## **Volume Two: Bluebeard, USA, 1944.**

### **A review by Dana Anderson, Binghamton University, New York, USA**

All Day Entertainment is an interesting company whose mission, as they tell us in their promotional brochures, is to revive "films that have fallen through the cracks". They go on to say that "There are many great, worthy films that have had the misfortune to become obscure. These movies are legitimately enjoyable, but are almost unknown by consumers...All Day Entertainment is dedicated to giving a second chance to orphaned films that deserve a new audience but do not have the power of a big studio to champion their cause." This is certainly a laudable undertaking, and the company pursues its goals with great care and consideration, digitally mastering fine (and often rare) prints of neglected works, then transferring them to DVD.

Among the more ambitious of their projects is a multi-volume exploration of the works of Edgar G. Ulmer, the king of the B-filmmakers of Hollywood's golden era. At this point the series is up to five volumes (including *The Strange Woman*, *Moon Over Harlem*, *Bluebeard*, *Daughter of Dr. Jekyll* [1957], *Pirates of Capri* [1949], *The Swiss Family Robinson* [1940], and *Strange Illusion* [1945]). If the first two volumes are any indication, the whole series is lovingly produced and executed, with thoughtful and illuminating liner notes that bring to life the circumstances of Ulmer's trials and tribulations in the Hollywood film industry, and provide useful information about the making of the films. The first two volumes also feature interviews with Ulmer's collaborators, and a featurette, "Bluebeard Revealed"; very interesting material.

I should say from the outset that these films are not masterpieces, or, if they are, we need a special definition for films made under trying circumstances with little or no money and generally B-list actors -- program pieces that had to succeed in spite of themselves. Ulmer was a master of this form, by necessity. He began his career in Germany, designing sets for such films as *The Golem* (1920), *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), *The Joyless Street* (1925), *Metropolis* (1927), *Die Nibelungen* (1924) and *M* (1931), and also co-directing *People on a Sunday* (1930) with Billy Wilder. Then, fleeing the Nazi regime he became one of the list of German expatriates who flooded the Hollywood scene in the 1930s. Ulmer

started at Universal as art director for Erich von Stroheim, and then directed *The Black Cat* (1934), which, along with *Detour* (1946), is probably his best known feature. Following *The Black Cat*, Ulmer fell out with the studio and floundered, eventually hooking up with Leon Fromkess at Producers Releasing Corporation (PRC), one of the cheapest of the poverty row houses where, though working under the toughest conditions, he made consistently interesting, remarkably stylish films that certainly stand the test of time. The three films in the first two volumes of the series (which are now available in a boxed set at <http://www.alldayentertainment.com>) are a good place from which to start exploring Ulmer's oeuvre. The first of these is one of his few studio films, the second an ethnic picture, and the third is one of his greatest works for PRC.

*The Strange Woman* brought Ulmer to United Artists at the insistence of leading actress Hedy Lamarr. As with many of Ulmer's films, *The Strange Woman* deals with desperate, character-trying situations. Lamarr plays the daughter of a drunk, abused and neglected by him for years, who counts on her beauty to help her find salvation, sacrificing her desire for love because of her need for security. The film deals with the personal decay that arises from need that has been corrupted into desperation, and in this way explores more honestly than usual the human condition. The film is tightly focused and, for the most part, well acted, but its main interest lies in the peculiar, almost parable-like structure of the narrative, precise and clear, but without elaboration, honed to a clean edge, with characters abstracted out of their individual circumstances so that they become representative of various types, a rich sort of two-dimensionality. Jenny Hagar is the woman warped into malignancy by fear of loss, and the men who seek her are warped into lust by her beauty. There is hardly any redeeming quality in the characters; all exist in the bleak world of longing and greed, coloured by a fine, complex chiaroscuro lighting that wraps the action in shadow.

The film is both intriguing and unusual, well worth seeing. One of the things I like most about Ulmer's work, especially *Detour*, but also *The Strange Woman* and *Bluebeard*, is a certain gritty, rough-and-ready quality that is hard to describe. The films do not have the glossy polish of so many Hollywood films of the period, and so echo the street realism of 1920s Germany, both in style and in a dark understanding of human character. You feel the *auteur's* hand behind the conception of the work, and this carries it beyond any shortcomings that might exist. In *The Strange Woman*, for instance, the opening is heavy-handed and obvious, and the scene where Jenny's father beats her lacks a real sense of violence, but these things seem small in comparison to the many interesting elements in the film. In fact, the obviousness and lack of realism in these parts of the film almost bring into clearer focus the parable-like quality I mentioned earlier. The film explores a dark loneliness without wanting to reach directly into psychological realism. This is not *The Lost Weekend* (1945). Instead, the work harkens back to expressionism, which revelled in symbolic, as opposed to realistic, manifestations of doom. The characters take on an allegorical quality, so the moments in which they appear to be just going through the motions of a scene, rather than giving it the usual method-oriented *sturm und drang*, add a disquieting quality that is hard to describe, though overly easy to discount. They become almost like the masks in a Greek drama.

*Moon Over Harlem* is one of a series of "ethnic" films that Ulmer made for Meteor Studios in New York after he left Universal. As it says in the editorial notes with which this presentation begins, the film was made for \$8,000 in 1939 (that most famous of Hollywood years), and no-one expected it to have much artistic or long-term commercial value. It was meant purely as throwaway entertainment, so no efforts were made at preservation. Its interest is primarily historical, the script being irremediable, and the acting equally bad, but the jazz music is

interesting, and for someone writing about this kind of filmmaking, it could well be invaluable. One of the things I most respect about All Day Entertainment's mission is a willingness to invest time and money in films like this that are representative of a particular way of filmmaking or a particular genre. Archivaly speaking, the film is an interesting addition to Ulmer's collected works, and so it is nice to have it made available in this format. Also, the presentation here has been put together from the best quality prints, all of which are in pretty bad shape, cut and spliced and scratched in identical ways, evidence of the lack of consideration given to the original elements that are now lost.

The film opens with an interesting set of jazz-age titles: modernist, slanted buildings in near silhouette, in which the title blinks like a neon sign...clearly a New York piece, for a New York audience. These titles lead into images of the real neon of the real streets, still in striking silhouette, a dream version of nights in 1930s Harlem, nightclubs in full swing, cars passing delineated only by their headlights, almost like mystical eyes. Gradually, the night fades to the day, leaving us with the sense that the night is where the real action takes place, the day just a break in the dream. The camera takes us shot by shot closer into a particular room, and the music fades to just a single clarinet singing softly behind a set of wedding vows; Sister Minnie and Dollar Bill are getting married.

For the most part, the film is interesting for its unevenness, the evidence of speedy work done with care but "on the fly". Sometimes things work nicely, and there is a genuineness in the delivery and the set-ups feel right, the camera moving fluidly through a carefully-wrought and natural-seeming pattern. But these finer moments commingle with stagy, proscenium-like framing and static camera work, along with canned delivery of egregious dialogue, a very interesting combination indeed when one is thinking about the process of the film's making as opposed to simply trying to enjoy it on its own merits.

Among the most worthwhile attributes of *Moon Over Harlem* is the simple fact of its unusual (for the time) attempt to play honestly and respectfully to the African American world. The characters come to life as real people working to make their dreams happen, with their own deep and powerful history behind them. There are stereotypes, but here they are fleshed out a bit, given extra depth, nothing like the usual Hollywood denigration of African Americans to the realm of servitude or ridiculousness. Instead, we see a real variety of life. It's good to know this sort of thing was available in the 1930s (though so few films of this type have survived).

*Bluebeard* is a pleasure in many ways. Firstly, the striking design and fine camera work make the style of the film alone worth the viewing, and Ulmer's usual, highly refined and compressed storytelling skills are equally remarkable. John Carradine gives one of his best performances as a crazed artist whose obsessive quest for perfection leads him to murder his models after painting them. Again, the theme of moral corruption comes to the fore, emphasised by the mobile camerawork and expressionistic art design. Carradine's character is also a puppeteer, and the use of the marionettes has interesting symbolic overtones that the film handles subtly, with a poetic attention to the allegorical role of the artist as a god figure. The opera the puppets perform is *Faust*, a perfectly suitable symbolic choice.

As with *The Strange Woman*, *Bluebeard* has an allegorical, mask-like aspect. The characters are not three-dimensional creations, rather they are types, but in the best sense of the word. *Bluebeard* is the frustrated genius, whose ability to create has been tortured into compromise. He longs for perfection, so he paints, and in painting strives and fails. When he sees the

evidence of his failure, that the portrait doesn't live and breathe (hence his movement from painting to puppetry, where the creations become more real), he is forced to kill to avoid the pain of his loss. Carradine plays this role to the hilt, seeming to revel in the strangeness and the seductive qualities of his art, and, as usual, speaking his lines beautifully. Then there are the girls, flattered into submission and the loss of self that this implies, their deaths almost preordained by their desire to be taken, and the inspector, driven to understand but doomed to fail. Each of the characters serves to advance the story as opposed to advancing themselves, and this odd sort of agency gives many of Ulmer's films a unique and wonderful sense of motion, an allegorical quality, the story properly abbreviated to a parable. All that is extraneous to the story and to thematic depth has been removed, as though the film is no longer about individuals at all.

This is one of Ulmer's great strengths, along with his extraordinary sense of visual style. The films in this collection all demonstrate a clear, concise sense of storytelling as the prime mover in filmmaking, and in this respect Ulmer is one of the great filmmakers. Because his gifts were all about honing his materials, discarding everything extra, cutting to the core as opposed to elaborating, all finery reduced to one clear movement of the camera across space, he was ideally suited to the world of the poverty row houses where, because of budgets, nothing else could be done. In the hands of a lesser artist, this poverty could be crippling, the extras being necessary to shore up weaker concepts. For Ulmer, it seems the low budgets just focused a natural talent and gave it an added edge.

Together these three films make a fine introduction to the work of one of Hollywood's mostly unsung heroes, a man whose works have tremendous range and are almost always intriguing, if not brilliant. At his best, in pictures like *Bluebeard*, or *Detour*, he rises to the level of true film artist. His style seems to fly most freely under the constraints that necessitate clarity and a certain abstraction of roles. His films do not delve into the personal world of characters, choosing to remain allegorical in mode, something that can be very refreshing. He reminds me of James M. Cain, another mostly unsung artist, or of Nathanael West, whose visions of despair are wedded to keen, precise language, a kind of poetry about style and loss.



# Gangs of New York

Dir: Martin Scorsese, USA/Germany/Italy/UK/Netherlands, 2002

## A review by Leighton Grist, King Alfred's College, UK

The long awaited *Gangs of New York* trails a much touted and reputedly fractious production history. The film took eight and a half months to shoot at Rome's Cinecittà studios, and its prolonged post-production ensured that two posited release dates -- December 2001 and July 2002 -- were missed. It was finally released in December 2002, by which time its negative cost had risen from an initially budgeted \$84 million to between, depending on source, \$97 and \$103 million. As this has made *Gangs of New York* the most expensive film both to be financed by Miramax and to be directed by Scorsese, so numerous column inches have reported claimed disagreements between Scorsese and Miramax head Harvey Weinstein on issues ranging from the film's prolonged shooting to its running time to its narrative focus to specific incidents, points of representation and *mise en scène*.

Such reports have almost invariably, and too often unthinkingly, been structured upon a loaded opposition of art and commerce, embattled *auteur* and philistine producer. Nevertheless, while *Gangs of New York* is based on Herbert Asbury's 1928 urban history, and while its script is credited to the not inconsiderable triumvirate of Jay Cocks, Steven Zaillian, and Kenneth Lonergan, and while the project was predicated economically upon the presence of star Leonardo DiCaprio, that Scorsese had been seeking to make the film since the 1970s inescapably invokes his authorial agency. Moreover, as a film text, *Gangs of New York* not only demonstrates notable consistencies with Scorsese's existing *oeuvre*, but significantly foregrounds, develops and reflects back upon elements of the films that have largely escaped critical remark.

Opening in 1846, the narrative of *Gangs of New York* takes place mainly during 1862-63, against the backdrop of the Civil War, before ending upon the Draft Riots of the latter year. The impressive scale and detail of the period New York sets designed by Dante Ferretti can correspondingly be regarded as not merely, or even primarily, a nostalgic return amidst an increasing use of CGI to "proper" epic filmmaking consistent with the allusive cinephilia of much of Scorsese's work, but of a piece with the near-anthropological, documentary imperative that has no less informed that work. Further, as the careful reconstruction of buildings, decor and dress is matched by that of the codes, rituals and customs of the represented society, so *Gangs of New York* continues a central thematic concern with cultural determination, which yet further partakes of an analogously familiar psychoanalytic aspect. Moreover, while the central characters Amsterdam Vallon (DiCaprio), William "Bill the Butcher" Cutting (Daniel Day-Lewis) and Jenny Everdeane (Cameron Diaz) present an almost textbook Oedipal triangle, this is lent leavening complexity by the implication of Bill's own unresolved and suggestively Oedipal relationship to Amsterdam's Irish-Catholic father, Priest Vallon (Liam Neeson), whom Bill kills at the film's beginning, and for whose death Amsterdam seeks revenge.

The represented New York carries other connotations. With its wooden structures, tenuous order and ready recourse to violence, it often resembles less a modern metropolis than a western frontier settlement. If the film, in turn, prompts deliberation upon the formal relatedness of the gangster film and the western, the western as a genre has, in its concern with American history, been regarded as a site of both national self-definition and, reciprocally, that definition's historically variable re-inflection and revision. Certainly, in its representation of Bill, head of a "nativist" gang, as racist, Protestant, violently intolerant of ethnic and religious otherness, and a figure who not only in one scene is literally draped in the Stars and Stripes, but defines a patriot as a man who is prepared to die -- like his father -- for his country, *Gangs of New York* would appear to have a self-consciously critical resonance for post-9/11 USA. Principal photography, however, was completed well before the World Trade Centre was attacked, while, that the film's closing dissolves, which "reveal" the emergence of modern New York, should conclude upon a cityscape with the Twin Towers noticeably present would seem to signify that it is seeking to address other, longer-standing matters.

An almost unconsidered part of Scorsese's filmmaking is its political tendency. Even excepting the compromised progressiveness of the early exploitation film *Boxcar Bertha* (1972), both *The Color of Money* (1986) and *GoodFellas* (1990) can, for example, be read as critiques of Reagan and George Bush Sr.'s USA, *Casino* (1995) presents a complexly articulated thesis on the structure of power, while *Kundun* (1997) is far from uncritical in its representation of theocratic Tibetan society. Moreover, if the films' frequent emphasis on cultural determination is itself open to materialist appropriation, then they complementarily partake of a recurrently classed perspective, with many offering typically verisimilar but rarely unsympathetic representations of lower class characters and mores. Critically, however, this classed perspective has been largely occluded by discussion of the films in terms of ethnicity. It consequently becomes somewhat indicative that *Gangs of New York*, a film that is founded narratively upon ethnic conflict, would appear thematically to subsume ethnicity before broader class considerations: with respect to which it is symptomatic that Bill not only bemoans Priest Vallon as "the last honorable man", but, in a collapsing of father figures that on one level further compounds the film's Oedipal connotations, declares, albeit unreflectively, that they "lived by the same principles", and that it was "only faith" that divided them.

Indeed, religion is positioned by the film as part of a dominant order that seeks to divide and thus control the lower classes. It is also an order that obtains personification in the historical figure of William "Boss" Tweed (Jim Broadbent), a character who is markedly reminded by socialite philanthropist Schermerhorn (David Hemmings) of his saying "You can always hire one half of the poor to kill the other half". Accordingly, Bill's oft-proclaimed rule of the Five Points district in which most of the narrative occurs can be seen to be represented as being as implicitly and ironically fallacious as his self-ordained status as a "Native American".

The climax of the film makes what was previously implicit explicit as the Draft Riots are put down by Union troops. In short, what is represented as a cross-ethnic, if mainly Irish, but indiscriminately violent and racist revolt against the state is indiscriminately and violently quelled by a body that tacitly comprises members of the same class, as witness the Irish immigrants shown earlier enlisting almost immediately upon their landfall. Moreover, as the Civil War thus "arrives" in New York, and, correlative to a stylistic shift to a more intensively edited, montage approach, background becomes foreground, so the final confrontation between Amsterdam and Bill, and culmination of the conflict that has been

hitherto central is, with narrative audaciousness and distinct political point, narratively overwhelmed and rendered virtually irrelevant by the play of larger historical forces.

Amsterdam and Bill's encounter nevertheless evokes certain cinematic antecedents. However, while the influence of canonical precursors such as Welles and Kurosawa has been noted, the sight of Amsterdam and Bill bloodied amidst the smoke and dust spread by violent state suppression perhaps most insistently recalls the climax of Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate* (1980) -- though Scorsese's characters lack even the nascent socialist consciousness granted the settlers in the latter, unfairly maligned masterwork. But if *Gangs of New York* has avoided the critical and commercial dismissal that effectively destroyed *Heaven's Gate*, its climactic accentuation of its political and class concerns is yet intrinsically, even radically, oppositional. Through this, moreover, the film holds a retrospectively illuminating and potentially reshaping mirror to a good deal of Scorsese's prior work. What is probably indisputable is that both *Heaven's Gate* and *Gangs of New York* bear eloquent testimony to those at whose expense the modern USA was established. Signally, as New York "emerges" via the closing dissolves of *Gangs of New York*, the graves of Priest Vallon and Bill the Butcher, set, pointedly, side by side and in the front of shot, simultaneously become overgrown, dilapidated, forgotten.

# Gohatto (Taboo)

Dir: Nagisa Oshima, UK/France/Japan, 1999

## A review by Kate Moran, Ochanomizu Women's University, Tokyo, Japan

Since *Ai no Corrida* (*In the Realm of the Senses*) (1976) Nagisa Oshima has been noted for his capacity to produce work of a highly sexual nature. Much of the publicity in London for *Gohatto* mentioned *Ai no Corrida*, implying a sexual content; *Gohatto* was marketed as a gay *samurai* film. This has been misleading for audiences; although *Gohatto* has moments of eroticism, it concentrates much more heavily on the social connotations of the sexual. Rumour from the Shochiku studio has it that, by the time production began, Oshima was too ill to direct, and actually had no hand in the filming of *Gohatto*. Yet to have removed his name from the director's slot would have lost much international attention. That the screenplay is Oshima's work, however, is self-evident. Referencing many of the foundations of Japanese national identity that have been put forward through cinema, he displays a sophisticated political motivation, common to all his work.

*Gohatto* was first conceived in 1988, two years after the author of the novel *Shinsengumi Seppuroku*, Ryotaro Shiba, had died. Shiba was a journalist, and in *Gohatto* he gave a political side-view of the *shinsengumi* militia (based in Kyoto's *Nishi-Honganji* temple) that is as rare to books as to films. Oshima was given license to interpret the Shiba novel for the screen in whatever manner he wished, and stated early on that it was his intention to highlight the homosexual nature of relationships. This was not without precedent. The subject of military homosexuality was handled in 1983's brilliant *Merry Christmas, Mr Lawrence*, which also featured *Gohatto*'s Takeshi Kitano and Ryuichi Sakamoto. Oshima's experience in cinema and with risqué subject matter meant that the film was destined to be a commercial success internationally, whilst the presence of the idol Tadanobu Asano, one of Japan's leading actors, playing Tashiro, was enough to ensure success in Japan.

*Gohatto*'s *shinsengumi* group are part of a highly skilled corps active in the mid-nineteenth century, before the restoration of the Emperor Meiji. *Gohatto* serves not only to "out" the militia and thereby, by connotation, the other military groups of the period, but also to work against a massive genre of *jidai-geki* and *chambara* feudal period dramas which have long depicted a period Japan of noisy hyper-masculinity. *Gohatto* retains the bloodthirstiness of other films, and features some impressive fight scenes, but the main contrast with the genre lies in the relationships between characters, which are portrayed with subtlety and sensitivity. The *jidai-geki* have made up the majority of male dramas in Japanese cinema and television, and Oshima is clearly referencing this massive canon by filming a studio-bound costume drama, complete with intertitles. The characters in the film and novel are mostly based on true members of the militia, excepting the young lad, Sozaburo Kano (Ryuhei Matsuda), the fictional protagonist and troublemaker abused by other men because of his exceptional beauty.

The description of *Gohatto* as a gay *samurai* film is an anachronism, and a simplification of the complexities inherent in the portrayal of period sexualities. What *Gohatto* portrays in detail is the discipline of *shudo* or male love in Japan (the *do* in *shudo* is the same as that suffixing *judo*, *kendo*, etc., an art that must be practised and perfected over time). *Shudo* was a highly sophisticated mechanism of "control over potentially explosive desires", and was propagated through enormous numbers of literary manuals and illustrations, accessible only to the literate elite. Oshima in *Gohatto*, through the behaviour of the boy Kano, employs the discourse of *shudo* to intensify the dramatic relationships between the men. Kano refuses to cut his forelocks, which symbolise boyhood and immaturity, keeping him in the realm of the beloved and submissive youngster. To cut them would be to become a lover of boys (*nenja* -- a role model and pedagogue), and not the object of love of the other men (*wakashu* -- a boy "waiting for education"), meaning that his intellect and integrity should become more important than his beauty. Kano is unwilling to give up the powerful position he has acquired, despite his proficiency with the sword and *kendo* baton.

Fighting is used in the film as a means of establishing subtle sexual and emotional hierarchies: a duel between the contemporaries Kano and Tashiro suggests to the authoritative Hijikata (played by Takeshi) that they are lovers; Kano is defeated, despite his superior skill. Kano has privately resisted Tashiro's advances because, being equals, there is no scope for social climbing. Yet rumours and jealousies provide Kano with another trump, and he will not admit explicitly to having refused Tashiro's propositions. When Kano fights Inoue, a much older, accomplished member of the militia, seniority is shown to be strength. In both these cases the power rests in Kano's hands -- he could be deliberately making the other seem stronger in order to maintain his perceived position as inferior.

The director's choice to dress the boy in white, and to change the traditional *shinsengumi* costume of the other cast members from grey to black, demarcates the boundaries of purity and maturity. The complexity of Kano's personality contrasts with his beauty. He is clearly capable of manipulation and murder, yet willingly accepts the advances of his elders, as a proficient *wakashu* should, according to the *shudo* writings. He states that he has joined the *shinsengumi*, despite his affluent origins, because only then is he "allowed to kill people". That Kano's individualism is developed through his murderous instincts (indeed, the film generically holds much more in common with murder/suspense than erotica) is an ironic element of the narrative; the reason why elite homosexuality was tempered through the discipline of *shudo* was because the jealousies enraged by love at such close quarters as the military could be mutinous. Although the authority figures attempt to introduce Kano to the pleasures of male-female sex -- a procedure they believe will "normalise" him --, Kano petulantly refuses.

Despite, by all appearances, being the perfect *wakashu*, devotedly yielding to many members of the militia, Kano is seen to be the actual perpetrator of violence and not an indirect cause. His position was allowed to become too powerful. Everyone indulges him, even the chiefs, as he uses the *shudo* rules to his own ends; the boy should be the underling, not the holder of so much power. In the closing sequence of the film, as Kano is murdered by his rival -- and, we might presume, the true object of his desire -- Hijikata cuts down a small, flowering cherry tree, employing a well-known symbol of Japanese aesthetics, to illustrate the ease with which something gentle and beautiful can become overburdened with power. In the war period, the young members of the armed forces who formed the *kamikaze* troops became known in national rhetoric as cherry blossoms, emphasising their honourably short lives -- a conceit omitted from very few post-war films dealing with the military. Oshima's use of this conceit

in a period film implies that Kano is a symbol, as are the *kamikaze* youths, of power misappropriated and let out of control. Within the film, this is seen as resulting from the older men's lack of discipline: two rogue *samurai* easily access the *shinsengumi* grounds, which should be heavily guarded, and witness Kano's deference to Inoue's experience and age in the aforementioned duel. The *samurai* are not capable of understanding the subtle workings of the elite's internal hierarchies, and loudly deride the apparent weakness of the militia's new recruits, meaning that violent revenge must be sought to re-establish authority in the locale.

The homosocial elements of the *jidai-geki* genre, which was banned for its feudalistic content by the American occupation authorities, have been reconstituted in the *yakuza* gangster movies, a genre latterly epitomised and, some may say, parodied, by Takeshi Kitano in *Violent Cop* (1989), and *Boiling Point* (1990), among others. Kitano and Oshima have long occupied a place in the contemporary Japanese media, both sliding easily between game and variety shows and heavyweight film drama. A dual authority over popular and high culture has allowed Oshima to, in his words, "force the Japanese to look in the mirror" (Turim, 1998: 133), and a partnership with Kitano adds weight to his assertions. The political nature of the director's early films, and their creation as a reflection of the darkness of post-war Japan, illustrate his endeavours since 1959 to establish the reputation of a director that goes against the grain. For Oshima, with Takeshi's support, to return to the *jidai-geki* genre through a political novel was for director and studio a far more complex decision than the production of a "gay samurai" film might on first glance appear to be.

The erotic tension, formal perfection and moments of rarest beauty in *Gohatto* introduce a gentler and more subtle approach to historical homosexualities than is common to worldwide film. The misnomer of *Gohatto* as a gay film has led to the puzzlement of reviewers and audiences, creating misunderstandings and hasty conclusions. *Gohatto* is one of Oshima's strongest works, and a brilliantly subversive film, if one is able to perceive the intelligent use of historical detail, the reference to previous cinematic trends in Japan, and to the complex socio-historical background of Japanese homosexuality.

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# K-PAX

Dir: Iain Softley, USA/Germany, 2001

## A review by Diane R. Wiener, University of Arizona, USA

Throughout the film, Dr. Mark Powell (Jeff Bridges) is portrayed as being overly committed to his work, and not attentive enough to his wife and children. His wife Rachel (Mary McCormack) is dissatisfied with his priorities and with him, and her compassion is wearing thin. One night Mark has gone too far, as he wakes up Rachel in the middle of the night. She initially comforts him when she realises that he is fretting and troubled in his obsessive professional dreamscape. After he jumps awake, flees their bed, and subsequently frightens their children with an outburst of professional insight about Prot, she finally loses her patience and barks, "What is the matter with you? What is this patient doing to you? Unbelievable!"

The depiction of a troubled doctor who needs as much, if not more help than his own patients is a common thread in mainstream American films featuring psychiatric plots. A risky role reversal has taken place, and it is Mark not Prot who is in need of support. Indeed, it seems that Mark is quite imbalanced, and he requires a lot of help. He gets that help from Prot and his other patients, whose presumed dependency upon him makes him feel valuable and important. They present him with a set of philosophical principles with which to grapple, and he thinks about these rather than effectively attending to the expectations of prescribed suburban domesticity and daily family intimacies.

The film is packed with juxtapositions between family barbecues and inpatient psychiatric interludes. The public and private worlds do not mesh well for Mark, and their overlaps are downright disturbing to his wife. As viewers, we are encouraged to wonder how these worlds are separated in the first place, and what ideologies lie behind and beyond the therapeutic couch. Audience members are compelled to grapple with many themes when experiencing the film, including the definitional bounds of scientific inquiry, medicine, intimacy, family, point-of-view, normality and truth.

One of the quandaries Mark faces is that he is not consistently convinced of the efficacy of his own professional discourse. He is unsure that Prot is delusional when he avows that he comes from the planet K-PAX, near the constellation Lyra, a planet that is circled by seven purple moons and warmed by two suns that only overlap once every two hundred years. After an extended stay in New York's city hospital system (in Bellevue), Prot is transferred to a state facility, the Manhattan Psychiatric Institute, where Mark is Chief of Clinical Psychology. Upon reviewing Prot's referral materials, Mark jokes, "Let's hope extraterrestrials qualify for Medicaid." His flippant tone changes when he finds out that, when at Bellevue, Prot was unresponsive after receiving three weeks of Thorazine administered at a high dosage.

Mark is further perplexed by the fact that empirical tests demonstrate that Prot can see in ultraviolet light, which is humanly impossible. Simultaneously titillated and unsettled, Mark

seeks support from his brother-in-law Steven Becker (Brian Howe), who happens to be an astronomer. Steven presents Mark with a set of seemingly impossible queries for Prot to engage with. After Prot thoroughly answers all of Dr. Becker's complex questions, Mark reports the results to Steve, and, fascinated, Steve notes that his colleagues "want to meet this fella of yours".

Prot is escorted from the psychiatric unit by Mark to meet with Steven and a team of leading astronomers at a planetarium. Prot is able to illustrate for the experts how K-PAX orbits within its solar system. His masterful calculations solve dilemmas that have long perplexed and even haunted the astronomical community. The team is incredulous, and Prot explains, "Every K-PAXian knows this, just as every child on earth knows that your planet revolves around the sun. It is common knowledge."

In these and myriad other ways, the film continuously encourages its viewers to examine what is considered expert versus commonsensical knowledge, and to explore the processes by which ideas are framed as coming from expert sources. The film creates a layered critique of expertise in relation to earthly dangers and risks. By disrupting ideas of perceived reason and competency, it challenges the ways those who are seen as possessing these qualities might dangerously deploy their power within global and even larger astral scales.

Prot refuses to tell the scientists about light travel and how it is operationalised: "If I told you, you'd blow yourselves up, or worse, someone else. You'd be surprised how much energy there is in a beam of light." Earlier, Prot states that the earth is in an early stage of evolution with an uncertain future. During a conversation about why K-PAXians don't need a formal government structure, Prot explains to Mark, "Every being in the universe knows right from wrong." Mark finds this hard to accept and asks Prot what happens if a K-PAXian commits rape or murder. Frustrated, Prot indicates that Mark isn't really listening to him, and says, "Most of you humans subscribe to this policy of an eye for an eye, a life for a life, which is known throughout the universe for its stupidity...you humans, sometimes it's hard to imagine how you've made it this far." The cautionary message is especially chilling, given that the film premiered in the United States on 22 October 2001, mere weeks after the tragedies of September 11th .

The film's critiques are likewise levied on a local plane. The practices of medicine, psychiatry, and "science" more broadly, their foundations and power manoeuvres, and the techniques by which reason is established are all debated by the film. When Mark uses mirroring strategies to communicate with Prot, Prot declares, "You know, for an educated person Mark, you repeat things quite a bit. Are you aware of that?" When he first meets the team of scientists, Prot asks, "How many doctors are there on this planet?" As Prot's case is first presented during clinical rounds, Mark rejects his colleague's diagnosis, and asserts that Psychosis NOS (not otherwise specified) is "a wastebasket diagnosis". Later, Mark challenges Prot: "What would you say if I told you I think you're as human as I am?" Prot retorts, "I would say you're in need of a Thorazine drip, Doctor".

However, the film also eerily re-establishes psychiatric authority. Prot knows that his choices are restricted, even if he can travel faster than the speed of light. Mark invites Prot to his home for an Independence Day barbecue. At the party Rachel confides in Prot about Mark's poor relationship with son Michael (Aaron Paul), a product of Mark's first marriage. When she wonders aloud about why she is seeking his empathy, he observes, "Probably because I'm a locked up lunatic, so what harm could it do?" His typically facetious retort is both



empowering to him in the ways that it questions definitions of deviance, and a symbolic indication of his fraught positionality.

A series of interlocking questions are at stake for Mark, Mark's family, Prot, Prot's fellow in-patient clients and the audience. How is common sense properly defined, by whom, and in what contexts? What constitutes reason versus unreason? What moral codes are edified and dismantled by mainstream psychiatric practices? What constitutes a good parent? How is a healthy family to be understood and recognised? *K-PAX* does not provide easy answers, but much fodder for thought and discussion, whether metaphysical, astronomical, or both.

# The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers

Dir: Peter Jackson, USA/New Zealand, 2002

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

Tolkien wrote his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy as one sequential narrative, making no allowances for readers who might inadvertently have begun reading with volume two or three. Peter Jackson, the director of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy of films, likewise makes few allowances for new viewers, or viewers who may have forgotten elements of the plot in the year that has elapsed since the release of *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001). The film begins with Frodo's dream-vision of Gandalf's fall into the abyss and his fight with the Balrog, a fleeting reminder of one of the first film's climaxes, but this is the only, brief and partial, reprise of events. As with the book, the film launches into the fates of the Fellowship members from the debacle of the fight at Amon Hen, and viewers are expected to remember how Merry and Pippin fell victim to the Orcs, who Legolas, Gimli and Aragorn are, and why it is so important for Frodo to reach Mordor. This is not a film that stands on its own.

Nor is it as faithful to its novel as the first film is to the first novel in Tolkien's trilogy. Jackson's *The Two Towers* does not take in all the action of the book, finishing its account of Frodo and Sam's journey before their encounter with the monster in the tunnels below Minas Tirith, and finishing its account of what happens to Aragorn, Gimli, Legolas, Merry and Pippin before the reunion of the friends amid the wreckage of Isengard and the scene where Saruman's servant throws down a seeing stone. Before I saw *The Two Towers*, I wondered how Jackson was going to handle the third book, as it provides much less action than books one and two. The problem has been addressed by truncating the film version of book two, leaving the book's culminating scenes of despair and hope for the start of the final film.

Like *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers* excels in its New Zealand settings. The defences of Helm's Deep, the wide grassy plains of Rohan, the uncanny forest of Fangorn, the Eryn Mui's cliffs down which Frodo must find a way, the heights and depths of Moria through which Gandalf battles, all are magnificently realised (sometimes by way of models rather than actual landscape). Magnificently realised too is the Black Gate of Mordor, although the film needed more wide-ranging vistas to establish the wasteland horror of pollution and desolation as Frodo and Sam draw near the outer defences of Sauron's empire. Mordor itself is shown in the distance or, at the end of the film, as an expanse of healthy-looking trees leading to the dark tower. For the dead lands of Mordor, the film is sorely in need of the kind of sweeping close-to-long-distance sequences that bring the northern landscapes of Middle Earth so successfully to life.

Like the too perfunctory and inadequately realised glimpses of Mordor's expanse, the episodes with the Ents seemed very much too quickly done. The Entmoot, in particular, is given very little time to establish how slow Ent-talk is, how very slowly the Ents come to any decision, and then, in contrast, how inexorably they move when they decide to go to war. There is no perceptible contrast between the film's Treebeard swinging along with Merry and Pippin at the start, talking fluently and quickly to them, and the film's Ents marching towards

Isengard. I also missed the walking trees from the book, and the heightened sense of inexorability afforded by their march to war. In the film it is the Ents, and only the Ents who attack Isengard and its Orcs.

The Ents' size was also problematic. In the book they are viewed almost entirely from the close-up viewpoint of the hobbits, and so seem immense. In the film Treebeard is at first shown in ECU, as the startled hobbits see a seeming tree looking at them with sentient eyes, but, for the most part, the Ents are viewed from a distance as whole bodies (and not from a hobbit's point of view), and they are much shorter than the trees among which they move. Their bodies appear at times like string figure caricatures, small and bony and not at all the imposing figures of tree strength that the book's descriptions convey. I missed both the awe and the pathos with which Tolkien infuses these beings.

Gollum is a triumph of human voice (Andy Serkis) and largely computer generated visuals, a spidery, scuttling, sentient being in torment, justly representing Tolkien's character, with particular emphasis on the growing resemblance between himself and Frodo, each psychologically torn between the Ring's compulsion and the powers of loyalty, love and trust. Frodo and Sam's characterisation builds on the touching performances of Elijah Wood and Sean Astin in the first film, and their story is finely realised until Jackson alters Tolkien's plot: instead of Faramir instantly choosing to free and aid the hobbits, he captures them to take to his father to aid the war against Mordor. As the Nazgul swoop on Osgiliath, Jackson's Frodo is compelled to show himself and hold up the ring in submission, after which this version of Faramir finally lets the hobbits go free. One of the rules of Middle Earth, as established in Tolkien's books and in the first film, is that the ring must stay hidden at all costs until it is cast into the mountain, and that any revealing of it to the Nazgul is likely to be fatal. Here, instead of instant exposure to Sauron's searching intelligence, instead of a mustering of all the Nazgul to take the ring, the one Black Rider is instantly deterred by the shooting of its steed, and anticlimactically forgets the ring. The first film's carefully built sense of terror is thus sabotaged for the sake of a momentary thrill.

Merry and Pippin's encounter with the Ents is similarly betrayed when Jackson introduces a scene in which Treebeard takes them to the White Wizard for identification. Despite this, the Ents still debate whether the two little creatures are Orcs at the Entmoot, and Gandalf's intrusion into their adventure bears no fruit in encouraging the Ents to war (although he has been busy encouraging all other friendly races). As with Frodo's capitulation to the Nazgul, the film's thrill of fear when the hobbits are taken to the White Wizard (suggested to be Saruman) is gained at the expense of overall consistency.

While Frodo and Sam, Gollum, Merry and Pippin are all well developed characters, Legolas and Gimli are little more than representative Elf and Dwarf in Tolkien's books one and two. In the *Two Towers* film, Legolas (Orlando Bloom) is given a more developed role as fighter than in the novel, but little in the way of psychological subtlety; rather, he strikes heroic stances and displays amazing gymnastic abilities, skateboarding downstairs on a shield while firing arrows and mounting a horse at the gallop. The jokes about Gimli (John Rhys-Davies) as a Scottish dwarf are repeated from film one, but he is also given a self-deprecating humour in *The Two Towers* that deepens rather than cheapens his character. Aragorn (Viggo Mortensen) is one of the film's successes as a strategist, fighter, charismatic leader and the beloved of two female characters. The emphasis changes from the book's ever more kingly Aragorn to the film's derring-do hero; Jackson adds scenes in which he hurtles over a cliff, floats downstream, revives and slumps onto his horse, aligning him with the iconic wounded

cowboy hero of Western movies, carried by his faithful horse to his destiny. This is an Aragorn of less gravitas than Tolkien's hero, and in serious danger of stealing the quest story from Frodo.

Not only does Aragorn as wounded hero recapitulate Frodo's role as wounded saviour, he also recapitulates Gandalf's role as saviour who dies and is miraculously brought back to life. Jackson adds a sequence in which Aragorn's beloved, Arwen, travels psychically to his side to kiss and bless him into life again as he lies in the water. This "death and resurrection of Aragorn sequence" seems to me trivial, too cheaply bought with a kiss, in contrast to Frodo's long agony. By the end of *The Two Towers*, it is the private suffering and transcendence of pain and death that is celebrated in both strands of narrative, with the danger that the fate of nations and races might become only a background for the solo adventurer's sufferings. Can Jackson recover the book's balance in his third and final film?

# Morvern Callar

Dir: Lynne Ramsay, UK, 2002

## A review by Jerome de Groot, University College Dublin, Ireland

*Morvern Callar* was apparently something of a labour of love for both Lynne Ramsay and her star, Samantha Morton. The product of their relationship, this adaptation of Alan Warner's cult novel (cult in the sense that people who like it really, really like it and want to tell you of its qualities far too often) is uneven but attains a level of simple beauty and strangeness at times that is just not found in the work of any contemporary European filmmaker. That said, they never really get away from the innate "and..." quality of the plot of the original novel, and this leads to an atmospheric, spare, often breathtaking film that ends on a strangely unsatisfying note and comes to no real, well, anything. One of the concluding scenes, Morvern waiting in the early hours of the morning on a wet rail platform in north-west Scotland, is, like every shot, imbued with an abundant texture but no real issue or focus. Ramsay's work has been seen as in the best tradition of the auteur, but this approach often leads to beautiful film for the sake of beautiful film, and it seems to me that there is too much of that self-indulgence here -- not really something which could be levelled at the lean *Ratcatcher* (1999). Morton is amazing, wide-eyed and monosyllabic, but never simple. The film's motif is not to ever explain central issues, and Morton is a natural for this kind of atmosphere. A great, brief exchange with a random caller to a public phone has her say "no, I'm not from round here; lived here for ages, though", half explaining her non-Scottishness, but giving us no real reasons for anything. Similarly, her boyfriend's suicide note claims "it just seemed like the best thing to do", which doesn't really tell us anything. Morton's flat, indefinable style is the ideal vehicle for presenting (or not) this emptiness, revealing the strangely circumscribed animation that she brought to *Sweet and Lowdown* (1999).

The opening half of the film is just lovely, with the kind of sparse, clear cut domesticity and normality that Mike Leigh attempts, but which here is much less caricatured. The cooking scene, in which Morvern and her best mate (played by non-professional Kathleen McDermott) trash the kitchen with flower and giggle whilst off their heads, is simple where other directors might have indulged in heavy-handed metaphor or joyless celebration. The sheer ordinariness of the non-urban drug culture presented here is in stark contrast to the lads' mag excesses of *Trainspotting* (1996), and has more veracity, in some ways, than that. Parties are, by turns, unsettling, fantastic, lonely, funny, stressful and cold. Life is OK, grindingly normal, but you get on with it. This normal life, however, is made strange and unsettling by Morvern's reaction to the central event of the first part of the film, her discovery of her dead boyfriend's body on the floor of their flat, underneath the flashing Christmas lights. This is a scene that sounds like it would have been pretty bizarre and moving on the page; visually, it is strikingly banal (and consciously so). Morvern keeps up with her everyday routine and dashes around to various Christmas parties and events. She enjoys herself, but it is clear that she is not having a better time than before, or even really a different time. She just has a corpse in her kitchen, and, luckily for her, a best-selling novel (written by him) on the PC.

This novel, and the money it eventually earns Morvern, enables her to lead her own life free from working in a supermarket. She goes to Spain, has some fun (but not much), dashes into the middle of nowhere, gets a huge advance for her novel, and decides to stay in Spain. The film seems slightly ill at ease with this contrast between "free", pseudo-intellectualised life, and the seeming banality of what she leaves behind. Why is Spain any better? Scotland was cold, but the lives she exchanges are not particularly different. Again, other filmmakers might turn this either into politicised metaphor (Loach) or crushingly dull, worthy self-awareness drama (Leigh), both roads that Ramsay avoids, but to no real avail. Ramsay does not really square this circle, never getting away from the central flaws of the plot. She even descends to the cliché of presenting how the beauty of "normal", simple, pastoral Spain changes Callar into someone different, represented physically when Morvern changes from hair up, jeans and Topshop girl sparkle (club- and civilisation-wear) to simple hair down, sundress hippy chic. At points like this, the text wanders into cloying obviousness. There is a dawn scene in a cemetery which is so over-stylised (particularly in the context of the rest of the film) as to seem like something that strayed in from the Calvin Klein previews. This self-consciousness is in stark comparison with a lovely, offhand situation like Morvern and a Spanish girl sharing an eye-rolling joke about her mother's attempts at non-English conversation. A recent review claims that she begins to lead "a life that has suddenly come alive". I'm not so sure that the text is presenting us with that. If it were, it would really be just a Mike Leigh film with more drugs: girl trapped in checkout hell escapes by bizarre coincidence and finds how to really understand the beauty of life in rural Spain. Euch. Morvern, it seems to me, has none of these existential, hopeful, transcendent qualities. The final scene is of her wandering around in a club wearing her Walkman and still listening to "music for you", the tape made for her by her dead boyfriend. She is in a different place, granted, but this hasn't really led her anywhere. Instead, she withdraws even further into herself, and the film leaves us with an incomplete and unsettling absence of point -- something that is great in itself, but only returns at the end, after we have had to suffer the deathly scenes in Spain.

# The Pianist

Dir: Roman Polanski, UK/France/Germany/Netherlands/Poland, 2002

## A review by Michael Keating, MIT, USA

To fully understand the thematic underpinnings of Roman Polanski's award-winning new film, *The Pianist*, it is important to understand the significance of the music of Chopin in the cultural life of the Poles. Here's a little bit of that significance from the musicologist Ignacy Paderewski:

A Scherzo! he beholds the wild frolics of demi-god and goddesses...Phantoms without number haunt field and meadow; in the dense thicket were-wolves struggle...to hear that deathless song which, long ago, burst her bosom open and laid bare to all men's sight a heart broken with loving the heart of Poland. (Paderewski, 2001)

The Chopin being played by Adrien Brody at the beginning of *The Pianist* is so powerful and his concentration is so intense that one could easily view him as a ritual conjurer using his hands and his instruments and the profundity of Chopin's musical text to literally call out to these gods. But things suddenly go awry. Explosions suddenly rip through the walls of the Polish National Radio, and the vile swill of history comes pouring through the cracks. Somehow, deep within the coils of the human condition, another type of spirit has been let loose; a Dionysian orgy perpetrated not by gods, but by German speaking werewolves with the souls of cost accountants. It's the Holocaust: The End of History for the Jews of Poland.

*The Pianist*, which won the 2002 Palme d'Or at Cannes, tells the story of Wladyslaw Szpilman, a young Polish-Jewish pianist who had a major reputation as a radio and concert pianist in pre-war Warsaw. The film takes us from that fateful day at the radio station through the entire history of war-time Warsaw; first through a narrative of what happens to Szpilman's immediate family as their life descends from middle-class comforts to the unspeakable; then we follow Szpilman alone as he manages to survive through the ghetto uprising, the Polish uprising and finally the liberation of Warsaw by the Russians.

Szpilman survives by his reputation, by the wiles of courageous friends in and out of the Ghetto, by his willingness to literally entomb himself at times in various forms of living death, and finally by something else: call it luck, the Grace of God. It doesn't matter. Szpilman survived to tell his story, and in that story we once again have a chance to meditate on the power of art and the physics of chance.

As a straightforward history lesson *The Pianist* is a masterwork, but it certainly achieves much more. Carefully mapping the events of Szpilman's odyssey to the actual events surrounding the creation and destruction of the Warsaw ghetto, Polanski has made an incredible memorial to Szpilman himself, but also to the truth of what the ghetto started as and what it became. Some people might be troubled by a film that shows Jewish speculators gorging themselves in ghetto cafés while their fellow Jews lay starving on the street outside,

but Polanski allows us to see this plainly without for one second distracting us from seeing the far more horrible circumstances that were developing on the periphery. Polanski asks us to boldly confront the fact that it was Jewish policemen who helped the Nazis round up the ghetto for the transports; but he just as boldly shows us that these were also human beings scared to death of what was happening, and as capable as any human of showing kindness and even mercy in the face of their own uncertain destinies.

There is something touchingly innocent in the Szpilman persona as played by Brody. He is perhaps the greatest pianist in Poland but he doesn't understand that; he doesn't feel the power of that. Perhaps he represents the very real position of Jews in Poland at the time: people of enormous intellectual, cultural and spiritual capacity who are inexplicably cut off from the main channel of the culture in which they lived. Nevertheless, they create for themselves a wonderland of achievement and *jouissance* that only aroused -- how else can one say it? -- the murderous envy of their neighbours.

In a sense, one can read Szpilman as a kind of innocent druid who embodies all the power of his people but is profoundly innocent of its implications. His Chopin at the beginning of the film is the last thing heard on the National Polish radio for almost five years. When Szpilman is silenced, so, literally, is the heart and soul of Warsaw, and so also began the extermination of the soul of Germany.

Once the main action of the film begins, Szpilman is immediately forced back into the Hobbesian world of conflict and survival for which he is so poorly prepared. Yet, due to his special magical powers qua musical genius, he is spared the fate of his family and rescued by a wide range of souls who know what *he* is, despite what *they* themselves may have become.

There are two other moments in the film when Szpilman uses his powers to mystify. In order to earn money to pay for food for his family, he takes a job playing the piano in a café. On the surface this looks like any other place where people are eating and drinking and sharing the pleasures of life. Just outside the door, however, Jews are being whipped and dropping dead from hunger and disease. Szpilman's playing casts a spell on this particular place, however -- a spell of "normality". Once again though, he is interrupted by the "real". One of the customers asks him to stop playing so he can listen to the sound of coins being cast on a table. The customer wants to know, by the sound they make, if the coins are fake or real. It's the same larger question that all the Jews in the ghetto must have been asking themselves on a daily basis.

The second point where he is called upon to display his powers is near the end of the film. Warsaw lies in ruins, Szpilman appears like the Last Man wandering through the smouldering shards of the Apocalypse -- but still he isn't dead. While hiding in a broken down ruin of what had probably been the home of a wealthy family, he hears the strains of Beethoven which arise like a dream drifting through the broken windows of hell. Later in the day Szpilman is confronted by the other player, a Wehrmacht officer named Hosenfeld, who insists that Szpilman play something to prove his assertion of having been a pianist.

Hosenfeld must be viewed like Szpilman to some extent. We don't know what he did in the war, so we can't say he is innocent of anything, but he obviously used music for himself to conjure a different world from the horror he has been helping to create. Perhaps we can view Hosenfeld as a stand-in for all of Germany. Perhaps Polanski is saying, "Look. Listen to the Beethoven you play. Hear what your culture has created, and despite that, see what you have



done." In all of Europe it was perhaps only the Germans who could have fully benefited from the brilliance of their Jewish citizens, but instead they chose murder and moral suicide.

What does Szpilman have to say of this? Not much really. Neither the character in the film nor the voice of the narrator in Szpilman's memoir, from which Polanski adapted the film, is able to rise to any crescendo of rage and recrimination. Szpilman, and then Polanski let the events speak for themselves. They both respect their audience enough to allow that little editorial comment is required.

There has been a great deal of speculation as to why Polanski made this film. Much has been made of the fact that Polanski himself survived the Holocaust in Poland, and that Szpilman's story must have resonated with his own. A cruder commentary might suggest the film is just another further exploration of Polanski's obsession with cruelty and violence. There is certainly a great deal of violence in *The Pianist*, but one can't say it shows cruelty as we have come to understand it. Most of the murders of Jews are carried out with such matter-of-factness and with such a sense of self-righteousness on the part of the Nazis that, in the end, we are left more astounded than disgusted, and Szpilman's fate seems just like one lucky cast of the die in a giant casino of death.

Unlike Spielberg's Schindler, who provided his film with a hero just as every American film needs a hero, Adrien Brody's Szpilman is no hero, and neither Polanski nor Szpilman himself want us to view him as such. Szpilman is something else. It's all in his name. He's a player...ein *Szpil*-man.

At the end of the film we see Szpilman playing first on the Polish radio, resuming the piece that he had stopped playing almost five years before. Then we see him sitting in an orchestra with a group of Polish musicians, ready to begin a Chopin piano concerto. The expression of his face is unchanged from the beginning of the film. There is nothing to help us understand what he is feeling and what his memory has left him with.

There is only the music. The magic music which says it all.

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# Possession

Dir: Neil LaBute, USA/UK, 2002

## A review by David Greven, University of Boston, Massachusetts, USA

I don't envy any director the task of bringing a work as self-consciously literary as Byatt's novel *Possession* to the screen, but I can think of few directors less suited to the material than Neil LaBute, director of the 2002 film adaptation. Whereas A. S. Byatt -- who borrows as her own Nathaniel Hawthorne's famous preface from *The House of the Seven Gables*, in which he lays out his theory of the romance -- conjures up a deeply romantic literary mystery, full of longing and erotic intensity, infused with a genuine affection for her unlikely heroes, LaBute crafts a seeming romance whose veneer of human warmth only thinly veils the misanthropy and cynicism that characterises this work no less than any of his other films.

Byatt's novel doesn't consider its unlikely heroes hopeless losers. Roland Michell may be weak-willed and flaccid, but he has an appealing humility. Roland's academic strivings also have an authentic note of despair. Struggling to gain academic credibility as a scholar of the (fictional) Victorian poet Randolph Henry Ash, he comes across a tantalising letter written by Ash to Christabel LaMott, his (equally fictional) contemporary, a proto-feminist poet who reminds one of Christina Rossetti, author of the great poem "Goblin Market". This is a major find, for Ash is thought to have been happily married; his possible relationship with Christabel LaMott, if proven to have existed, will radically alter perceptions and future scholarship done on both poets. Roland consults a chilly, prim, but beautiful LaMott scholar and descendent, Maude Bailey. Reluctant at first, Maude agrees to help Roland investigate the possibility of an affair between these great poets. As it turns out, they had not only an affair, but also a child, who was never allowed to know either of her parents, whose adulterous romance ended unhappily.

Byatt's novel is a feat of imaginative empathy. She does a marvelous job of conjuring up that exquisite, slightly irritating, luscious Victorian mixture of abundant sensuality and hyper-controlled rigor; she even provides new feats of Victorian poetics for Ash and LaMott. These Victorian lovers' doomed, yet triumphantly erotic love is a stirring corrective to the cautious tentativeness of Roland and Maude, torpidly stuck in their modern day academic dreariness. But they *are* stirred; "cold hand touched cold hand", and Roland and Maude, so chilly yet so charged with desire, reach out for each other as if they were Ash and LaMott given another chance at fulfilling love.

LaBute made a decision to cast Aaron Eckhart, his recurring male star, as an Americanised Roland. Many Byatt purists hated the idea of Roland being made an American. I think I can see how this change *could* work; the movie suggests with some effectiveness how out of place a young American academic might be in the specialised, wholly distinct world of English academe. The problem with LaBute's Roland, however, isn't that he's American but that he's a LaBute American man.

Eckhart is woefully miscast as an academic of any sort. Many academics have the convention-defying cut, muscled body Eckhart sports here; the point that not all academics are obese nebbishes is well taken. But Eckhart has no poetry as an actor, much less the capacity to suggest that he studies poetry for a living. Eckhart plays Roland like a big, grinning, slightly unsure, all-American doofus, and, in so doing, seems like he'd be more at home in a goofy frat comedy. His lopsided grin, big frame and earnest amiability all suggest an idealised version of Gary Cooper-esque American manhood. LaBute has no interest in someone like Byatt's less energetic, more introspective Roland. LaBute has an unusually idealised view of white straight masculinity, always depicted in his films as goofily innocent, no competition for the machinations of cold, devious women (see Eckhart's character in *Your Friends & Neighbours* [1998]).

I do not mean, in any way, to suggest that films should slavishly mimic the novels they adapt. More unimaginative criticism than I care to track has been written about the failure of movies to reproduce word for word accounts of the novels that inspired them. Still, LaBute's conceptualisation of Roland makes the story far less interesting than it is. Though ultimately a much sunnier version of his other films, *Possession* ends up being yet another LaBute meditation on the inherent difficulties of achieving heterosexual love in our duplicitous world. Whereas Byatt suggests that the account of passionate love between one's heroes can lead one to romantic bravery, to overcome one's own fears and reach out to another, LaBute sticks yet another one of his remote, unhappy heterosexual couples under the tarpaulin of Byatt's story. Casting Gwyneth Paltrow as the middle-aged Maude and Eckhart as the middle-aged Roland, LaBute signals his interest in emphasising their contemporary immediacy. As with his other films, the man earnestly, haplessly, but "endearingly" reaches out to a cold, circumspect, passion-deflating woman. Eckhart and Paltrow are merely playing softer, cuddlier versions of the Ben Stiller and Catharine Keener characters in *Your Friends*. Paltrow fares better than Eckhart (she's a better actor, anyway) in the film, but she is only slightly more convincing as an academic than Eckhart. I lay the problem for this not at Paltrow's door -- though she is miscast -- but at that of screenwriters LaBute, Laura Jones and David Henry Hwang, whose conception of her character is paltry. The film Maude is horribly underwritten. We have little idea what motivates her. Paltrow suggests, rather, a woman bored by men, certainly bored by Eckhart's Roland. This suggestion is intriguing, but the film ignores it, instead focusing on Eckhart's inexorably winning canine charms.

An interest in the communicative gulfs between men and women can be deeply fruitful for certain directors (think Ingmar Bergman, Hitchcock). It's not fruitful for LaBute because his characters never convince you that they're more than abstract positions in a theoretical argument. In order for *Possession* to work, I think we'd really have to be convinced that Roland and Maude were academics schooled in particular modes of behaviour who, once awakened, break free of their constrictive discipline. LaBute eschews the academic side of this story, and thus denatures the specific qualities and texture of the story. This couple is just another bland, dysfunctional LaBute "everycouple" struggling towards intimacy. The whole Victorian backdrop becomes, therefore, irrelevant to their story. Since LaBute's modern lovers are never convincingly academic, their pursuit of Ash and LaMott's story feels terribly academic. It's as if some random art-house flick were spliced in with a LaBute-lite romance. Part of what makes Roland and Maude interesting in the novel is that their passion for Ash and LaMott mirrors and refracts the theme of hopeless, unrealisable, but inspiring passion in the novel. What can be more poignantly passionate than an academic's ardour for an author long-since dead, an object of endless contemplation, yet as unreachable as a movie screen figure? The academic nature of Byatt's modern lovers is crucial to the organic coherence of

their story. Since LaBute's academics aren't remotely convincing as such, the film deprives itself of a great deal of the story's special interest and power. In Byatt's book, characters tenderly protect ancient tomes from the menace of photocopiers lest their delicate spines break; there's nothing as deliciously bibliophilic in this movie. All of the academic stuff is a mere camouflage for yet another (but this time more idealised) embattled LaBute romance -- surprising when you consider that LaBute is himself a part-time English teacher.

The only real surprise of *Possession* is that its Victorian scenes work unexpectedly well. Both Jennifer Ehle as LaMott, and especially Jeremy Northam as Ash are very well cast. Ehle seems delighted to play a period character with some real complexity and darkness, for a change, and she seizes the moment: in the scene in which she chastises her well-meaning but intrusive sister, Ehle is positively chilling. But Northam gives this film's best performance. I've never seen him better. His eyes convey mingled feelings of erotic hunger and premonitory sadness; he makes this man a poignant emblem of the pain of unrealisable, unattainable love. His tragic handsomeness powerfully obviates Eckhart's loping, vaguely buffoonish physicality.

Perhaps LaBute should make period films? Much of the effectiveness of the Victorian scenes is owed to Jean-Yves Escoffier's richly considered cinematography, Gabriel Yared's intelligent, sensitive score, and the expert performances. (Something that doesn't work here is LaMott's screamingly stereotypical angry lesbian lover.) But LaBute seems freer and more spontaneous, surprisingly enough, in scenes in which he's attempting to evoke hidden reserves of passion beneath a modulated, controlled social façade. It's almost as if all of that Victorian repression freed him. LaBute directs movies as if he were a time-traveller, stuck in a century he detests but can't escape.

For some critics, LaBute makes brutally, uncompromisingly "honest" movies about how rotten people can be, but, in my view, LaBute's honesty is merely reactionary contempt for liberal humanism masquerading as unflinching purity. (In addition, LaBute uses strong women characters and constant references to gay themes as smoke and mirrors to hide his unabashed empathy for the plight of straight white men in a post-feminist, post-gay world.) What makes *Possession* so grotesquely unappealing is that it uses the surface calm of the literary adaptation genre to hide the usual LaBute despair and corrosiveness. It's almost as if LaBute wants to convince that, deep down, he's just a bluesy romantic, wounded yet hopeful. Eckhart's orang-utan physicality and canine earnestness suggest that LaBute wants audiences to coddle and stroke him, as if he were our pet. But the sheep's clothing of Byatt's story only flimsily, ineffectively covers up the mangy fur of LaBute's wolfish sensibility.

# Singin' in the Rain

Dir: Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, USA, 1952

## A review by Sunny Stalter, Rutgers University, New Jersey, USA

The waxing and waning of a genre's popularity is a curious fact of the film world. Westerns, for instance, lost their artistic caché after Morricone and Peckinpah, and then resurfaced in the early 1990s with *Unforgiven* (1992) and *Tombstone* (1993). The movie musical has come back into favour in recent years, both in gritty, independent forms (*Dancer in the Dark* [2000], *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* [2001]), and those as star-studded and lavish as any MGM production (*Moulin Rouge* [2001], *Chicago* [2002]). *Singin' in the Rain*, the behind-the-scenes look at Hollywood's transition from silent to sound films starring Gene Kelly, Debbie Reynolds, and Donald O'Connor, is an important parent to this newest crop of musicals. The fiftieth anniversary re-release of the film, both in theatres and on a newly remastered DVD, makes clear just how influential it is: *Chicago*'s combo of nostalgia for a simpler time and cynicism about the machinations of mass culture? Check.

Recontextualisation of popular songs à la *Moulin Rouge*? Certainly. Like *Tristram Shandy* to the modern and postmodern novel, *Singin' in the Rain* is an old pro that's thought of and done everything already.

Here's a plot summary for those of you who have never seen this perpetual top ten favourite of film critics the world over. Don Lockwood (Gene Kelly) is a silent film star of swashbuckling costume dramas. His co-star, Lina Lamont (Jean Hagen), is a beautiful and universally adored leading lady with a screechy voice, a bad attitude and a credulous manner -- she believes that she and Don are engaged because she read it in the fan magazines. When their studio begins to shift from silent to sound movies, Lina's voice (and various, hilarious technical difficulties) threatens to turn their film collaborations into a joke and a box office bomb. Don's best friend, Cosmo (Donald O'Connor), comes up with a solution that will save the film: Don's sweetheart, aspiring actress Kathy Selden (Debbie Reynolds), can record the vocal tracks, with Lina unknowingly merely lip-synching. Lina discovers the ruse and tries to force Kathy to be her voice for good, but the plan is foiled and Kathy becomes a star in her own right.

Perhaps one of the reasons the film feels so contemporary is its grappling with the idea of (and the impossibility of) originality. After the premiere that starts the film, Don Lockwood flees screaming fans and falls into Kathy's car. At this first meeting, she's an aspiring stage actress who dismisses Don's films as interchangeable: "you've seen one, you've seen them all". And audiences of the 1950s *had* seen it all before, since nearly all of the songs in the film were in earlier movie musicals. The film's producer, Arthur Freed, wrote the lyrics when he was fresh from Tin Pan Alley in the late 1920s; to add to the film's self-referentiality, one of the songs, "The Broadway Melody", was written for MGM's first musical sound film, *The Broadway Melody of 1929*. One of the most helpful features on the new DVD is a series of clips showing the songs used in *Singin' in the Rain* in the films where they originated. Seeing

clips of the songs from revue and backstage musicals, Bing Crosby comedies and Joan Crawford dramas makes clear just how much of a pastiche this film is.

And it's not only the film that's a pastiche; one of the recurring themes of the film is just how important mass culture is in the formation of subjectivity. Setting itself apart from the usual nostalgia of period pieces -- the past was more authentic, more natural, more connected -- *Singin' in the Rain* explores how, even in the 1920s, everything was already mediated by movies. The most sentimental version of this idea comes from Don: he can't confess his love to Kathy on an empty soundstage until he creates a romantic environment with lights, a smoke machine and an imaginary scene. Cosmo is more transgressive; his voice seems never to belong to himself, and when he is not being dubbed, he is doing impersonations. And what he is "doing" in his impersonations is almost always some variation of Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer* (1927), nicely thematising the issue of sound film, but also suggesting something further through the two-layered imitation. Cosmo brings into the film the question of imitation as pure play, disconnected from any system of production or meaning, and hints at this kind of imitation as it exists within a racialised context. The influence the movies can have in shaping our characters, then, is not only a reactionary, normalising one; Cosmo shows precisely how abnormal and unnatural identifications can be.

Perhaps the most interesting thing that the *Singin' in the Rain* DVD makes visible is just how much work it takes to make something that looks and sounds "natural" or "realistic". All of the dancing in the film seems to effortlessly arise out of the movements of everyday life as a natural response to characters' emotional states, a style that came to be known as the "integrated musical". The documentaries included with the DVD make clear how much hard work went into creating this effect: Debbie Reynolds talks about her bleeding feet, Cyd Charisse about how she was nearly blown away by wind machines during the dance number with a huge veil. The dubbing scenes are also places where realism takes even more convoluted efforts than those shown on screen. In the scenes where Kathy is dubbing Lina's song, for example, the song was *actually* sung by a woman named Bettie Noyes or Royce who is uncredited and otherwise uninvolved in the film (Clover, 2002: 158); the voice heard in the redubbed spoken lines is the real voice of the actress who plays Lina. (Did you follow that?) A scene in the film shows just as much awareness of the many stages of artistry that lead to the "natural" appearance of a movie scene. The process of recording and synchronizing the song "Would You?" is shown in four steps: Kathy recording it with an orchestra; Lina singing along (poorly) to the playback; Lina playing the scene with Kathy's voice as a soundtrack, and, in one of the most breathtaking shots of the film, Lina's image fading to black and white as she is transformed to a film reproduction that melds her body with Kathy's voice. The scene is so disorienting because Lina's lip-synching to Kathy's voice doesn't look any different from any other character "really" singing a song in the film. But the knowledge of how this process works doesn't detract from the fun of watching it. In his commentary on the *Singin' in the Rain* DVD, Baz Luhrmann's description of his own work sums up the film's continuing relevance today:

Our audience, particularly our younger audience, is so aware of manipulation. They know that naturalism is just another set of tricks, so here we expose the tricks again and we say look, it's a movie, enjoy, participate, be involved.

Watch it, and I guarantee you will.

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# Star Trek Nemesis

Dir: Stuart Baird, USA, 2002

## A review by Lincoln Geraghty, University of Nottingham, UK

When word comes out that a new *Star Trek* movie is about to be made, the fans go crazy; speculation, conjecture and new theories abound. Right up to the day of release fans are desperately trying to find out what is going to happen, how bad is the "baddie", who will be killed off? When *Nemesis* was introduced as the tenth movie in the franchise, the buzz was enormous. The most important question seemed to be: would this be the last outing for the crew of *The Next Generation*?

The answer, judging by the way *Nemesis* comes to a close, is a big "who knows?". As always, *Star Trek* leaves you with as many questions at the end as you had at the beginning. What is obvious, however, is that the franchise is likely to continue for quite some time to come. *Star Trek* has an uncanny ability to regenerate, evolve, even rejuvenate, which is unique to television or film; the new series, *Enterprise*, is a prime example, going back to before Kirk to chart humanity's first steps beyond the solar system. In this sense of rejuvenation or rebirth -- a topic that is returned to in many episodes -- that explicitly characterises *Nemesis*, and also implicitly encapsulates the previous three *Next Generation* movies: *Generations* (1994), *First Contact* (1996) and *Insurrection* (1998). In fact, one can see *Nemesis* as part of a continuing storyline that exposes and tackles keen issues raised over life/death, family/individuality, sacrifice/greed, even offering one or two possible answers without allowing itself to be pinned down.

The plot of *Nemesis* is simple in *Star Trek* terms: Picard and his crew are called to Romulus, the home world of the devious Romulans, to discuss peace. However, after a detour to investigate what appears to be an abandoned prototype of Data on a desert planet, Picard comes face to face with an aggressive young human called Shinzon who has taken over the leadership of the Romulan senate on behalf of the Remans -- inhabitants of Remus, Romulus' sister planet. After centuries of being bred as slaves, the Remans have revolted and taken control with brutal force, making Shinzon their spokesman. Their sense of otherness is made more visible by the fact that they have become vampiric in appearance, not just having pointed Vulcan ears but also needle-like teeth, bat-like features and a strong aversion to bright light. However, Shinzon is human, a clone to be more precise, and the result of an abandoned Romulan experiment to replace a key figure in the Federation to bring it down from within. Unsurprisingly, the audience learns almost immediately that Shinzon is, in fact, Picard's clone, bred to age quicker so he could replace him. For Picard, this news is particularly hard to come to terms with because he has always longed for a son, if not a sense of kinship or family, since his brother, sister-in-law and nephew died in a fire briefly reported in *Generations*. As with previous movies, the notions of family, lineage and youth resound throughout, particularly in the scenes where Shinzon and Picard connect together like aloof father and troubled son.



In a sub-plot that sees Data confront an earlier version of himself that Dr. Noonien Soong had created but never revealed, similar concepts of ancestry and origin characterise their relationship. Being a more primitive version of Data, tellingly called B-4, the prototype is like a child in need of parental nurturing; he has no understanding of himself as an individual or of his surroundings. Data tries to literally bring him up to speed by downloading his entire memory into B-4's head in order to make him more of an individual, but fails to realise that what made him who he is took years to develop -- a development that was an indelible part of *The Next Generation* series. Both father/son relationships accentuate a sense of passing on experience, making their perceived offspring into better people. However, Picard's relationship with Shinzon is ultimately doomed because Picard's unwitting absence from his life has contributed to his desire to seek revenge on humanity. Data's brief experience of fatherhood may at first seem to fail as B-4 shows no sign of cognitive awareness, yet after Data's sacrificial death to save both the ship and his captain, B-4 begins to become aware of who he is and, more importantly for the continuing narrative of the *Star Trek* franchise, in what capacity he fills Data's place.

In her book *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film* Vivian Sobchack says that "despite all their 'futuristic' gadgetry and special effects...the *Star Trek* films are conservative and nostalgic, imaging the future by looking backward to the imagination of a textual past." (Sobchack, 1998: 277) The films referred to were the first three feature films to include the original crew: *The Motion Picture* (1979), *The Wrath of Khan* (1982) and *The Search for Spock* (1984); specifically how their "futurism" entailed looking back on previous visions of the future in order to "re-enact the nostalgic drama of the television series' own death and resurrection". Together the three films represent a rebirth, death, resurrection cycle constituted by an "intertextually grounded pseudo-history", and illustrated through their constant references to "aging, regret, loss, and death" (Ibid: 276-277) found at the heart of their narratives. In keeping with this tradition, *Nemesis* continues to offer references to such feelings and incidents through the father/son relationships of Picard and Shinzon, and Data and B-4, but, more importantly, it has also not escaped elements of the "intertextually grounded pseudo-history". When Data sacrifices himself for his captain, he is revisioning the final moments of *The Wrath of Khan* where Spock dies saving Kirk and the *Enterprise*. By the end of the film B-4 becomes the regenerated Data, just as Spock was given a second chance in *The Search for Spock* and Riker's promotion to captain of the *Titan* mirrors Sulu's promotion in *The Undiscovered Country* (1991). The *Star Trek* canonical text is rewritten to include Riker and Troi's wedding, Captain Janeway's promotion to Admiral and a brief appearance of once *TNG* season regulars Wesley Crusher and Guinan. These examples of *Star Trek* narrative continuity and progress strengthen and update the "pseudo-history" that Sobchack has identified in the original movies.

The year 2002 saw a significant amount of films that relied on previous incarnations to provide narrative links that would attract an eager audience. *Die Another Day*, the twentieth Bond film in its fortieth franchise year, was full of in-jokes and intertextual references that kept fans interested long enough to be fooled that it was any good. The release of *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones* signalled just how much audiences wanted to watch something reassuringly familiar rather than risk experiencing reality that was becoming increasingly hard to bear after 9/11. *Nemesis* can be counted amongst these types of film, but not because it was responding in any way to recent terrorist attacks or global angst, rather it was merely continuing a *Star Trek* tradition that predates America's recent turn to nostalgia. The film is very much part of the continuing efforts to create a fictional future history that epitomises *Star Trek's* view of our utopian destiny. *Star Trek's* representation of a reality

through its fictitious future has not only been entrenched as a possible outcome for society, it has become reality for some die-hard fans who want to believe that it is true, or, as David Gerrold puts it, "it represents a future we would like to make real" (Gerrold, 1996: 228). Its connections to history only add legitimacy to its figuration of the future; they have both become inseparable from each other, making *Star Trek* a signifier of the future and a signifier of the past (Geraghty, 2002: 168-169). Intertextual references mean so much more within the narrative framework of *Nemesis* that they are inseparable from its reception.

Both visually and thematically *Star Trek Nemesis* manages to convince its audience that it has something new to offer alongside existing franchise output, and that it remains part of intricately woven pre-existent future narrative. It shares many similarities with previous *Star Trek* films, and it should not be frowned upon for doing so; if it had not, then it would not have sat well with fans. Nevertheless, perhaps the most intriguing part of *Nemesis* was that one could begin to see how the franchise is starting to borrow from different filmic sources: Shinzon's piercing by a metal bulkhead wielded by Picard in the final fight scene is iconographically reminiscent of Aragorn's impaling of Lurtz in *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001). Slowly, *Star Trek* is learning to evolve along with its contemporaries, as well as trying to remain faithful to the franchise. Since evolution and rejuvenation were such key themes of the story, it is no surprise that they should come to characterise the film's overall approach to its cinema release. For example, Stuart Baird, the director, and John Logan, the screenwriter, were strangers to the franchise brought in to "break the mould a little bit without breaking the tea set" (Spelling, 2003: 24). Unfortunately, taking into account its so far average impact at the box office, *Nemesis* appears to have been just a little bit too much of a *Star Trek* film for most people to tolerate. Perhaps this will be the deciding factor in whether *Nemesis* will be the last outing for the crew of *The Next Generation*?

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# Vanilla Sky

Dir: Cameron Crowe, USA, 2001

## A review by Kevin Hunt, University of Nottingham, UK

Watching *Vanilla Sky*, I am constantly reminded of Roland Barthes quotation from "The death of the author" about how the "text is a tissue of cultural quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (Barthes, 1981: 211). This is no coincidence, as the film is deliberately shot through with pop culture and cinephiliac references for the audience to self-gratifyingly acknowledge. Among many others, huge posters for *Jules et Jim* (1962) and *A Bout de Souffle* (1959) adorn the walls of a plush Manhattan penthouse, while *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1962) plays on a TV in the background of a prison cell. In this respect, *Vanilla Sky* is not dissimilar from *Pulp Fiction* (1994) with its insistent listing of self-reflexive references and pop art sensibility. However, unlike *Pulp Fiction*, in which to gather the references is arguably to miss the point (like a mass culture equivalent of T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*), *Vanilla Sky* suggests these references *are* the point, at least for the protagonist David Aames (Tom Cruise) whose world, we discover, is constructed of little else.

Based upon Alejandro Amenabar's imaginative and complex 1997 sci-fi drama *Abre Los Ojos* (*Open Your Eyes*), Cameron Crowe's cover version, or "remix", tells the story of wealthy New York playboy David Aames. Nicknamed "Citizen Dildo" by the board members of the publishing empire he inherited from his father (a hard-nosed, adventure-seeking, media baron whose biography is "*the manual for every cut-throat publisher in New York City*"), Aames is "snowboarding" (or should that be cruising?) through a charmed life of wine, women and song. Spending as much time in Aspen as in the office, Aames is a caricature of Cruise's star persona. His greatest concerns seem to be eradicating the presence of any grey hairs, and seeking ways to resist the inevitability of middle age. Wealthy, handsome, popular and successful, Aames has "All The Right Friends" (Crowe's choice of music working as an effective soundtrack to Aames' life). As if to hammer home the parallel with Cruise, these friends include Steven Spielberg, who shows up at Aames' thirty-third birthday party. However, Aames has neglected to invite his infatuated "fuck buddy" Julie Guliani (Cameron Diaz), who refuses to bend to his will and shows up anyway. In an attempt to escape her attentions, Aames latches on to new girl Sofia Serrano (Penelope Cruz, reprising her role from *Abre Los Ojos*), steals her from her date, Brian Shelby (Jason Lee), who also happens to be Aames' "best friend" and one of the writers he "owns", and then runs out on his own party to be somewhere a little more private. As a "pleasure delayer", Aames explains that he deliberately resists having sex with her, despite declaring "I want your life" after seeing a collection of snapshots from her past, and emerges the next morning from her apartment apparently in love with someone other than himself. Obsessive lover-turned-stalker Julie Guliani then rolls up to offer him one last ride together, which he makes the misguided decision to accept as it ends abruptly when she drives them both off a bridge in a suicidal rage. One coma, some facial surgery, and a lot of headaches later, and Aames wakes up to a very different life...or does he?

The line between dream and reality is constantly displaced as Aames recounts his life in a series of flashbacks from a psychiatric unit. Hiding behind a facial mask, a motif that connotes themes of appearance and reality more successfully utilised in *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), Aames is being questioned by a paternal criminal psychiatrist named Curtis McCabe (Kurt Russell) about a murder he has been charged with but insists he didn't commit. In a jumbled mixture of memories and dreams Julie and Sofia's identities become confused as one consistently switches places with the other, while Aames' face alternates between disfigurement and complete reconstruction. Maybe there was a murder and maybe there wasn't, maybe the victim was Sofia and maybe it's someone else? *Vanilla Sky* edges into David Lynch territory, toying with the ontological issues of identity and perception explored in *Lost Highway* (1996), but these themes are a red herring, as Cameron Crowe's film lacks the profundity to go anywhere quite that dark or interesting. Instead, *Vanilla Sky* attempts to be a morality tale of loss and redemption. The problem is that through a paradoxical mess of projected realities and actual events there seems to be only loss, complimented by the suggestion that money and narcissism are more life affirming than love.

Morally speaking, *Vanilla Sky* starts out on the right track as Aames is punished for his superficial love affairs and lack of respect for women through the car crash and the resulting physical pain and disfigurement. A harsh punishment indeed, but one which opens the door for a change in attitude, or transcendence of his situation, through the possibility of a pure love for Sofia that is more than skin deep. Chasing this idea, Aames arranges to meet her at a nightclub, but blows his chance and ends up face down in the gutter with a hangover, never to see her again. Depressed and dejected, he falls back on his ego and wealth to invest in a cryogenic life extension plan that enables him to buy an alternate reality constructed out of his own subconscious. Called a "lucid dream", this perceived world will enable him to have everything he ever dreamed of on his own terms: a narcissistic paradise in keeping with his character. Subsequently, he commits suicide and enters this personal utopia which is formulated from snippets of his memory, such as the cover of a Bob Dylan album, Jeanne Moreau's laughter in *Jules et Jim*, and the vanilla coloured sky in a Monet painting. However, a lingering guilt and hidden sense of responsibility over the death of Julie Guliani manifests itself as a Freudian "return of the repressed" and she ousts Sofia from his dreamworld, changing his utopia into a dystopian nightmare. Driven insane by Julie's reappearance, the acceptance of which might actually offer a certain redemptive quality, Aames instead figures out a way to pause the dream/nightmare aided by "tech support" in the form of Edmund Ventura (Noah Taylor). Ventura becomes a medium of exposition, and fills in a few of the larger plot holes, finally explaining the disjointed narrative through a logical mechanism. The downside to this is that where other films successfully utilise a twist in the tale to recontextualise the narrative without necessitating a second viewing, notably *The Sixth Sense* (2000), *Vanilla Sky* seems to presume you'll be watching it twice from the start. Accordingly, it makes no qualms about completely alienating the viewer from the narrative, and the resulting confusion creates a sort of Brechtian distancing, preventing either an easy engagement with the film or empathy for David Aames.

As a result, when Ventura reveals that after Aames' death it was Sofia "who never fully recovered" because she "never forgot that one night where true love seemed possible", it is difficult to feel pleased for our hero because he didn't murder her, rather than sorry for Sofia who has assumed an air of responsibility for Aames' death. Off the hook for murder one, Aames seems untroubled by the shadow he cast over Sofia's life with his suicide and, by contrast to her inability to recover, discovers that his own life can be regenerated and his face properly fixed.

Regaining his handsome looks seems to have been the secret to his happiness all along, like the equivalent of long hair to Samson's strength. Particularly as the painful memories of Julie Guliani, which were closely associated with his disfigurement, can now be successfully repressed, making a dubious equation between cosmetic beauty and inner peace. The closing shot seems to bear this out by taking us full circle, with Aames waking up to a third female voice, following in the footsteps of Julie and Sofia by saying, "Relax, David...open your eyes". Somehow, I can't help but feel the implication that this is a beautiful nurse who'll end up first on the list of his future conquests. So, redemption, in this case, seems limited to the financial kind as Aames buys his way back to life for a second bite of the cherry -- a conclusion suitably in keeping with *Vanilla Sky's* commitment to a lot of style with little substance.

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