Bringing Down the House

Dir: Adam Shankman, USA, 2003

A review by Rebecca Janicker, University of Nottingham, UK

A family-oriented comedy vehicle for Steve Martin, *Bringing Down the House* co-stars rap artist Queen Latifah, fresh from film success in *Chicago* (2002). Drawing on both racial and class stereotypes and their interplay within a broadly white upper-middle-class context, the film seeks to uncover common ground between the protagonists and heralds a new era in the representation of African Americans in the media.

The film begins with an on-line interchange of messages in a lawyers' chat room between Martin's character Peter Sanderson, posing as 'Legal Eagle', and Latifah, posing as 'Lawyer Girl'. The audience learns that Peter is an affluent lawyer living in a middle-class area of Los Angeles, lonely since his recent divorce from his wife and subsequent loss of his children from the family home. On the basis of an e-mailed photograph of an attractive power-suited white woman, Peter is hopeful that the enigmatic 'Lawyer Girl', who calls herself Charlene, will provide a suitably respectable companion and arranges for them to meet. Having succeeded in wresting a coveted opportunity for the business of a wealthy heiress (Joan Plowright) from a dynamic young rival (Michael Rosenbaum) within his firm, Peter prepares to meet his date fresh from this accomplishment, intending to impress her with his business acumen. However, Charlene's true identity is very far from that imagined by Peter. When he finally makes the acquaintance of the voluptuous, and undeniably black, Charlene he is unable to hide his discomfort. Insisting that she is *not* the subject of the photograph supplied, he is finally forced to accept the truth when Charlene makes herself known as she is unceremoniously bundled into a car by police officers, across the street from the white woman whom Peter had found so attractive. It quickly transpires that she has recently left a correctional facility in which she was confined for a crime she insists she did not commit. In spending time in lawyer's chat rooms she has selected Peter as the ideal legal representative to prove her innocence and clear her name. Horrified at this suggestion, hampered by his desperate attempts to secure the heiress' business, placate his bosses and maintain good relations with a family he desperately misses, Peter's plight is further complicated by the presence of his boss's elderly and bigoted sister Mrs Kline (Betty White), who lives across his street. What follows is a comic interplay between these situations, with all the implications this has for the role of class and race in American society. In a particularly memorable scene, Peter adopts the stance and verbal style for which he has continually berated Charlene for using in order to establish her innocence. Ultimately, he learns the nature of his true values, gaining a happier work life and reclaiming his family in the process.

Of central importance to the film is its focus on the relationship between two intelligent, articulate adults who originate from very different social environments. Early on, it is made apparent to the audience that the energetic and ebullient Charlene provides a source of consternation to the phlegmatic and conservative Peter. Much is made of the difference in the style of language employed by each: he speaks in the conventional fashion of a middle-class

professional, whilst her colloquialisms and direct manner belie the expectations he had formed on the basis of her e-mails. When Peter confronts her as to the reason why she chooses to speak in an apparently 'uneducated' way when she is obviously an intelligent individual, Charlene responds by telling Peter that she speaks the way she does because she wants to. Peter's inexperience of non-middle-class people, especially those who happen to be black, has led him to associate such speech styles with those from low-income low-status backgrounds. This view is most clearly upheld by his neighbour Mrs Kline, whose blind prejudice and lack of enlightenment is consistently presented as an object of amusement and derision for the audience. We are invited to identify with Charlene, who is clearly irritated by such views but seldom allows such bigotry to deter her from her goals or happiness. She is shown as intelligent, capable and likeable. Ironically, it is by adopting Charlene's street-wise conduct and vernacular that Peter is able to clear her name.

Suht Jhally and Justin Lewis in their 1992 analysis of the portrayal of African Americans on television argued that:

> A value system based upon social class (upper equals good, lower equals bad: a notion with a sinister Orwellian ring) devalues most black people, for whom a high-income life-style… is quite unattainable… To look good, to look 'positive', means accepting a value system in which upper middle class status is a sign of superiority. (Jhally and Lewis, 2003: 280)

This work is reproduced in a contemporary (2003) reader on audience studies as a study examining ethnicity and audience perception, specifically addressing African American interpretations of *The Cosby Show*. Claiming that "So powerful is the desire among blacks to escape the negative world of stereotyping that the representation of social reality, the reality of which most of them are a part, becomes a necessary sacrifice" (280), they conclude that the media can only portray African Americans in a positive light if they are situated within unrealistic surroundings. *Bringing Down the House* succeeds in countering this argument. Whilst Charlene is initially impressed by the comforts evident in Peter's middle-class home, it is not in terms of material possessions that the film develops her character. Rather, she is consistently shown to place great emphasis on self-improvement, education and maintaining integrity. She balances this determination with the ability to help those for whom she cares whilst vociferously defending her pride in her racial identity. The argument presented by Jhally and Lewis, now some eleven years old, is not sufficiently exhaustive to explain the presentation of African American characters within this contemporary film.

Bringing Down the House was released as a contentious debate on ethnicity surfaced within Hollywood. In the April 2003 edition of *Vanity Fair*, current to the time of the film's US release, a number of irate readers wrote in to express their disgust with a column addressing certain racial stereotypes written by entertainer Barry Humphries in the guise of Dame Edna Everage, which was printed in the magazine's February issue. Latina actress Salma Hayek was amongst those infuriated by the column. Amongst other comments concerning the Hispanic population, Everage was said to have remarked that learning Spanish was a worthless activity as Spanish-speakers were typically employed as nothing more than 'hired help' or as 'leaf blowers' and that therefore nothing really worth reading existed in the Spanish language. This comment was especially salient to *Bringing Down the House*, as the prejudiced Mrs Kline actually comments to Peter that no person of 'ethnic' origins is welcome in their neighbourhood unless accompanied by a leaf-blower. Once again, the use of current derisive stereotypes about ethnic minorities is parodied as archaic within the film.

Vanity Fair responded: “In the role of Dame Edna, Humphries practices a long comedic tradition of making statements that are tasteless, wrongheaded or taboo with an eye turned towards exposing hypocrisies or prejudices. Her remarks were meant to satirize stereotypes, not reinforce them.” (Vanity Fair Replies, 2003: 53-54) Anxious to impress upon readers that the columnist was trying to lampoon prejudices rather than condone them, the magazine nevertheless managed to offend those involved. This highlights the relevance of the film to the very community that created it; provoking debate as to whether there is a need to be continually offended by such prejudice or whether greater progress can be made if it is exposed as ‘wrongheaded’ and thus overcome. For Charlene, these prejudiced attitudes are perturbing yet so clearly at odds with her strong self-image that she does not allow them to hold her back.

The film’s pertinence to such a current debate would help to explain its popularity within the United States. In Great Britain, released later and billed as the number one US hit comedy, it appears to have enjoyed rather less success. Having experienced screenings in Los Angeles and in Nottingham, it was interesting for me to compare audience reactions to the film. L.A. moviegoers, especially the African American and Hispanic members of the audience, appeared to find the film hilarious and were uninhibited in showing their appreciation of the ‘misfit’ scenarios in which Peter becomes the butt of the racist jokes as he tries to blend into Charlene’s neighbourhood. The response of their counterparts in Nottingham was muted and a little uncomfortable by comparison; perhaps the British audience was left wondering whether laughter was appropriate over such taboo subjects in this politically-correct climate?

To conclude, *Bringing Down the House* is an enjoyable, thought-provoking film, one which attempts a modern, positive portrayal of African Americans on the big screen whilst bringing contemporary concerns about the portrayal of stereotypes to the fore.

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Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle

Dir: McG, USA, 2003

A review by Natalie Wilson-Clift, Birbeck College, University of London, UK

Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle, despite the pre-release hype and being one of the first wave of summer movies to hit theatres, was a relative flop. Reviewers across the U.S. derided its supposed lack of plot, lack of humor, and overblown use of 'tired' camera angles and visual effects. Margaret A. McGurk wrote in *The Cincinnati Enquirer* that the film looked "like it was made by a hyper 14 year old boy" and further quipped "watching this movie, I swear I could feel my IQ oozing away." (McGurk, 2003) Kenneth Turan, in his review for the *Los Angeles Times*, "Power Puff Girls," disparaged what he saw as the film's humorlessness and shallow pleasure (Turan, 2003). While Marc Caro of the *Chicago Tribune* criticized the jumpy camera and gratuitous butt shots (Caro, 2003).

Although I read many reviews from across the nation, none considered the movie in relation to the hit 1970s television show on which it was based. Moreover, there is no mention of the film's 'message' or any real consideration of parody, pastiche, cultural references, feminist elements -- in fact, most reviewers claim the film is mere eye candy, a fun frolic of what Owen Gleiberman called "espionage Barbie role playing and thrilling kitsch kinetics." (Gleiberman, 2003: 63)

However, reading the movie without any consideration of the television show that spawned it is exactly what allows for it to be viewed as shallow and empty. For, in order to dig beneath the shiny exterior of the film, one must take into account not only the original show, but also the politics and cultural milieu of that show. As one of the first and certainly most popular shows in the U.S. to depict women as action heroes, the show helped in the ideological work of breaking down female stereotypes. These 'Angels' were not homemakers or mothers, not even married, they owned racy cars and drove them recklessly, they refused to live by society's (read men's) rules, they were strong, powerful, smart, athletic *and* beautiful at the same time.

Some may scoff at what seems like mere fluff in hindsight, questioning how traditionally beautiful actresses in story lines that often emphasized their sexy bodies over their abilities was in any way 'feminist'. But the show, despite some shortcomings in regards to feminist ideology, gave a whole generation of young girls new ideas, new roles to play. Instead of playing dressing up, or going on imaginary shopping trips and beauty salon appointments, girls began to play 'Angels' -- a game that usually involved catching bad guys and escaping life-threatening danger. Running and jumping, hiding under furniture, orchestrating chase scenes, and acting out physical feats which had previously been construed as 'boy's play' became the new hot game. Girls began to dream of future careers inspired by the Angels, of being government agents, race car drivers, secret spies.

Young boys were often beneficially affected as well. Instead of yearning after images of pin-up girls and swimsuit models, adolescent bedroom walls became adorned with the Angels -- women who were not just pretty faces with come hither pouts, but who represented action, intelligence, and strength. Many male action figure aficionados were in awe of not only the Angels' beauty, but of their action-figure like abilities.

Unfortunately, the Angels craze didn't bring about any lasting female action figures. In fact, there are still no mass-market female action figure toys. But, if they did make the new Angels into figures, they could not be Barbie-like to be viable -- they would have to be able to bend their arms, kick their legs, move their feet -- and surely they would not be able to carry out exhausting and dangerous missions with such preposterously small waists.

Thus, behind the Angels, old and new, is a feminist impulse -- one that argues for women's strength, power, intelligence and ability. This is clear in Drew Barrymore's comments on why she wanted to make the films: "I watched how women were handled. Even if they were the heroines, they were always shown worrying about the way they looked, they were doing it for the guy, or they would cry, they'd be victimized." (Kuster, 2003: 123) With these movies, she wanted to give women "chances to be heroic and protect people." (123)

Both movies also emphasize the value of female friendship and downplay the focus on romantic relations. As Cameron Diaz noted in an interview, the film allows audiences to see women who love and support each other, who give each other strength -- rather than catty, competitive women whose main goal is procuring a man (or a good manicure) (Kuster, 2003: 123). However, most critics derided the apparent friendship the three actresses have off screen, suggesting they were having way too much fun, that they are mere silly girls, playing with each others hair and fawning over one another. This seems to only emphasize the actresses' claims about the film in the first place -- that there is a dire need to glorify and celebrate the power and endurance of female fidelity.

While most critics claim exactly the opposite of what I am suggesting, namely, that the film is an empty, male pleasing romp, I would go so far as to say that the film reworks the male (and female) gaze. For men, the film refuses to play into what Laura Mulvey has famously called "the narrative gaze" in which "women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*." (Mulvey, 1997: 438, 442) While the Angels certainly beg to be looked at, it is not in the predatory way Mulvey is suggesting here. They are certainly beautiful and sexy, but they are definitely not inert objects on display. In fact, rather than being "looked at", which connotes passive seeing, they are "watched" -- a type of looking that does not merely scan the body for beauty and sexiness, but watches it in action. As Mulvey argues in her groundbreaking essay, the phallocentric system (and the Hollywood system by and large) depend on the idea of woman as lack, as the "bearer, not maker, of meaning." (439) But, in *Full Throttle*, the Angels are anything but lack -- they not only carry and define all the action, they make meaning out of their own lives through their choices, their friendships, their interests. They are not empty vessels awaiting male intervention, but female super heroes defining their own destiny.

The Angels are shown excelling at all sorts of traditionally male activities -- pro-wrestling, motorcross, monster truck racing, and surfing. Moreover, they are not the objects of a predatory male gaze but they themselves do all the gazing. For example, in various humorous scenes, Dylan (Barrymore) is shown lusting over some hot male bod. Even in the strip club

scene, the Angels are the ones in power; the men, captivated by their show, are rendered powerless, allowing the Angels to acquire from them the keys and tools they need to carry out their latest mission.

In fact, men in the show and the movie are overall either inept, evil, or inconsequential. While Charlie serves as an invisible and benevolent patriarch who purportedly calls all the shots, he is unobtrusive and aloof. The Angels seem far more in control of things than he, his distant voice that of a kindly grandfather. As for Bosley, he serves as the bumbling and rather untalented sidekick. In the new film, Bernie Mac captures the role well by leaving all the action and thrills to the Angels and only stepping in once in a while for comic relief or to offer some rather inexpert assistance. Although the show seemed to nod to traditional patriarchal power structures by placing men as the 'true' bosses, it actually gave us women who were far more talented and interesting than their male 'superiors'. In the films, male ineffectiveness is played on even further via Alex's confused father and slow-witted boyfriend, Natalie's beau's simple mindedness, and, on a more general level, through all the 'bad guys' who are duped by the Angels. Thus, in both the show and the movie, women are most definitely on top, and men are either indistinguishable or incompetent. I am not suggesting that the Angels' enterprise should be branded as 'man hating', but rather that the narratives do not glorify and exalt men in power (and simultaneously limit women to the hot bod in bikini role) in the same way most action films do.

Jaclyn Smith's cameo also cements the feminist message of the film. Dylan has gone to Mexico to drown her sorrows, mistakenly believing that Natalie (Diaz) will be leaving their trio. As she enters the dark bar, an old man lasciviously ogles her and grabs her butt. Too downtrodden to care, she merely carries on and finds a seat at the bar. Here, she is visited by a vision of former Angel Kelly (Smith) whose wise words invigorate her. On her way out of the bar, the man grabs her butt again. This time, though, she is back to her old butt-kicking self and lashes him with her tongue before launching him across the room into a jukebox. This scene is charged with pleasure for female audiences who are led to fantasize about treating their next ogler similarly.

So, while the film is certainly not a brainteaser, it is nevertheless full of important messages. Yes, it does have lots of butt shots and yes the females change clothes a zillion times and are far from average beauties. However, it also portrays women's friendship, strength, humor, intelligence, and success. Perhaps most importantly, it does so in a way that does not beat audiences over the heads with a lesson. Rather, it shows the lighter side of female empowerment and feminism. And, it does so in such a sneaky, joyous way that most critics were too blind to see it.

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Hulk

Dir: Ang Lee, USA, 2003

A review by Bob Rehak, Indiana University, USA

It's hard to put my finger on what's wrong with *Hulk* -- but something definitely is wrong. Even the title of this ponderous, distracted attempt at a blockbuster bewilders, with its omission of the definite article and adjective (surely associated in more minds than just my own) with the comic-book series that spawned the movie. What does it mean that *The Incredible Hulk* has been pared down to the monosyllabic, monolithic *Hulk*? Perhaps nothing more than that Hollywood prefers its titles short and snappy (notwithstanding longwinded summer releases such as *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* [2003] and *Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life* [2003]). Or it could be that director Ang Lee and writer James Schamus wanted to rid their production of its comic-book trappings (a more likely hypothesis, given the other things they're up to here). But I prefer to think in terms of homology. *Hulk* the movie is much like Hulk the green-skinned strongman: a perplexing hybrid -- I hesitate to use the term "freak of nature" -- trapped somewhere in the undecidable realm between man and monster, high-spirited action flick and art-house bore.

Hulk tells a story that would have archetypal resonances even if it didn't form the kernel of a forty-year-old comics franchise. Conceived during the early-60s experimentation at Marvel -- primarily the work of editor/writer Stan Lee and writer/artist Jack Kirby -- the Hulk, like Spider-Man and the assorted X-Men, takes the various constitutive divisions of the superhero and translates them into psychic dissonance. Identities, as well as bodies, are at war with themselves. The awkward teenager, nebbishy scientist, or closeted mutant exists in an uneasy dialectic with his or her super-powered alter ego, an idealized action figure whose existence creates as many problems as it solves. Marvel's vision of the misfit superhero troubled the optimistic fantasies left over from previous decades. Certainly Clark Kent might resent Superman on some level, but on the whole the two integrated as smoothly as the melting-pot vision of 1930s America demanded: the ethnically-coded Kryptonian immigrant picked up where his bespectacled, Taylorized secret identity left off. (Only Lois Lane suffered, trapped between the two fathers and unable to recognize that her fetishization of Superman was utterly dependent on her sadistic rejection of his counterpart.) Superman and Clark Kent were essentially each other's sidekicks, Lone Ranger and Tonto rolled up into one.

The Hulk, on the other hand, burst forth from scientist Bruce Banner's frail body as an enraged and preliterate brute, like Hyde taking over from Jekyll. (The changed face of America, with 1950s Cold-War repression battling the eruptive social transformations of a nascent civil-rights movement, demonstrated equal schizophrenia; perhaps the better title is not *Hulk* but *Symptom*.) Inverting the truism about Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers (he made her seem graceful; she made him seem handsome), Banner and the Hulk did not combine favorably. Next to the Hulk, Bruce Banner was half a man, a weakling, while the Hulk looked terrifyingly brutal, the antithesis of science and rationality. To teenage readers in daily if not hourly oscillation between polarities of self-loathing and blissful sexual impulse, this packaging in one body of painful extremes seemed a reasonable state of affairs.

Which is where Ang Lee comes in. Picking up from a mid-80s storyline in the comic involving Bruce Banner's discovery/recovery of childhood sexual abuse -- a crucial turn in his character's evolution -- *Hulk* tells the superhero story as one of repressed memories slowly coming to light. In the film, Bruce (Eric Bana) is repressed and impotent, showing little interest in the woman structurally designated as his soulmate, Betty Ross (Jennifer Connelly). Instead, he divides his time between research (some muddled conflation of nanotechnology and cellular biology), peering broodily off into space, and glaring at the corporate and/or military goons who want to hijack his lab, his erstwhile girlfriend, and finally -- after the accident that swells him up into an enormous slab of grunting CGI in purple pants -- his body. What's striking about *Hulk*, however, is that this perfectly serviceable excuse for fast-moving spectacle has been slowed to a crawl by the introduction of the repressed-memory element. The Oedipal subplot is so insistently foregrounded that it takes over the story, reducing the action sequences and few moments of romance or humor to marginal notes on a psychiatric patient's case file. The true center of the film -- and its most stirring special effect – is Nick Nolte, playing Bruce's father with vicious energy and a gruesome rat's nest of hair. He's like Doc Brown from the *Back to the Future* series crossed with Tony Soprano, with a bit of Joan Crawford in *Mommie Dearest* (1981). It's a misjudged if attention-getting performance, similar to Jack Nicholson's Joker in the first *Batman* (1989).

As the plot trundles on toward the final confrontation between father and son, Nolte's performance hits such histrionic heights that Bruce/Hulk practically disappears. This comes as something of a relief, as Lee arranges the film so that its least interesting characters get the most screen time. He succeeds in making *Hulk* a sober and serious-minded film, but history shows that comic-book adaptations risk losing touch with their core pleasures when they take the high road. The best of them -- *Superman* (1978) and *Spider-Man* (2002) -- keep things brisk, colorful, and cheerful, while the films that dare to mix in adult themes and somber tones, like *Batman* and *X-Men* (2000), seem uncertain about their own status. *Hulk* seems aware of what it is doing, but the audience never quite catches up to the filmmakers' agenda. The undecidable nature of the experience doesn't disqualify the film as art, but it defies the viewing competencies we've developed for big-budget summer thrill rides, and thus breaks an implicit contract with the audience.

It's possible, of course, that the film's leaden subtext is a strategic move, a counterweight to the two visual innovations Lee has attempted. In the register of *mise-en-scène*, of course, there is the Hulk "himself" -- a digital thing courtesy of Industrial Light and Magic that roars, leaps, and tosses large objects with intermittent realism. The most interesting aspect of the Hulk's presence onscreen is that the director himself donned the motion-capture suit to act out the character. But like so much of extratextual Hollywood, the production information is more compelling than the results. We don't really care how many millions of dollars it took to turn Arnold Schwarzenegger back into the Terminator, or how many gallons of water it took to sink James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997); all that matters is the moment of optical impact, and too much of the time the Hulk comes off as an overgrown and rather petulant child. More successful, however, is the editing scheme Lee has devised, a daring dance of wipes and split-screens that make you wonder if Sergei Eisenstein would have made a good web page designer. In yet another summer dominated by visually splendid but narratively vapid films that add fuel to the debate over story versus spectacle, *Hulk* does manage to find a new way of blending imagery and ideas. But it's not much fun to watch, and somehow -- with its castration-obsessed script and chaotically inscrutable ending -- even less fun to think about.

Irréversible

Dir: Gaspar Noé, France, 2002

A review by Eugenie Brinkema, State University of New York at Buffalo, USA

The club is called "Rectum" and something about the screams of men fucking in darkened red tunnels makes me think of Leo Bersani's work on the shattering effects of sexuality. The psyche, unbound, by the sheer trauma of being a sexed subject. The space of the film opens up, tumbles out before us, constantly unfolding onto something new. Later, it will give way to a smooth, silken, flat camera, but for now I feel sick, undone. There is constant movement -- of the two main characters as they storm through the building; of the frenetic, spinning pendulum-camera -- as they look for the rapist. Near silence but for that throbbing electronic drone. Near darkness but for that violent red strobe. Crystal meth vision; crystalline vision. Everything in total chaos, but the film has just started.

Gaspar Noé's *Irréversible* (*Irreversible*) and his strikingly different but equally brilliant *Seul contre tous* (*I Stand Alone*, 1998) should never be discussed apart. They form part of a bizarre, wonderful sandwich for a short advocating condom usage entitled *Sodomites* (1998) -- this is a supremely rectal trilogy. Which is not to say that it is at all phallic.

The men storming through "Rectum" are Pierre (Albert Dupontel) and Marcus (Vincent Cassel), hunters of a predator who rapes. We see Pierre being taunted -- you'll be sodomized, you'll get AIDS -- as he is interrogated by police and threatened with prison, and as Marcus' wounded body is pulled away on a stretcher. There is no cut, but a languorous blackened segue to the chronologically previous scene in which Marcus is almost anally raped in the club and Pierre smashes the attacker's face in with a fire hydrant, again, again, again. Like *Memento* (2000), *Irréversible* runs chronologically backwards, although locally forward -- cause precedes effect within the twelve narrative blocks, but effect precedes cause in the relationship between the structural elements.

As the film moves forward in *our* time, backwards in *its*, we find out that Marcus' girlfriend, Alex (played exquisitely by the gorgeous Monica Bellucci), was violently raped (the nine minute real-time sequence is excruciating, and has garnered most of the critical attention about this film) by the man they seek but never find in "Rectum". The film ends with the tender beginnings of Alex's day, as she finds out that she is pregnant. When the final twirling image is of a plump pregnant Alex, we do not know if this is a dream of hers, of the narrative, or if in fact the rape sequence was itself fantasized. This indeterminability is one of the especial beauties -- and that is not an inappropriate word in this case -- of this film.

Some fantastically entertaining reviews have been written about Noé's controversial film: the "best" by far is from the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. Barry Paris, Post-Gazette Film Critic, pens these opening lines: "Run, don't walk, in the opposite direction from 'Irreversible,' the sickest French/(Freedom) flick ever to pollute a Coalition-of-the-Willing screen." Paris later brags about walking out halfway through the film. (He's not the only one

-- audiences at Cannes reportedly left in disgust as well, and the film has been likened to Pasolini's notorious *Salò* [1975].) Setting aside the ridiculous political bigotry slipped in there, what are we to make of this same film reviewer's description of Noé's work as "a virtual porn-snuff film"? It is precisely the nature of snuff films *not* to be virtual, and the slippage between pornography-snuff/horror-*Irréversible* suggests how profoundly disruptive this film is -- ethically, generically, subjectively.

Something in Alex's rape scene is so realistic, horrific, that it is likened to a *real* assault; what is unsaid in Paris' and other's comments, however, is that they couldn't care less about Alex, but felt that the assault was *on them*. This supremely affective film is a force itself, bludgeoning audiences in much the same way as the shockingly violent seduction/murder of the racist butcher's mute daughter in *Seul contre tous*. Touchpoints with reality are numerous in the film: Vincent Cassel and Monica Bellucci are married in real life, adding an *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) voyeurism to their intimate moments; Noé appears as a masturbating homosexual in "Rectum"; and most of the script was improvised by the actors. But I suspect that when critics of the film pointed to their problems with its realism, they were unwittingly speaking to its greatest triumph. *Irréversible* shows a rape scene that is so traumatic (her terrified face, her battered body, his erect, sticky penis pulling out), so unbearable, so *exposed,* that one cannot help but feel that this is as close one could come to empathizing with a victim without having physically experienced the assault oneself.

The problem with -- indeed, the great lie of -- most cinematic rapes is that they are too pretty, too sutured into the narrative, too watchable. They don't repulse us enough. But there can be no myth of enjoyment here -- no no-yesses in the manner of *Straw Dogs* (1971). We cannot laugh, cannot appreciate the stylish/stylized set (as we can in, say, Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* [1971]), cannot look elsewhere: there is nothing to do but be a quiet, nauseated observer. When Alex fights with Marcus at a friends' party, when she leaves in anger, when she chooses the underground tunnel as the quickest way to get home, one has the sense that at any moment her world and this film could have gone otherwise. The sense of limitless possibility irrevocably damned is the great triumph of classical tragedy, and the most striking feature of Noé's film. The rape does not come as the prolonged climactic moment the spectator desires (as it does in many Hollywood narratives, such as *The Accused* [1988]), nor is it immediately made metaphorical, converting the women's experience into a larger "social" problem. Instead, it is real, it is private, it is contained -- it is insufferably present. This film is utterly uninterested in phallic/male power; rather, it interrogates vehicles of receptivity and the power and violence done to bodies by bodies.

This violence takes on an explicitly temporal dimension in *Irréversible*: when we watch Alex's tortuous rape, it is itself the rape, now, here, but also always it is the reaction on her lover's face, her battered body, the revenge, the end. The present is thus denied any sense of purity, of its being outside of time, immune from its past and future. When Noé chooses to end the film with an image of Alex's beatific face in the morning before her rape, it is precisely to foreclose any prelapsarian fantasy. That morning, she had already been raped, there was never a time properly before the trauma -- the rape initiates time, the trauma is a temporal violation as much as a physical one. The purpose of the film is not to recapture the past but to bring it into existence *now*.

How else could this story have been told? Had Noé started with the beautiful, calm morning, moved to the violent rape, and finished with the bloody revenge, we might be able to place the trauma, to locate it, to isolate it. Moving narratively backwards suggests the inability,

once traumatized, to conceive of the past as anything other than a false before, anything other than a past now forever charged and changed, a past that is chargeable and changeable. Noé suggests that there is *no other way -- no pure way* -- to experience time. The victim's experience becomes our experience of the film, inaugurated with violence and centred structurally around that violence.

This temporal identification with the victim of trauma is one of the most beautiful (and harrowing) gestures I've ever seen from a filmmaker. Mastery of the narrative -- even mastery of the camera, which is down on the ground for Alex's point of view, not the rapist's -- is given up to the experience of the victimized body. This is perhaps the film's most notably anti-realist move -- where else in this culture do we see this level of empathy or any attempts at all to identify with wounded female bodies?

Laurel Canyon

Dir: Lisa Cholodenko, USA, 2002

A review by Michael Keating, MIT, USA

There are many divides in America. There are race, class, regional, educational, technological and religious divides. There are divides between fat people and thin people, between smokers and non-smokers, between people who think George Bush a hero and others who think him an idiot. Perhaps the most lethal divide, however, is that between the 'cool' and the 'uncool', between those in the know and the grotesquely clueless.

In *Laurel Canyon*, the young American director Lisa Cholodenko takes us on a tour along the rim of the 'cool' divide in exploring the relationship between Jane, a forty-something L.A. record producer (brilliantly played with cunningly innocent salaciousness by Frances McDormand), and her 20-something Harvard Medical school son (played in a state of comically Oedipal angst by Christian Bale).

On the surface, *Laurel Canyon* seems like a typical slice of Hollywood, an east coast versus west coast, Woody Allenesque confection. Unlike Allen, however, who is always playing to his New York based peanut gallery, Cholodenko, an L.A. native (and not a self hating one) shows us the up-side of the dark side of La La Land in her depiction of Jane as both a free-wheeling hedonist *and* a hard working music industry professional. Despite her myriad lovers, her chain smoking and her drinking and her drugs, Jane is still a big player in a crummy dog-eat-dog profession and she isn't going to let anything get her down.

Well almost.

Jane has two problems. Her record label isn't satisfied with her current project which is being crafted in her back-yard studio by her raffish younger boyfriend Ian (Alessando Nivola) and his band. Also, her son Sam has just arrived for an extended stay with Alex, his fiancé and medical school colleague played to pert perfection by Kate Beckinsale. The original plan was that Jane was going to move to her beach house in Malibu and the two newly-minted MDs would use the Laurel Canyon pad, but as fate would have it, Jane decided to 'lend' her beach-house to her just dumped boyfriend so now Sam and Alex will have to share quarters with Jane, her lover, and their merry band of pot-heads.

Alex, a product of pure stick-up-your-bum East Coast rectitude, is at first slightly appalled by the free-wheeling charms of her of future mother-in-law and her new house-mates, but after staring at data matrices on her computer screen for a few days she decides there's more life to be had in the studio. She slowly gets sucked into Crazy Jane's orbit and all but abandons her meditations on the reproductive inclinations of fruit flies in favor of pot smoking and serving as an ad-hoc music critic and muse for Ian and his mates.

Sam, on the other hand, is flying out of the house at the crack of dawn. He's come to LA to do a psychiatric internship despite the advice of his future father in-law that psychiatry is a

waste of time. His view of the situation which he reveals to his gorgeous Israeli colleague Sara (played by the ever wide-eyed Natascha McElhone) is based on the concept that his mother is a lunatic and that despite the fact that she has had a successful career and seems quite content she is probably borderline delusional and altogether an unfit parent. Sam got a raw deal in the mother department and he's spent his whole life trying to come to terms with it.

In terms of his immediate needs he wants to make a good impression on his new colleagues and find an apartment so he and Alex can move out of his mother's asylum and be on their own. Sam can't look at Jane without seeing his own pain. He cannot bear to hear anything good from Jane about their earlier life together, and he is certainly in no mood to hear that despite everything, Jane loves him. Loves him like a son.

In a movie where most of the action takes place in people's heads and facial expressions -- as it also does in TV sitcom land -- it's up to the performers to keep some measure of authenticity alive. In the case of *Laurel Canyon*, Frances McDormand does all the heavy lifting, but she does it effortlessly and with beautifully poetic understatement. Perhaps no other working actress, except perhaps Charlotte Rampling or Susan Sarandon, could take a helium-light story like *Laurel Canyon* and turn it into something worth watching. In the case of McDormand it is all expressed in her silences, in those short intervals where she is presented with some aspect of the world and she ponders galaxies before she responds.

In some aspects, *Laurel Canyon* is reminiscent of the Bob Rafelson/Jack Nicholson collaboration, *Five Easy Pieces* (1970). Both pictures are about homecomings by young men who have abandoned their pasts and show up on the ancestral doorstep with an altogether out-of-place mate. Both Jack Nicholson's Bobby and Bale's Sam are men who rejected their pasts, mostly out of misunderstandings and perhaps weakness, only to find themselves back in the Sumo match with the familial ghosts they left behind.

In *Five Easy Pieces* we learn nothing about Bobby's mother and a stroke has left his once powerful father completely paralyzed in a wheelchair. Bobby has one aborted attempt to address the enormous gulf that has grown between the two men, but the Father's 'removal' prevents any resolution. In *Laurel Canyon* we only get a glimpse of Sam's father, a musician, from some pictures on Jane's bookcase. We get the idea that Sam has had several 'fathers' cross his path, but the only constant has been Jane.

In his essay, "Psychological Aspects of the Mother Archetype", Jung differentiates between several types of Mother complex. In the base case however Jung writes: "the simple relationships of identity or of resistance and differentiation are continually cut across by erotic attraction or repulsion, which complicates matters very considerably." (Jung, 1982: 114)

In the case of Sam and Jane this dynamic is clearly visible and it has had such an effect on Sam that one imagines he chose psychiatry as a profession simply to arm himself against the very idea of Mom.

As Jung points out, the mother-complex can manifest itself in men in many ways with the two most common poles being extreme femininity or homosexuality on the one hand, and Don Juanism on the other. Leaving aside for a moment any revisions we might want to make to his theory on homosexuality, Jung suggests that there are positive aspects to these two

poles as well. In the case of Sam, we clearly see a reversed Don Juan, which Jung characterizes as being someone who "can appear as bold and resolute manliness; ambitious striving after the highest goal." (Jung, 1982: 115)

This has clearly been the road for Sam who at an early age chose his own father, a grade school science teacher, to help him work out a rational identity to save him from the swamp of Jane's erotic maelstrom.

As we all know, however, it is simply not enough to resist. One has to go beyond resistance in order to develop as a person and the only way we can do this to overcome ourselves, either by will or circumstance. In *Laurel Canyon*, Sam's chance comes in the form of Alex's threatening eruption as an independent sexual being. During the course of the film we see Alex slowly shedding clothes and inhibitions with Jane and Ian, while Sam fights his growing erotic interest in his beautiful colleague Sara. Sam's resistance to Eros in this case is a perfect example of what Jung characterized as the 'toughness of will' of the positive Don Juan.

In the very first scene of the film we see Sam and Alex making love with all the precision of a pair of structural engineers. This is not a pair of hedonists, but rather perfectionists who seem more engaged in mutually satisfying masturbation than authentic sexual communion.

It's at this point, however, that *Laurel Canyon* disappoints. In order to round out the story it would have been great to know a little more about the psychological backgrounds of Alex and Jane, but especially Jane. We know Alex was a child of privilege and paid back her parents with a slavish devotion to success, but what of Jane? What tree bore her fruits? The movie doesn't provide any clues except some altogether convenient references to 'the sixties'. It's an artistic cop-out which prevents *Laurel Canyon* from achieving the full psychological fluency one might find in a French cut on the subject matter.

The ending of the film is also a bit mystifying. In the face of all the strong women who have all put their erotic software on display, Sam's reaction is to dive to the bottom of his mother's pool, reminiscent of Dustin Hoffman's dive in *The Graduate* (1967). There is no place for Sam to escape however. He shows no inclination to conquer these women so all he can do is find refuge in aquatic sublimation. Perhaps at the bottom of the pool he can take solace with Lacan's notion that "the satisfaction of human desire is possible only when mediated by the desire and the labour of the Other." (Lacan, 1977: 26)

One has the feeling that Sam's problems are not going to end any time soon, but at least the women certainly seem to feel better about themselves. In Jungian terms a canyon would certainly be a symbol of the feminine, and laurels are often given to the victors.

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The Magdalene Sisters

Dir: Peter Mullan, UK/Ireland, 2002

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

In 1997, the Cannes award-winning star of Ken Loach's *My Name is Joe* (1998), set in the Glaswegian slums, directed a glittering dark comedy, *Orphans*, about dysfunctional siblings dealing with the death of their mother on a stormy night in Glasgow. Since then, the seethingly intense actor Peter Mullan has starred in such different films as the atmospheric horror flick *Session 9* (2001) and Michael Winterbottom's Western homage *The Claim* (2000).

Mullan's return to the director's chair has resulted in another movie about abandoned children, though this time the subject is the true story of the 30,000 females last century who were left with nuns in Magdalene Asylums, to launder clothes in order to cleanse their impure souls. But if the story of *The Magdalene Sisters* is far more important and inherently moving than the fiction of *Orphans*, it is neither more artfully told nor, ultimately, a better film.

There's a scene towards the end of Mullan's film, where Father Fitzroy (Daniel Costello) -- who has been sexually abusing Crispina (Eileen Walsh), a homely, mentally slower girl at the convent -- runs away from a ceremony, after Margaret who, having accidentally glimpsed Crispina fellating him, has vengefully ground up an irritating plant in the priest's robes. After Fitzroy has stripped off his clothes and run into the fields, a rash spread all over his dumpy body, the devout, respectable crowd looking on in silent dismay, Crispina dimly realizes how she has been treated. She shows the head nun, Sister Bridget (Geraldine McEwan), her rash-covered groin and then turns to scream the words at her abuser that Margaret had earlier whispered angrily in her ear. "YOU ARE NOT A MAN OF GOD!" Crispina yells. "YOU ARE NOT A MAN OF GOD!" she cries again and again, as the camera slowly pulls back. Crispina howls this expression of her confused anger twenty-four times before Mullan cuts to the next scene.

It is this relentless bludgeoning-the-point-home that undermines a naturally tragic and gut-turning true story. The episodes of horror, abuse, and heartbreak in Mullan's film are so relentlessly stifling and dramatic that I felt anything less than crying a stream of tears for the women in the Magdalene Asylum of County Dublin, 1964, would be inexcusably cold-hearted. So the difficulty in reviewing *The Magdalene Sisters* is that any extensive criticism can be easily mistaken as a lack of sympathy for the unimaginable experiences of the many women around the world who were left in such hellish places. But however horrific the sufferings of those trapped within the Asylums (Mullan was inspired by Steve Humphries' documentary *Sex in a Cold Climate*, which apparently showed that the true travails of those in the laundries were even more terrible than what is shown in the movie [Sarris, 2003]), the one-sided agit-prop of Mullan's dramatic interpretation forces audiences to condemn the women's tormentors, rather than feel compassion for the victims and consider the socio-political issues surrounding the asylums. *The Magdalene Sisters* is a well-acted litany of

abuse worth seeing for its sustained yowl of rage, but it is Mullan's relentless lack of subtlety that also hinders the movie.

From the very first appalling scenes, the three splendid actresses -- Anne-Marie Duff as silently strong, morally firm Margaret, Nora-Jane Noone as raven-haired, fatalistic but rebellious Bernadette, and Dorothy Duffy as kind-hearted Rose -- foretell all the burdens they will have to bear with the bewilderment, defiance, and grief etched on their faces. The grainy, faded look of the film, particularly in these early moments, brings a gritty realism to the 1960s world of a resolutely Roman Catholic Ireland far removed from the counter-culture movements under way in England and the United States.

Mullan's opening shot is of a priest sweating over the hand-drum he is strumming at a post-wedding celebration. His lustful clinging to the instrument he is beating establishes the cycle of sickening sexual innuendo and vicious corporal punishment that will flourish in the nun-controlled prison. In a back room at the celebration Margaret is raped by her cousin, and the torturously long period of semi-public humiliation she next endures seems as awful as the physical violation. She tells a friend, who informs the male elders at the ceremony and, as the whispered discussions increase, the priest is finally informed. The next morning, Margaret is whisked from her home and taken to the convent. Bernadette is removed from "St. Attracta's Orphanage" after flirting with boys leering and cat-calling at her from the street. In a desperately sad scene, Rose is sent to the Sisters after she confusedly gives up what the pressuring priest calls her "bastard child" for adoption. Populated by slow-witted women who were taken advantage of, presumed coquettes, or females who were simply unwanted, the laundry where the trio find themselves is a woman-run repository of misogyny, where centuries-old base notions of females' hysteria and sexual licentiousness cast a blotting shadow.

The hypocrisy and hatred of the church is clear from the plot, but Mullan hammers home the crosses that the Magdalene laundry-women must bear because of the perverted logic of people like Sister Bridget. The head nun explains with a withering look, "In any God-fearing country, if you want to save men from themselves, you want to remove the temptation." (This moralizing tyrant is introduced by a shot panning down from the crucifix on her neck to the wads of bills in laundry profits that she flicks through. Then the camera closes in on a crucifix next to the biscuit tin of bank notes she is filling.)

Horrifying episode after horrifying episode wrings the drama out of the film. Mullan appears in a brief cameo to play the father of an escapee who returns his daughter to the laundry, beats her with his belt and warns her that if she tries to come home again, "I'll cripple ye." The washer-women penned in the supposedly religious halls are constantly reminded of their sinfulness, whoring, and basic temptress nature by chaste nuns who, stereotypically, seem to be perversely aroused by their ruminations about their lustful charges (most obviously in a scene where two sisters mock the breasts, buttocks, and pubic hair of the naked girls lined up before them). Just as Sister Bridget finishes beating Rose for an insubordinate act, Bernadette enters to announce the death of an older woman who had believed the nuns cared about her when, as Bernadette told her, they did not. To prove her point, Sister Bridget whispers "May she rest in peace" as she collects her breath from the strenuous lashing she has just doled out.

The film rushes on in such flurries of masochistic frenzy, never showing the day-to-day drudgery of the women's work. The relationships between Margaret, Bernadette, and Rose are rarely developed, and each of them is not humanized enough. The ending is so

indulgently triumphant -- the escaping Bernadette, channelling the hatred towards Sister Bridget that Mullan has whipped up, calls her a "fucking twisted bitch" -- that it seems influenced by test audiences who could take no more of the whippings, head-shavings, failed escapes, and all-pervading gloom.

After the brief notes before the credits about what happened to Bernadette, Rose, Margaret, and Crispina after they left the Magdalene laundry, there was only a cold kernel of nothingness in my stomach. For as the last tiny vestige of my heart left untouched by this *Three Flew Over The Catholics' Nest* was struck by the sad summaries of these women's lives, the critic (or cynic) in me suspected that Mullan left Crispina's fate to the end because it was the most awful. Jesus may have suffered on the cross for our sins, but Mullan hammers so many nails into the coffin of one of the Roman Catholic Church's many travesties that I could feel no anger or bitterness towards the Magdalene Asylums… only despair and hopelessness.

When Bernadette fails in an early escape attempt, her hair is cut by the dastardly Sister Bridget as she struggles; afterwards, the audience sees her opening her gore-caked eyelids, her iris reflecting the cruel face of the head nun. There are far too many such instances of Mullan forcing the audience to stare the horrors of the Magdalene Asylums in its ugly, unblinking face, and not enough shots like the last image of Bernadette, when she looks back at some nuns on the street and frees her hair from its bun, glaring at them defiantly through the rain, her unshorn raven tresses flicking around her. There is more natural, subtle power in that final image of escape, independence, and dissent than in the dozens of scenes of forced drama that preceded it. In his disgust for the crimes he wants to expose, Mullan forgets that the best political films must be more than a polemical document -- they should also be inspiring art that help us to rage against the machine, not just despair at its relentless grindings and workings.

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Playtime

Dir: Jacques Tati, France/Italy, 1967

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

'Charming' is the word generally applied to Jacques Tati's strange, episodic films. Gentle and feckless, much like his accident-prone Mr. Hulot, the early films -- *Jour de Fete* (1949) and *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday* (1953) -- consciously evoke a prelapsarian, childlike innocence. There is a lack of politics or gritty reality -- unlike, say, Chaplin, an obvious antecedent -- the films centre on comfortable, controllable situations with no rough edges. There is a scene in *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday* that encapsulates this neatly. During the hotel's masked ball Hulot and his girl companion shut the door on the serious bourgeoisie – who are playing cards, talking, reading, listening to a political address on the radio -- to dance with carefree abandon. The film constantly does this, eschewing responsibility and seriousness, closing the door on such mundane concerns. In some ways this in itself may be a political gesture -- the carnival of Hulot continually celebrated over the petty concerns of the holidaying middle classes. Yet these films are so consciously light that such concerns are very much in the background. Hulot is not a levelling, anarchic force for transformation, more a charming fool who makes everyone smile. His mistakes are silly, rather than unsettling or awkward. The comedy is that of the genial grin rather than the socially conscious Lord of Misrule. The films are incredibly fragmented, small sequences often without clear point or meaning. There are generally no narrative structures other than a situation -- *Traffic* (1971), for instance, centres upon a traffic jam, *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday* a small hotel on the coast of Southern France. Scenes are elliptical, slow, muted. For slapstick there are very few pratfalls; Tati concentrates more on reaction and situation. As the focus for most of the films, Tati's Hulot anchors the films in the most gentle of fashions. Socially awkward, nearly silent, eccentric, Hulot is an unfortunate oddball.

Playtime is the film by which Tati stands or falls. A sprawling epic filmed on a purpose-built city set, the film has no narrative, no particular situation and no purpose. However, it is part of a new wave of Parisian films shot in the late 1960s and 1970s that strive for a new language of cinema and the urban. Whilst he is often attacked for his perceived right leaning politics, this film easily sits with others of its time, particularly those of the *nouvelle vague*, in attempting to comprehend the relationship between the human and the city, in establishing a new dynamic and film language to describe the modern. Certainly, the first film I thought of in comparison was Jean-Luc Godard's *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (1967). *Playtime* is an avant-garde, anti-formalist text that delights in challenging the viewer to reassess their understanding of film. Like Godard, Tati is concerned with the possibility of the new Paris of the 1960s, with the contrast between dehumanising city and the interrogating individual. *Playtime* almost ruined Tati and along with *Mon Oncle* (1958) it is the source for most critiques of his alleged anti-Modernism. The film celebrates the achievement of the individual within the new concrete and steel city -- this achievement being simply to get on with life within this dehumanising and demeaning environment. The opening hour has Hulot pursue various people around vast modernist business offices and exhibitions of new gadgets.

The effect is to emphasise Hulot's everyman tussle with technology. This section of the film is the flimsiest, the oddest and the most elliptical. Tati has been accused of being a reactionary satirist of modernity, yet the film in general feels more like the anxiety of postmodernity. Businesses are faceless, the city is a great hive, the people are a mass. One of the first comments from the American tourists is "they have streetlights just like ours/once you've seen one bus you've seen them all", a statement of globalised homogeneity. The new Paris of the 60s is all façade and surface -- tower blocks obscure the famous landmarks (and in the airline office the posters for Stockholm and London also have their key monuments obscured). The film takes place in postmodern liminal spaces of possibility and alienation -- airports, offices, roads. The answer to the utilitarian is the imagination.

Throughout this ultramodern world, however, runs a sense of anarchy and disordered beauty. A final metaphor encapsulates the film's understanding of the beautiful in the everyday and the utilitarian. Hulot presents his new American friend with a parting gift, a scarf and some flowers which are the same shape and formation as the Parisian streetlights as the roundabout traffic jam turns into a merry-go-round. This melding of the languages of modernism and nature, the ability to find the creative, the possible and the new in anything, characterises the film's engagement with the world. The intersection of human and city is not alienating but enlivening, transforming. The spaces of liminality are not closed and faceless but places of possibility. The cold design of the daytime city is replaced in the final hour of the film with the hedonism of the evening. Set almost entirely in the Royal Garden restaurant, this highly choreographed and increasingly complex sequence is inventive and destructive. The beautifully designed building is thoroughly destroyed through the intervention of highly under-designed human beings. The building is planned to sustain a particular model of hierarchical society – the rich diners sit according to their influence, the staff have their own levels of prestige from cloakroom attendant to Maitre'd; the kitchens are hidden and the doorman a socially invisible luxury. Yet from the beginning the place begins to fall apart, and the carefully constructed spatial model of social order represented by the new architecture collapses. The evening becomes a drunken bacchanal, a carnival as defined by Bakhtin: "it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions." (Bakhtin, 1998: 46) The restaurant is ergonomically restructured, turned into a space of imagination and possibility.

Entrances, and particularly physical doors, are important to Tati throughout his career both in the creation of humour and political points about social comedy. Doors help construct a typology of class and a categorisation of space, but they also allow for farcical misunderstanding and the undermining of boundary. The doors of Hulot's car are continually falling off; he often moves through open doors into social gatherings, turning hierarchy upside down and introducing carnival and freedom. In *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday* for instance he drives through an open gate into the midst of a funeral, turning it from a dour ceremony into a celebratory party. On another trip he loses his car and passengers who instead meet the local gentry and have tea with them after gently rolling into their garden. The opportunity for the open door, then, to level social distinctions is very strong. This carnivalesque trope is furthered in *Playtime*, when the door to the swanky restaurant is shattered and the doorman uses the door handle to mimic a door, opening and closing it for the guests. Various drunken undesirable bohemians, however, make use of the lack of door to crash the party. When part of the restaurant ceiling collapses an American makes it into "an exclusive Bistro", complete with a 'door' made from a broken ceiling tile. A serving hatch is turned into Napoleon's hat. Doors also highlight Tati's unique use of diegetic sound, deployed as they are to separate the noise of the street and the quiet of the interior, or vice versa. Yet in *Playtime* the boundaries

and the walls and the doors are all clear glass, the signifier of partition yet relatively useless at actually parting. The office walls are at once impassable and simultaneously transparent. The fluidity of this makes for rich comedy, but also illustrates key points about integration and interrogation. Furthermore, the glass of the offices and buildings is a surface that reflects. Doors are often opened and shown to reflect the sights of Paris, which are projected onto them. There is a playful point here, surely, about limits and margins, a newly interpenetrative system of signs relating to exterior/interior and perimeter/freedom. This notion of a new architectural language of surface and surveillance -- overlaid, as it is, by ideas of the cinema and audience -- demonstrates that *Playtime* is not critiquing the modernist world but finding it strangely levelling and beautiful, admiring its possibility for the creation of a carnival discourse. Doors, entrances and windows all provide gaps in the boundary wall of society, spaces in which to get leverage or purchase with which to tease out the individual and unique, to begin to introduce 'play' into the system -- 'play' in the humorous, and the deconstructive sense. The modern or the postmodern world may be over-designed and dehumanising, but it has enough flaws to make it interesting.

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The Recruit

Dir: Roger Donaldson, USA, 2003

A review by Ross Thompson, University of Dundee, UK

The Recruit is much more enjoyable than it has any right to be. This paint-by-numbers thriller contains few surprises and offers little in the way of intellectual nourishment, but remains a fairly entertaining means of spending a couple of hours. Man of the moment Colin Farrell plays James Clayton, a computer whiz kid who is headhunted by CIA veteran Walter Burke (Al Pacino) to help continue the war against covert terrorist attacks on the United States. The film unveils a hackneyed Hollywood cliché within the first ten minutes. Clayton initially refuses to listen to Burke's talk of conspiracies, as his own father went missing in action working for the same institution. This subplot is intended to be tragic, but is undercut by the fact that the audience will have seen it many, many times before. The death of a partner/wife/brother is a well-worn motif in 'Buddy' movies, and it would be refreshing to see scriptwriters try something new rather than relying upon such an obvious cliché.

Like the numerous 'surly on the surface, loveable underneath characters' that have appeared in similar films, Clayton is not reluctant for very long, and he is soon won over by Burke's lofty talk of fighting for God and country. Burke becomes a paternal influence on Clayton, but the potential of this intriguing relationship is counteracted by further generic clichés and obvious plot developments. *The Recruit* is split into two halves. The opening section is arguably the more interesting part of the film, during which Clayton is taken to a secluded hideaway and taught how to disguise his real identity and to fool a polygraph. During these stealth operations, the relationship between the leading men takes on a new dynamic. While Burke continually repeats the 'trust no-one' mantra left over from the Cold War, Clayton becomes romantically entangled with Layla (Bridget Moynahan), a fellow trainee. Clayton's life is further complicated by an order to hunt down a 'mole' who has infiltrated the CIA ranks. What follows is a rather formulaic game of cat-and-mouse which effectively undoes the mood of suspense and suspicion established during the previous scenes. *The Recruit* could have challenged the traditional and cinematic depictions of masculinity by further exploring the friendship between Burke and Clayton. Instead, the script resorts to macho posturing and a few unresolved plot threads about Clayton's missing father.

It is during the film's second section that the narrative flaws and plot holes are clearly made apparent. Firstly, the romance that forms the film's centre is just not convincing. Both Farrell and Moynahan are physically attractive players, but the lack of sexual chemistry between the two supposed lovers hampers the film greatly. This has nothing to do with the absence of an explicit sex scene, because for this viewer nudity has little effect on the erotic atmosphere in a movie. Rather, it has more to do with a lack of subtlety and suggestion. It does not take long before the romantic subplot is introduced, and subsequently it takes even less time before the couple consummate their relationship. In comparison, scriptwriters of television drama know that 'jumping the shark' (a peculiar phrase attributed to the decline in ratings for the popular comedy series *Moonlighting* after its onscreen characters became romantically entangled)

means that the piece will inevitably lose its appeal. There is little frisson between Clayton and Layla, if any, because their romance is not drawn out long enough.

Secondly, it is never made clear how much of a threat the mole poses to the CIA. It has something to do with a top-secret computer program, but the lack of danger within a wider American spectrum saps the film's potential to thrill. The script makes thinly veiled references to the Al-Qaeda bombing of the Twin Towers, but stubbornly refuses to contextualise the significance of the historical event that defines a new political era for the United States. Characters make sly remarks about the CIA having wronged the American populace in failing to stop this catastrophe, but nobody has enough conviction to say what the repercussions of September 11 represent. The spy game in *The Recruit* takes place within the vague conceit that an unseen force is working against the American people. This is too reminiscent of the McCarthyite anti-communist witch-hunts in America during the late 1940s and 1950s, and in this light Burke's 'Our cause is just' speech sounds especially hollow. Admittedly, director Donaldson set out to make a non-taxing thriller for dating couples, rather than a radical polemic that questioned America's political history and military entanglements. However, it is difficult not to view *The Recruit* as a step backwards from Donaldson's previous film *Thirteen Days* (2000), a highly effective dramatisation of the Cuban Missile Crisis. If Donaldson had applied the same sense of political scope to *The Recruit*, then it would have made for a very interesting film, rather than one that simply passes the time. A more penetrating insight into the shady workings of the CIA would have been more beguiling than the roughly sketched hokum about an errant computer program on offer here.

In spite of its failings, *The Recruit* remains a solid, if undemanding, example of the kind of diverting fluff continually churned out by Hollywood. Colin Farrell, an actor cursed by the 'next big thing' tag, is better known for his extracurricular activities, but he puts in a strong reading of a script that is clearly beneath him. Clayton is a conventional hero, determined to do the right thing, but Farrell's his talents are better suited to characters that are morally ambiguous, as exemplified by his role in Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report* (2002). Predictably, Al Pacino steals every scene in which he appears, displaying the same onscreen charisma that has established him as a cinematic icon. Pacino's instinctive understanding of the nuances of the art of acting allows him to flesh out Burke into a three-dimensional character, one who may well know more than he is letting on. I could quite happily watch Pacino mow his lawn, and therefore I am more tolerant of his involvement in such an unimaginative movie. At least, in contrast to his most obvious contemporary Robert De Niro, he is not lending his name to lamentable comedies like *Analyse That* (2002) and *The Adventures of Rocky & Bullwinkle* (2000). However, Pacino's presence here is somewhat overshadowed by his role in *Insomnia* (2002), last year's beautifully made thriller that displayed how to make a taut, complex thriller based on similar themes.

I realise that I am damning with faint praise, but *The Recruit* is a film best watched on a Saturday night on a comfortable sofa. There is much talk of 'Nothing in the CIA is as it seems', but pretty much everything in this movie is exactly as it seems. When the true identity of the mole is revealed, the movie finally kicks into gear and threatens to deliver some real thrills, but unfortunately this revelation occurs during the final fifteen minutes. If only Donaldson had applied the same principle to the rest of *The Recruit*, it would have made for a more effective movie.

Spider

Dir: David Cronenberg, France/Canada/UK, 2002
Videodrome

Videodrome

Dir. David Cronenberg, USA/Canada, 1983.

A review by Wayne Egers, McGill University, Montreal, Canada

> My films are bodycentric. For me, the first fact of human existence is the body and the further we move away from the human body the less real things become and have to be invented by us. Maybe the body is the only fact of human existence that we can cling to. And yet it seems to be much ignored in movie making, although maybe not in art generally. One thinks of a lot of strange, interesting performance artists and painters like Francis Bacon. But in movie making there still seems to be this flight from the body in a weird way.
> -- David Cronenberg (Porton, 1999: 8-9)

Of David Cronenberg's thirteen feature films, fully half -- *Shivers* (1975), *Rabid* (1977), *The Brood* (1979), *Scanners* (1981), *Videodrome* (1983), and *The Fly* (1986) -- can be described as shocking "body-horror" metamorphoses. "Body-horror," a new horror film sub-genre set in motion by Cronenberg's earliest work, spotlights the physical transformation and destruction of the human body. Whereas the classical horror film showed us terrors that were either supernatural or external to the body, for the first time, the modern horror film portrayed the body and its processes as monstrous threats:

> The contemporary horror film tends to play not so much on the broad fear of Death, but more precisely on the fear of one's own body, of how one controls and relates to it… [The horror film accomplishes this] by conveying to the viewer a graphic sense of physicality, accentuating the very presence of the body on the screen. (Brophy, 1986: 8)

Ultimately, body-horror takes its name from the emotion that it conveys -- feelings of horror or disgust associated with the human body itself.

Cronenberg has utilized the remaining half of his cinematic repertoire to explore a different, but intimately related, kind of metamorphosis -- a transformation of the emotions or the psyche. In the metamorphosis of the psyche-emotions films -- *The Dead Zone* (1983), *Dead Ringers* (1988), *Naked Lunch* (1991) *M. Butterfly* (1993), *Crash* (1996), and *eXistenZ* (1999) -- he abandons the explicit transformations playing out on the surface of bodies, and opts

instead for a transformation of "hidden" subjective interiors. *Spider* (2002) belongs with this later group, although Spider's desperate attempt at metamorphosis is a failure.

Even though distinctions are noticeable at the level of subject matter and theme, all of Cronenberg's metamorphosis films have been committed to revealing how mind and body are intermeshed and to challenging the cultural ideology of mind-body splitting. "Mind-body dualism" in Western thought has followed a blistering path from the Greek philosophers to Christianity (which condemned the body as the seat of unreason, passion, and desire), to 17th century Rationalism (expressed most famously in Descartes' distrust of the body's senses and passions), to 18th century philosophy's hyperbolic privileging of mind over matter, culminating in the work of Kant (Young, 1999: 62-73). Cronenberg's horror films examine the biological body as it has been a continual source of anxiety in our culture and philosophy. However, Young's wise analysis explains corporeality in terms of discourse, and underrates how the primordially expressive body is essential to all human communications. Taking into account the body's own abilities for nonverbal communication, the contempt for the body can be seen as a culturally learned behaviour that may be resisted by means of embodied experience itself (Egers, 2002: 51).

Although *Spider* is a failed metamorphosis, clearly its central theme is still transformation, a struggle to bring emotional knowing about the world and mind-language back together. Until making *Spider*, Cronenberg's overall project had been to show how culture itself, whether in the guise of technology or the discourses of Western philosophy, maintains a separation of the mind and body through violence. With *Spider*, a physical disease (schizophrenia), rather than the ills of a negative cultural conditioning, is the catalyst for a possible transformation.

Spider opens with a visually stunning slow roll of credits over Rorschach like stains etched on the surface of soiled, decaying wallpaper. These oddly beautiful visual puzzles -- some demonic in tone, others playfully whimsical -- spark the imagination and become the preliminary markers for testing viewers' intellectual, emotional, and creative reactions. Subtly, the film re-directs spectators' attention, not to itself, but to their own internal screens, onto which Spider's painful catatonia will be projected and absorbed. To one extent or another, these intimate blemishes encourage us to experience the film as pseudo-psychiatric patients, standing as important watermarks within the complex web that will become the Spider/spectator interchange.

In his short story "Lunch at the Gotham Café" master horror writer Stephen King uses the term anhedonia (an·he·do·nia) to describe one of the symptoms of withdrawal from smoking cigarettes -- "mild to moderate depression, mourning, some degree of anhedonia (emotional flatline, in other words)." (King, 2003: 401) In another context, anhedonia is defined as "a psychological condition characterized by inability to experience pleasure in normally pleasurable acts." (Merriam-Webster OnLine, 2003) Anhedonia, or emotional flatline, was my initial embodied response to *Spider* and perhaps, in part, was an effect of leaving the security/addiction of the conventional Hollywood narrative behind.

For many spectators, this emotional flat-line feeling is similar to the one they may have experienced while watching *Crash*, but affective disturbance is raised to a new level in *Spider* as it becomes the film's central concern. Like Spider, the characters we meet in the beginning of *Crash* (James Ballard, Helen Remington, Vaughn, and Catherine Ballard) will remain essentially the same when the film ends. In both films, spectators are dropped into the narrative in the middle of things, parachuted into an ongoing struggle to bring intuitive body

knowing and intellectual awareness back together. Yet, one important difference stands out: *Spider* is an abject, paralyzing failure to bring about this reunion, whereas *Crash* lays bare the desperate, obsessive acts -- the terminal car crashes -- that are the cinematic landscape onto which the characters' frantic desire is projected -- a stunning desperation to feel re-connected to lived embodied experience while functioning within the deadly abstractions of their own disembodied intellect and culture. In the final sequence in *Crash*, James (James Spader) uses Vaughn's (Elias Koteas) battered Cadillac to push Catherine's (Deborah Unger) car off the road. Kneeling beside his wife's prone and partially nude body, James asks her if she is all right. Answering him through a haze of shock and the swirling smoke rising from the car, she says she's thinks she's all right. James replies with an odd consolation: "Maybe the next time darling. Maybe the next time." The couple's frenetic desire for reconnection with intuitive embodied knowing, played out through this near death experience, is central to the complex feelings evoked when James and Catherine engage in sex while lying beside her wrecked and burning car. As their sexual passion intensifies, the camera pulls up and away leaving the audience to ponder the extraordinary desperation of men and women who struggle against their anxious place in a culture of disembodied excess.

Yet, even though a spectator's immediate experience with *Spider* may be fretfully stricken by an almost debilitating anguish for Spider's predicament, the film's multiple webbing also discourages a passive viewing. We may feel trapped by the stickiness of Spider's fragmented and near catatonic time and memory (especially since the film's *mise-en-scène* does not offer even the most subtle hint about what temporal plane we are being shown), but we also are encouraged to bring our own embodied fears about what is real and what is illusion to the interpretive dance flickering on our own interior cinemas. From the opening credits, *Spider*'s catalytic blots call out for an active and personal empathetic response to Spider's predicament -- a kind of "comrade in arms" response to the struggle for sanity, to the battle between order and disorder.

But *Crash* is not the only film in Cronenberg's oeuvre aligned with the problematic of *Spider*. In terms of scrutinizing the permeable borders between internal fantasy and external reality, *Videodrome* may be *Spider*'s most unlikely twin. The body-horror of *Videodrome* opens with a double-take of a gritty transmission difficulty. Twice, the "Videodrome" typography wavers between dissolution into disordered transmission noise and a solid, sharp image. This technological hitch, made more ominous by Howard Shore's haunting music, is immediately followed by a wake-up-call, a gentle summons from the protagonist Max's girl Friday to "wake slowly, but painfully" and ease himself back into consciousness. This early morning call becomes an initial directive to Max, our modern day Robinson Crusoe of technoculture, to leave the shores of his embodied dream world behind and rise to the challenge of living in the hallucinatory abstractions of the video world made flesh. This opening sequence sets out the parameters the film will use to explore the slippery borders between the worlds of the video-fantasy and the phenomenologically lived world, and for undermining the culturally induced abyss between the mind and the body.

Whereas *Videodrome* shows us how the cultural conventions embedded in video technology split the mind from body, privileging "video flesh" over "embodied flesh", *Spider* shows us what it feels like to be captive of a disease that horrifically splits the mind and body. Thinking about the similarities between these two films, a dilemma crystallizes as to which "disease" is worse, schizophrenia or the culturally maintained ideology of mind/body splitting? And whereas *Spider* focuses on the failure to re-weave an emotional transformation that might reunite Dennis Cleg's fragmented mind and body experience, *Videodrome* offers

spectators a further opportunity to test their own conceptions of the misty borders between reality and fantasy, body and mind.

At times, *Videodrome* implores its spectators to identify with Max (James Woods), whose very name and willingness to move beyond the borders of cultural convention (especially those associated with sexual norms) becomes the central metaphor for extreme or "maximum" technological experience. Identifying with Max, we can imagine ourselves functioning within a new world morality malformed through video technology, where TV is more real than the material world itself, and where the corrupt Videodrome signal literally becomes tumorous flesh. Unlike Spider's painful catatonia and ambiguous uncertainty, Max is recklessly confident and resilient, even when hallucination threatens to overwhelm his experience.

Max's fascination with the torture economics of Videodrome, on the other hand, may push many spectators to also identify with Videodrome's torture victims. From the beginning, Max's capitalistic instincts push aside any moral trepidations he may hold about the cruelty of Videodrome's torture chambers. At one point in the film, Marsha (a distributor of soft porn videos, played by Lynne Gorman) tells Max not to pursue Videodrome, because it is too political. It's real "snuff TV" she says. But Max, as capitalism's most enthusiastic representative, is greatly impressed with Videodrome, because it has negligible production costs -- no plot, no characters, just torture and murder. He is quick to realize that he could make a lot of money distributing something he could buy so cheap. Videodrome is snuff TV in another way that makes sense within the logic of the film's diegesis. Videodrome snuffs out the "old flesh" by altering the physical structure of the brain, causing a "new flesh" to emerge that fabricates a hallucinatory perception of reality. As a fantasy of "fascism by video", the torture chambers of Videodrome symbolize extreme right wing ideology, its goals facilitated by the most absurd pragmatism of capitalist philosophy. The Videodrome belief system is most explicitly expressed when Harlan (Peter Dvorsky) delivers his monologue about purity and surviving in a world that is getting tougher. Videodrome will be used to smoke out the weak, so society can grow stronger.

Videodrome focuses on the spectacle of the nonverbal communication of body metamorphosis, whereas *Spider* relies on the nonverbal communications of Spider's schizophrenia. Nonverbal communication has always been central to Cronenberg's technique, especially body-horror, but in *Spider* it acquires a novel dimension. Spider's central disability is his inability to verbalize a traumatic past. Cronenberg heightens this struggle by refusing the standard device of using "voice-over" to get us inside a character's head and by distorting the conventional flashback so that Spider becomes a kind of unreliable voyeur of his own past embodied memories. Spider's past is never revealed straightforwardly through his point of view. He literally stands within the *mise-en-scène* depicting his past, functioning as a reverse Doppler effect, his adult self-becoming an impossible echo within the temporal unfolding of his childhood past. Spider's adult self becomes a pseudo-catalyst in his own early life. Rather than the child giving birth to the man, the adult "literally" gives birth to the child's mental life as he telegraphs phrases that the child will repeat. Still, the spectator is always unsure whether this is an accurate recollection or the fabrications of a terrible disease.

Often we may feel uncomfortable by *Spider*'s lack of a contented Hollywood closure and conventional character development, but the film's powerful nonverbal communication does not allow us to remain indifferent to Spider's passionate struggle for metamorphosis, his stumbling fight to re-weave the lost fragments of his shattered life and transform them into

something else. Complexity, rather than development, is revealed through multiple webs of past experience (his childhood, his time at the asylum) and by a doomed struggle to reunite mind and body. *Spider* spins its viewers a heartrending story about a schizophrenic mind split off from a body, about a man whose present day phenomenological experience has been kidnapped by a past he cannot bring to articulation. Desperately, his embodied intuitive understanding lurches for an entrance into the dehabilitating maze of his fractured, disease-ridden mind, but is tripped up at every potential access. Struggling to fabricate some semblance of order against the emotional and intellectual chaos of his inner experience, Spider secretly keeps a diary of unintelligible scribbling (clouded evidence about his mother's "death"), assembles puzzles of seagulls and broken shards of glass, and builds string-yarn webs that enclose the precise security of mathematical shapes.

In *Videodrome*, body metamorphosis, presented through the film's nonverbal strategies in the *mise-en-scène*, is used to extend and complicate the narrative. After watching several Videodrome broadcasts, a vagina like opening appears in Max's stomach, into which several video tapes will be inserted to program him to the will of the Spectacular Optical corporation. Inanimate objects take on the characteristics of the human body as video tapes and television sets breathe and twist, helping to create a feeling of the uncanny in spectators' imaginations. At one point, a television screen bulges out like a pregnant belly while Max pushes his head into it, symbolizing his impending rebirth into video-flesh. Near the end of the film when Max goes to the Cathode Ray Mission to kill Bianca Oblivion, he is stunned by a mirror image of himself, holding a cyborg gun (earlier his biological hand had been fused with the inorganic technology of a gun), stretching like human skin out of a television screen. The gun fires three times shooting Max in the stomach, and on the reverse shot, the television screen becomes Max's wounded chest. Before the final sequence in the belly of an abandoned ship, Max shoots Barry Convex, and his body explodes into squirming undulating flesh, echoing with the final showdown between the good and evil brothers in *Scanners*, and the mobile parasites in *Shivers*.

Stripped of the usual special effects of body-horror, *Spider* presents its failed metamorphosis through the nonverbal communication of schizophrenia. Ralph Fiennes' body language -- stumbling, mumbling, dreary catatonia -- is a touchstone and context for all the film's other nonverbal strategies. Spider makes webs from strings to nonverbally communicate his desire for stable relationships and connections with others, yet he also uses part of this structuring web to turn on the gas that "kills" his mother/Yvonne. Spider cocoons himself inside four shirts (he is a captive of his own disease; his past eating his present self alive) and wraps himself in newspapers (wraps himself in words) to protect himself from the gas, from the horrific maze of memory about the death of his mother. Like a detective suffering vertigo, he gathers evidence of a crime in unintelligible scribbles in a secret diary. Did he or his father murder his mother, or was this nothing but a cruel fantasy? Resonating with the horrifically repetitive writing in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) -- "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy" -- Spider's personal hieroglyphics also foreground the unattainable desire for a healthy connection of words and experience that is at the crux of both stories. Contrasted to the paralyzing impact of Spider's linguistic fog is the stability of the geometric shapes on the wallpaper throughout the *mise-en-scène*, and the mathematically precise outlines made by the criss-crossing of Spider's webs. Another layer of Spider's nonverbal communication is his struggle with puzzles -- the cardboard seagull jigsaw and the puzzle of glass shards at the asylum. These constant efforts encourage the audience to painfully identify with Spider's doomed desire for an ordered experience.

The brilliance of the color blue, relayed throughout the film in several important scenes, is in stark contrast to the drab decaying brownish pallet of the rest. While stumbling his way to the halfway house, Spider passes an abandoned apartment building with the most beautiful blue windows. However, this beauty is a thin veil covering a blockage, something bricked over and closed to the external world. The blue here not only reflects Spider's immediate mood but his whole internal predicament. Another obstruction to Spider's recovery, Mrs. Wilkinson (Lynn Redgrave), the woman who runs the halfway house, greets him at the door wearing a blue blouse. Later on in a significant scene, he catches his mother wearing a beautiful blue slip she has bought to entice his father. In the last sequence of the film, Yvonne/his mother, after being gassed, is wearing a blue dress.

One of the most powerful aspects of *Spider* is how it cracks open a door for spectators to temporarily inhabit a grey-mist-universe fraught with a spasmodic, faltering desire to reconnect words and embodied emotional knowing. Spider is caught in the interpenetrating webs of reality and fantasy of his own past, whereas Max is confronted with the dilemma: "Is public life on television more real than private life in the flesh."

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Who Framed Roger Rabbit

Dir: Robert Zemeckis, USA, 1988

A review by Greg Jericho, James Cook University, Cairns, Australia

There is little sadder than revisiting an old film based on special effects. No matter how glorious those effects were at the time of its original release, and regardless of how members of the audience gasped at the ability of Industrial Light & Magic et al to make effects that seemed "so real", if special effects are the film's major asset, then a re-viewing of that film some years later inevitably leads to disappointment and wonder at what all the fuss was about.

Cinema history is crowded with examples of such films. *King Kong* may have scared and amazed audiences in 1933, but a viewing of it now mostly results in mere appreciation, but not surprise. The only reason Peter Jackson is remaking *King Kong* is because of that fact. No film is made to be merely admired, and no filmmaker wants to hear the comment "it was good for its time", for such a comment reflects that he/she has failed to make an enduring contribution to cinema. Just as no one begins a critique of Shakespeare with the proviso that drama in his time was much different than now, neither should we review films in such a manner. If the film is dated, let us not forgive the makers; let us judge them.

Time is not only unkind to special-effects-laden movies such as *Star Wars* (1977) -- the special editions of which merely proved that the original is now sadly dated -- comedies have also suffered from the erosion of time. Chaplin, for example, is now merely admired. If we as viewers only see the skill in his little tramp doing the dinner roll dance, but do not laugh, then while Chaplin's achievement as a film maker may not be questioned, we must surely realise that something unfortunately has been lost. That films such as *King Kong* and *The Gold Rush* (1925) remain admired -- and even enjoyed -- is not then due to the ability of effects, or Chaplin's comedic ability, but due to the strength of the narrative, the characters and the cinematography.

Which brings us to *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. When originally released, it was praised unanimously for its technical brilliance. At the time, the sight of animated characters interacting with real people was astonishing, and even now, it still seems amazing given that the entire process was done with minimal computer help. The film (along with *The Little Mermaid* [1989] which was released the following year) was also important historically as to a great extent it saved animation. Animation during the 1970s and 1980s was for the most part ignored by the major studios. Yet since 1988 animation has thrived, and today the genre even has a separate Oscar category. After *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* studios realised that animation could be both critically and financially successful. But since its release, the success of animated films (and television series such as *The Simpsons* and *South Park*) has, ironically, mortally injured *Roger Rabbit*, and make the release of the *Roger Rabbit* on DVD more an exercise in nostalgia than excitement.

Despite this, the animation in the film remains impressive: Jessica Rabbit is still drawn jaw-droppingly "bad" (indeed her figure makes Lara Croft's seem realistic), and despite the advances in CGI, the "toons" do still appear three-dimensional. Unlike most recent CGI characters -- such as Jar Jar Binks and Gollum -- Roger Rabbit and the other toons do not look life-like. This as much as anything shocks the contemporary viewer. The toys in *Toy Story* (1995), for example, look real, and it is surprising now to see that the animators did not attempt to make the toons look human. This is because the characters are still cartoons, though three-dimensional ones, and the animators never made any attempt to portray them as alive to the point that they could bleed. And in keeping with their being cartoons, they do not obey the laws of physics and can be stretched or flattened and can survive after a refrigerator falls on them. This un-realness thankfully allows us to avoid the lapses in movies such as *Jaws* (1975) when our suspension of disbelief fails when we spot the fake shark. However, the "wow factor" of the animation has been lost. In a time when we have seen dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park* (1993), Gollum and even poor Jar Jar Binks, the sight of Eddie Valiant (Bob Hoskins) grabbing an animated character by the ears no longer causes one to marvel in disbelief.

When the wow factor is gone, all that is left is for us to judge the film -- as all films must ultimately be judged -- on the merits of its narrative and characters. Unfortunately it is here that time has been most unkind. The narrative, which involves hard-boiled, private-eye Eddie Valiant's attempt to discover who has framed 'toon actor Roger Rabbit for the murder of props wizard, Marvin Acme, lacks the complexity required for a detective film. Moreover, the characters lack the sophistication now required for films that seek to appeal to both children and adults. Zemeckis attempted to replicate the look of Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974) -- to the point of using the J.J. Gittes' car -- but there is great difficulty in using a decidedly adult genre for a film aimed for families. Detective films can contain humour, but the antics of Roger and the other animated 'toons is inconsistent with a narrative involving murder and corruption.

What most surprises the contemporary viewer are the aspects which in 1989 made the film one that adults could unashamedly enjoy. Jessica Rabbit's voluptuous figure, Baby Herman cursing and smoking a cigar, and an alcoholic Eddie Valiant are, in the light of *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, now rather tame. The humour is at times naughty, but in a childish manner; such as when Valiant accidentally hits his head on Jessica Rabbit's breasts. Recent animated films, such as *Shrek* (2001), do not attempt to appeal to an adult audience by covering topics considered adult, but rather through a strong narrative and a mature and often subtle humour that only adults enjoy -- not because children are too young to understand, but rather are too young to appreciate. For example, consider the following dialogue from *Shrek*:

> Lord Farquar: Mirror, mirror on the wall, is this not the most perfect kingdom of them all?
>
> The Mirror: Well technically, you're not a king.

The humour is far superior compared to the obvious and tame dialogue of *Roger Rabbit*: "So tell me Eddie, is that a rabbit in your pocket or are you just happy to see me?"

The DVD contains an extra disk with an excellent number of features. The usual "making of…" documentaries are interesting for the critic, but add little that is not already known. The split-screen feature, which shows the final version of a scene next to Bob Hoskins acting in

front of a blue screen is interesting more because how unsurprising it all is. Just as the impact of animated characters interacting with humans is diminished, so is the novelty at seeing an actor in front of a blue screen. The extra disk does however contain three excellent “Baby Herman and Roger Rabbit” cartoons. All of which are highly entertaining and all conclude with the characters interacting with director “Raoul J Raoul”. These cartoons are so wonderful and inventive that it makes one wish the film concerned itself more with the trials of making a cartoon with “live” cartoons than with the limp detective narrative.

Who Framed Roger Rabbit remains a film adults can appreciate. The animation will forever be an outstanding achievement, especially when placed within the context of the pre-CGI world. However, the film now fails to meet the needs of its target audience. Family films need not be overtly complex to be successful, but just as they must not be above the children, they must also not be below the adults. It is a fine line, and one that has moved significantly since 1988. For its time, *Roger Rabbit* was good family entertainment, but whereas then parents were glad to be dragged to see this film by their children, they will now find themselves surprised by how childish and -- more damming -- how boring the DVD is.

X2

Dir: Bryan Singer, USA, 2003

A review by Rayna Denison, University of Nottingham, UK

There are two general trends through which politics plays out in film: in literal and allegorical, with the former mapping, more or less faithfully, epochal moments in history and the latter engaging typically with the broader brush strokes of national (often American) politics. *X-Men* (2000) and its successor *X2* fall into this second category of politically-infused filmmaking.

This second instalment of the X film franchise revolves around a series of politically laden themes and storylines that both reflect and comment on current political trends in America. The film rests on the intellectual battle between three characters: Patrick Stewart's liberal mutant Professor Xavier, Ian McKellen's militant pro-mutant rights Magneto and Brian Cox's human fascist, aptly named William Stryker. The plot sees the mutant super-teams headed by Professor X and Magneto forced to face their common enemy Stryker as he both manipulates the top levels of American government and attacks mutants in their homes. This perhaps oversimplifies the action of *X2* which is also heavily invested in exploring the ways in which American society treats its internal Others, through its successes and failures in race and religious intermingling, and *X2* is also at pains to present identity itself as a serious problem in America. With an ensemble cast of thirteen principle characters, Singer is able to delve into many issues surrounding the outsider within American society, emphasising Nightcrawler's (Alan Cumming) Catholicism and Bobby Drake/Iceman's (Shawn Ashmore) problems with his "normal" family. Protagonist Logan/Wolverine also continues to search out his identity, and indeed purpose and place in the world, only to find the answer lying in a Pandora's Box that he may well not wish to open, forming a somewhat fitting allegory for the identity crisis faced by many in American society today.

This rather complex layering of story lines is a reflection of the origins of the X-texts. Since its conception, the X-franchise has been parent company Marvel's political outlet, paralleling American political movements from its birth during the time of the Civil Rights Movement. As both a comic book franchise and now as a film franchise, the mutant minority of the X-Men has presented a cipher for Marvel's discussions of the problems and outright crises faced by America's minority groups.

Since the late 1960s the comic books have ranged across pivotal political and sociological debates within American culture, from the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 90s to dealing with the rights of Native Americans through to issues surrounding religion and sexuality. This in amongst space travel narratives and the soap opera lives of its central cast of characters. But it is the mapping of politics onto X-Men that has differentiated it from other comic books, as through their mutancy the central X-Men characters have provided a ready mirror for discourse on Otherness and minority in American social life. Bryan Singer's latest instalment of the X-story continues this trend at a peculiarly unstable moment in American history as

America deals with the aftermath of 9/11, entering into aggression against the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq.

As such *X2* provides a cautionary tale for America's political future. *X2* is unlike Singer's previous X-movie, which stuck close to the comic book's political origins in the 1960s with Professor Xavier and his sometime nemesis Magneto playing Caucasian versions of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. For this sequel, the mutant factions are forced to unite in the face of an oppressive force bent on conquering or annihilating them, read in this light as a chilling warning to America's Republican party about what can happen if you paint all minority groups with the same brush of terrorism. In this reading of the film, Colonel Stryker, an evilly minded genetic scientist turned black-ops militant extremist, is America at its least liberal. Through various machinations Stryker is able to manipulate a bewildered and frightened President into attacking Xavier's School for Gifted (read "mutant") Children and kidnapping its wards. He is also able to take Xavier himself prisoner and in a wonderful "enemy within" storyline uses Xavier's own powers of telepathy against the mutants he has sworn to protect.

This has interesting repercussions for the two camps of mutant characters -- the liberal X-Men and the militant Brotherhood of Mutants. The lines drawn in the sand between the two groups disintegrate with the X-Men largely forced to forego the moral high ground that they had long occupied (attacking such bastions of moral and political authority as American fighter jets, military installations and policemen). The final scene of confrontation in the film, between the X-Men and the President of the United States, takes place just as the President is about to broadcast to the nation on the dangers of the mutant threat. In a somewhat worrying conclusion to the meeting Professor Xavier warns the President that the X-Men will be watching his next moves with great interest. The might-makes-right mentality of this scene is far removed from Xavier's calls for peace between mutant- and mankind in the first *X-Men*. Although perhaps unintentional, the parallels between *X2*'s more radical and reactionary politics and what one reviewer of the film called "random suspensions of habeas corpus and the eradication of, in a matter of hours, civil liberties protected in the Constitution for more than 200 years" (Coker, 2003: 57) are all the more significant.

For all that the "X" of the X-Men denotes a blank narrative space into which any number of social groups can be inserted, the immediacy of *X2*'s narrative post-9/11 and concomitant with the conflict in Iraq, and the popularity of this politically influenced blockbuster film points to an American public that has perhaps become more politically charged. There are not many calculated blockbuster films that, when reviewed contain the variety of political buzzwords that became associated with *X2*. For example, "September 11", " current political climate" and "dictator" were just three of the major topics under discussion in a single extended review (Gross, 2003: 46-56). Questions remain however, as to whether *X2* was truly or even allegorically political or if it merely used the political climate of the time to further its own capitalist, corporate ends. Furthermore, the audience for *X2* is predicated on the success of its predecessor, *X-Men*, which was also a blockbuster hit with political leanings. The fact that *X2* may therefore have been playing to the successful traits of its forebear suggest that corporate and not political leanings may have been the impetus behind *X2*'s more radical politics. This stated though, the nature of *X2* as an unapologetically "political" blockbuster does present something of a reinterpretation of the usual conservative-liberal politics on display in the blockbuster.

References:

Coker, Cheo Hodari (2003) X: Claws and Effects, *Premiere* 16 (10) (June), pp. 54-61 and 108.

Gross, Ed (2003) Claws and Effects, *SFX* 103 (April), pp. 46-56.