

An Affair (Jeon-Sa)

Dir: Yi Jae-Yong, South Korea, 1999
Happy End (Hae-P'i-En-Teu)

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Dir. Jung Ji-Woo, South Korea, 1999

A review by Teo Kia Choong, National University of Singapore

As a nation state isolated from outside influences until contact with the USA after the Korean War in the 1950s, the ethnic-cultural homogeneity of South Korean society is a factor which warrants much attention for us, a contemporary audience, even while we view its cinematic exports. Over six centuries of a neo-Confucian system of government until Japanese occupation in 1910, during which the estates of Korean society became increasingly slanted towards the male chauvinist values of 'nam jeon yo bi' ('nan zun nui bei' in Chinese, meaning 'man/superior, woman/inferior'), have affirmed the primacy of men in the working world and societal-familial roles alike as opposed to the silence and subservience of women. Not surprisingly, the stifling political atmosphere of censorship in South Korean society from the early 1960s to the 1980s -- chiefly a result of strict dictatorial rule under the successive governments led by Presidents Syngman Rhee and then Chung Hee Park -- has additionally contributed to affirming the strict moral-social taboos on the public viewing and screening of sexual intimacy and sexual subject matter.

The cinema of the 1990s and early twenty-first century in South Korea can be seen to represent a clear change in the degree of laxity awarded to films with regard to depictions of sexual activity on screen. Although the screening of genitalia and occasional blunt violence is still forbidden under South Korea's Media Ratings Board in commercial and art-house films alike, these pressures are often pitted as controversies more than decisive actions of censorship since, in practice, the Media Ratings Board has no direct power to cut or ban a film per se. Here the change in South Korea's reigning generation of auteur-directors, such as Jang Sun-Woo who tackled the subject of sado-masochism in *Lies* (1999) and Im Sang-Soo who dealt with women's sexual fantasies in *Girls' Night Out* (1999), often mark a concerted attempt to breach the formal boundaries imposed on artists by the Media Ratings Board.

If this sudden surge of liberalism and 'free love' is shown by mainstream auteurs, experimental directors like Jung Ji-Woo and Yi Jae-Yong, who have studied in the film institutes of today's South Korea, have shown a similar predilection towards the testing these boundaries of censorial pressures. The directorial debuts of Jung Ji-Woo and Yi Jae-Yong, *Happy End* (1999) and *An Affair* (1998), reflect the current destabilization of the traditional neo-Confucian stress on female subservience to her husband and family, the nuclear family

unit governed by a patriarchal figure (normally the father-husband), and of marital fidelity under the influence of Western liberal values. As these two films reveal in their immediate historical context, where issues like adultery and sexual infidelity were direct affronts to social consciousness and political correctness in a military dictatorship of the 1960s and 1970s, they are now brought to the forefront for the audience's consumption in the 1990s, thus marking a 'new' surge of vigor in South Korean cinema in the forays into once-taboo subjects.

A perennial excuse for adultery is the prevalent dissatisfaction on either spouse's part with the institution of heterosexual marriage, and the *ennui* into which it devolves after the period of honeymoonal bliss. As films dealing with the subject of adultery, *Happy End* and *An Affair* explore the ambiguities that beset spouses' desire to relieve innate feelings of boredom through these illicit relationships, and the conservative social mechanism that punishes these adulterers (or adulteresses). Placed especially in the neo-Confucian sexual climate of South Korea, which has traditionally emphasized the Sinicized values of 'san chong si de' (literally 'three submissions and four virtues literally') for women and the man's need to provide for the family through industrious work, these two films reveal the inherent destructiveness of sexual passions to be equal to the burdens of social boredom. While the *ennui* inherent to the routine lifestyle of heterosexual marriage supposedly leads its protagonists to turn to the excitements of an illicit affair, closure in the form of a happy end is, however, never guaranteed. Instead it deteriorates into this form of *jouissance*, an addictive desire for sex that does not abate. Both of these films, while testing the limits of on-screen sexual intimacy in South Korean cinema, simultaneously affirms conventional sexual-moral ethos in South Korea. An affair hardly promises a happy end, and, in fact, distances one from it.

As a case in point, both films meticulously recreate the repetitious compulsions inherent in the everyday to highlight the boredom associated with conventional marriage. In *An Affair*, Yi Jae-Yong manages this through disjunctive jump-cuts among images associated with familial warmth and order, of the adulteress So-Hyun executing her household duties. She repetitively pre-packs Ziploc bags of fresh meats and vegetables for the fridge. She rearranges the rock specimens that adorn her living room daily despite their already neat arrangements. She lies snugly in bed beside her husband after having sexual intercourse and, in a moment of stark silence for her, tries to talk to him about household matters only to discover that he has fallen asleep. She drives her son to school daily, asking the routine set of questions as to when he will be released from school for the afternoon. In a Warholesque fashion, the camera constantly repeats the same image of a car's front window against the background of a clear day amidst the traffic lights, denoting the boredom of the quotidian.

By contrast, *Happy End* highlights this boredom of everyday married life in the portrayal of a destabilized nuclear family -- one where traditional gender roles of male/breadwinner and female/housewife are inverted. Day in and day out, the main characters of Seo Min-Ki (the husband) and Choi Bo-Ra (the wife) live their lives wishing for an avenue of escape. We are shown Min-Ki interviewing for jobs daily, in between his typing out neat résumés and cutting empty milk cartons for recycling. In between these mundane hours, he hogs the corners of the second-hand bookshop reading his favorite romance and mystery novels. An early scene establishes the action of the owner trying to drive him out of the bookshop because of his refusal to buy the books until he has finished reading them. Min-Ki, however, continues reading the book with devout attention. The camera then cuts to another scene of him reading in the park, wiping a tear from his cheek when moved by the novel's sentimental plot. Through escape into the narrative world as a reader, Min-Ki therefore obtains temporary

respite from his everyday burdens, namely the dour reality of unemployment and economic reliance on his wife. By opposition, his wife, Bo-Ra, relieves such feelings of *ennui* through adultery. The thrill of the affair is treated by her as that of a game of how best to play thief and not to be discovered in the act. By day, she is a career woman at a foreign language centre promoting the efficacy of its language training courses; at night, she becomes a wild woman in sexual foreplay with her lover Kim Il-Beom, allowing herself to be photographed in the nude. The ten-minute sexual tryst that plays as part of the opening credits may be audacious, but reminds us that it is precisely in the affront that adultery offers to conventional sexual morality that individuals find insulation against the dulling effects of the everyday.

Additionally, denials of the affair are always conducted by either pretending that it never really happened, or that it can be terminated as and when one prefers -- ironically this has the effect of reinforcing the affair. The characters' belief that a return to the 'normalcy' of the quotidian is always possible after an affair is a premise which both films demonstrate to be fallacious and self-destructive. In *An Affair*, this is revealed in the sibling tensions between So-Hyun and her younger sister, Ji-Hyun, who both vacillate between attempts to end their relationships with Yu-In (Ji-Hyun's fiancée) and attempts to sustain that desire. The early half of the film reveals So-Hyun promising her sister to take care of Yu-In in her absence, to the extent of sharing his bed as his lover. But upon her younger sister's return from the United States, which constitutes the latter half of the plot, she refuses to be intimate with him openly or to talk to him.

The portrayal of Ji-Hyun, as an emotionally tormented sibling who abides by the traditional axiom "do not wash your dirty linen in public", itself affirms the fallacy of thinking that an affair can ever be denied with ease. In a crucial scene where Yu-In declares his sudden decision to return to Los Angeles before So-Hyun and her family, the scene is charged with a stifling and uneasy atmosphere, as So-Hyun watches Yu-In hanging his arms around Ji-Hyun's shoulders affectionately. Any possibility of the characters returning to a life of familial harmony is demonstrated as wishful thinking here. As the audience, we have already witnessed a terse, silent confrontation between Yu-In and Ji-Hyun prior to this, where he confesses his change of love for another. The scene that ensues after Yu-In's disclosure of his decision reveals Ji-Hyun issuing a curt warning, "You had better take care of her," secretly to him in the taxi. This affirms Ji-Hyun's knowledge of the adulterous relationship between her sister and Yu-In, even as she tries to deny her knowledge by playing games of intimacy with Yu-In in front of So-Hyun. The two sisters' fluctuating attentions towards Yu-In thus highlight that an adulterous affair can never be fully denied and that its destructive effects are there to stay.

Similarly, *Happy End* highlights the impossibility of a marital relationship returning to normal given the high stakes of the emotions involved in the affair. In the light of this, the claim that adultery is but a brief fling for fun is exposed as naïveté. The film's opening credits show Bo-Ra leaving Il-Beom's apartment after a night of sex, readying to return to her station as a working woman who has to support her jobless husband and baby girl. The camera closes in on an attractive, sexily dressed woman who walks past her, and she stares at that woman, as if suspecting that Il-Beom has another lover besides her. In a later scene in the film, Bo-Ra develops a complex jealousy upon seeing another woman brush past her while walking to Il-Beom's apartment. Storming in the direction of his apartment, she bangs on the door, cursing and swearing at him for betraying their relationship. This constitutes an ironic moment in their adulterous affair which lacks legal recognition and is, therefore, as illegitimate as the affair she suspects him of having. As *Happy End* shows, when adulteresses

(or adulterers) start developing possessive feelings for that other lover, their pretense that it can never ruin their everyday lives as married women (or men) becomes a red herring.

The premature endings of both films, lacking in a sense of immediate comfort and closure, also prove that passion is as grinding as the *ennui* of the quotidian. In *An Affair* this premature ending is brought into effect by its characters' meditation upon the question of "what if?", of the possible alternative endings in one's life. Yu-In, as the contemplative silent man that So-Hyun starts to develop adulterous feelings for, represents one facet of this question. In one scene, viewing the apartment that his father has prepared for him in South Korea, he laments to So-Hyun that his whole life has been a machination of his father's wishes, including his move to study architecture. While he looks down upon the Muslims of this neighbourhood praying in the direction of Mecca, we are given a hint that he is played upon by a larger god-like force beyond himself -- namely his father's will. His later reminiscences to So-Hyun of childhood days in Buenos Aires (shown in a later scene of her visiting him secretly in his new apartment outside Seoul) proffers an alternative ending: what if he had stayed on in Argentina against his father's wishes to emigrate to Los Angeles?

Similarly, So-Hyun's character, as the reticent wife and mother preoccupied with her familial duties, also leads her to contemplate the question of alternative endings in her life. Silently meditating upon Yu-In's stories of his childhood days in Buenos Aires, of him playing soccer with the town children in the hot sun, and then basking in the nearby river together, the scene holds a sense of romanticism for So-Hyun. Argentina thus becomes the projection of a country of hot-blooded Latinos in So-Hyun's mind, representing for her the question of whether she could ever have romance again in her thirties outside of her marriage. The prevalent question of the (im)possibility of alternative endings and denouements in one's boring personal life is, therefore, one which gels the various sequences and leading characters of the film together. This is illustrated in the final scene of the film, in which we see So-Hyun and Yu-In seated diagonally across each other in the same plane bound for Argentina, not aware at all of each other's presence. Yu-In tries to sleep quietly by the window, indifferent to his surroundings, while So-Hyun, sitting in the middle, continues contemplating how her fate after a broken marriage and severed family ties would be. By promising endings alternative to their lives as a normal working class man and a housewife respectively, sexual passion has intruded into their everyday lives. But there is no guarantee of its alternative endings ever being realized in any way, while peace in familial order has already been dismantled.

In contrast, *Happy End* presents this premature ending via what many would regard as a brutal deterioration into intentional cliché. Min-Ki's discovery of how Bo-Ra doped their baby daughter with sleeping medication in order to meet her lover, concomitant with their daughter's subsequent hospitalization, resembles a series of episodes derived from a third-grade murder mystery novel about sexual jealousy and possession -- a genre that Min-Ki loves to read. Looking devastatingly at photos not only of Bo-Ra naked but also, in perhaps more of a betrayal, of Il-Beom and Bo-Ra carrying their daughter together, his character transforms overnight into that of a jealous cuckold bent on administering justice. He sneaks into Il-Beom's apartment, extracts hair samples belonging to Il-Beom, and murders Bo-Ra in cold blood. Then he frames Il-Beom by planting these hair samples as incriminating evidence, thereby getting away with murder. The film's final freeze-frame image reveals Min-Ki waking up to a 'normal' day with his baby daughter sleeping beside him on the floor mat. As an ending, it is an ironic reminder that, in order to provide food and shelter for his daughter, he must 'return' to the everyday. The film has, however, left us with the foreknowledge that there is no guarantee of a happy end here. The penultimate scene of Min-

Ki burning photos of Bo-Ra and weeping hysterically to himself in the bathroom reminds us that his conscience will haunt him forever, and that his unemployment remains a problem to solve.

While stretching the limits of cinematic narrative in South Korea by their focus on the taboo subject of adultery, *Happy End* and *An Affair*, however, affirm conventional Confucian morality. Social-moral criticisms of the act of adultery, replete with an internal law of justice administered through *deus ex machina* figures like angry husbands or siblings, eventually get the better of the perpetrators. If these two directors, Jung Ji-Woo and Yi Jae-Yong, are regarded as radical in testing limits imposed by censorship rules on onscreen sexuality, they are radical for the sake of affirming that traditional Confucian morality never dies old.

The Passion of the Christ

Dir: Mel Gibson, USA, 2004

**A review by Brian Gibson, University of Alberta,
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"What is truth?" Pilate asked." – John 18:38

After the brewing storm of controversy over its possible anti-Semitism, a flood of articles questioning the commercial viability of a film with characters who speak only Aramaic or Latin, and then an immense swell of hype, buoyed by hundreds of churches in North America buying up screenings for their congregations to view the film, the cinematic merits of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* were largely overlooked. Soon the movie had become a blockbuster, churning past critical nods or pans on a sea of profit. All that matters, in the end, is the box office, and by Easter 2004, Gibson's film was such a colossal money-maker (even in some of the Middle East countries where it wasn't banned) that Tinseltown moguls were talking about "faith-based" films as the next great wave.

The Passion of the Christ is not a film, though, but propaganda in the oldest sense -- a carefully channelled, controlled, and single-minded interpretation of events meant to sway the audience into believing a certain 'truth'. Even the Bible offers four versions of Christ's life in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But here the version is altogether more direct, explicit, and unthoughtful. Gibson's 'truth' is: the Jews feared, reviled, and condemned Jesus Christ, who then suffered horrifically until he was reborn.

Not only the message, but the scope of Gibson's film is narrow; apart from some flashbacks to the Last Supper and a few of Christ's teachings, along with recollections by Peter, John, Mary Magdalene, and Mary, the film opens in the garden of Gethsemane and ends shortly after Christ's death on the cross at Golgotha, a stretch of time that occupies only a couple of chapters in each book (specifically Matthew 26:45–28:20, Mark 14:41–15:41, Luke 22:46–23:49, and John 18:1–19:37).

Of the four books, Gibson's screenplay follows John most closely in tone and content (from Judas' kiss and Jesus' healing of Malchus the soldier to King Herod and Jesus' dialogue), and it is John (Hristo Jirkov) who follows Christ (James Caviezel) through his last hours, accompanying his mother and Mary Magdalene as they watch the prophet's torture and death. In the Bible, John's version of Christ's death is the only one that explicitly states that "Jewish officials" arrested Jesus and places the crux of the blame on the Jews who crowed for Christ's crucifixion: "The Jews insisted, 'We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God'" (19:7); "Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jews kept shouting, 'If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be king opposes Caesar'" (19:12). (In the film, Gibson has the Jewish crowd sardonically cry out, "We have no King except Caesar," then snicker.)

While there is no overt mention of those agitating for Christ's death as "Jews" and Gibson does not include the above lines, an early slo-mo shot focuses on a sneering high priest throwing a bag of money to Judas in return for his betrayal of Christ, while the priests and other elders, even though they seem disturbed by the whipping and beating of Christ, persist in calling for his crucifixion and exhort their unthinking followers to demand the same. Crucially, in addition to associating the Jewish priests with money (only negatively; when Judas later throws the money back at the high priests, they do not take it, while in Mark 27:6-7, "The chief priests picked up the coins and said, 'It is against the law to put this into the treasury, since it is blood money.' So they decided to use the money to buy the potter's field as a burial place for foreigners.") and showing Jews demanding Christ's death (one of the Jewish leaders mocks Christ while he is on the cross), Gibson includes Christ's words to Pilate from John 19:11, which implicates the Jewish high priest Caiaphas -- Gibson's rendering is "'it is he who delivered me to you who has the greater sin.'" At best, Gibson could be accused of ignorance of the anti-Semitic charges against the Book of John, but given Gibson's well-publicized right wing, fundamentalist Roman Catholic leanings, the film seems purposely anti-Jewish. After the first hour of showing the Jews' blood libel, the only actual mention of "Jew" in the story, when Simon of Cyrene -- who helps Christ bear his cross only after telling lookers-on that he should not be thought of as a condemned criminal himself -- is derisively called one by a Roman soldier ("Let's go . . . Jew!"), seems a clear sop to politically sensitive critics.

The success of the bigoted *The Passion of the Christ* seems, then, to be a disturbing reflection of the abiding appeal of mythic propaganda propelled by archetypal storylines and cardboard cut-out heroes (as in the class fantasy, epic mush of *Titanic* [1997] or such jingoistic Uncle Sam ads as *Top Gun* [1986] and *Pearl Harbour* [2001]). If Gibson's film were at least artful, if not artistic, propaganda, it might sit amongst infamous cinematic company, from Griffiths' *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) to Reizenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935). But *Passion* is never complex or subtle and, even though the costumes and sets provide an authentic atmosphere, cinematographer Caleb Deschanel's increasingly predictable shots cannot rouse the dogmatic story to life.

There's little humanity in Gibson's work because the actors don't have to act. The cast just has to *be*, epitomizing one emotion each. So the Jewish high priests embody anger, Judas personifies guilt, Mary Magdalene (Monica Bellucci) is always distraught, and Mary (Maia Morgenstern) exudes maternal grief. In early scenes, particularly, malice swirls darkly around the androgynous-looking but deep-voiced Satan (Rosalinda Celentano). Caviezel's Christ simply shows resignation to his preordained death, or agony over his punishment (never mercy or compassion). These are Biblical archetypes pre-formed for us and, apparently, co-writers Gibson and Benedict Fitzgerald, so they don't add any depth or contradictions, particularly to their beatific Christ, who is only offered some intriguing earthliness in a flashback scene where the carpenter talks to his mother while making a table, and in his testy awakening of his sleepy disciples in the garden of Gethsemane (seemingly based on Matt. 27:40 and 27:45-46, though Mark 14:37 and 14:41-42 -- "Returning the third time, he said to them, 'Are you still sleeping? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go!...'") -- suggest an even more agitated Messiah anticipating Peter's denial and his own arrest). The prosaic *Passion*'s Jesus is always a demigod, never a divine man, as was Willem Dafoe's tormented Jesus in Martin Scorsese's poetic *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988).

Pilate (Hristo Shopov) is the only conflicted figure in the movie, refusing to kill Jesus because of his moral scruples, the persuasion of his wife Claudia, and bitterness about his own position as a Roman proconsul stuck governing an outpost. Even Gibson's arguably homophobic depiction of Herod as a roly-poly, mincing, wigged orgiast, is at least oddly singular in an otherwise rigid, unimaginative movie.

The Passion of the Christ is essentially two parts: first, the condemnation of Christ (which in turn involves an implicit condemnation of the Jews), then the punishment of Christ, a vicious torture carried out by leering, jeering, brutish Roman soldiers who are the essence of sadism. The anti-Semitism of the first hour may not be completely dropped in the second hour, however, as Professor Morrow of Queen's University Theological College argues, noting that Christ's enormous sacrifice can lead to a tremendous sense of guilt in Christians, displaced into a wish to scapegoat others. A focus on the Crucifixion made it possible to "gloss the cross with the sword" and that Gibson's movie, a "Ninja Turtles interpretation," is "scary [in that] it's so popular... a certain amount of the population is going to be upset by the sheer brutalization of the death of Jesus in a way that co-operates with other anti-Semitic energies in society" (Focus on violent death of Jesus unhealthy, 2004: A10).

The passionless film revels in the Messiah's suffering at the hands of his Roman torturers in its second hour, becoming bogged down in slo-mo shots of Christ being flagellated thirty-two times by switches and then his flesh raked and ripped by barbed whips. As the viewer becomes utterly numbed, the camera lingers over the grotesque beauty of the seared criss-crosses on the saviour's body and the crimson spray and pools of scarlet ribboned on the ground around the post which Jesus gripped while he was brutalized. After this torture, the nailing of Christ, dislocated arm and all, to his cross is shown in all its frieze-frame, nauseating, gory glory. Gibson recreates John's bloody version of the post-crucifixion Christ, and so a fearful Roman soldier pierces the dead man's side with a spear, only to release a pseudo-baptismal fount of blood and water. If *Kill Bill* (2003) was gore porn, this *Diced Christ* is Biblical martyr porn, where Christ is so sanguinated that even his eyes are bloodshot.

While Christ must endure excruciating pain inflicted by cartoonishly inhuman Roman soldiers, Gibson also offers a predictably lurid version of Barabbas (described variously in the Bible as having killed in a rebellion or merely having taken part in an insurrection) as a filthy, Manson-like psycho. Most of Gibson's other dark additions to the story are likewise over-the-top: a crow pecks out the bad thief's eyes on Golgotha, and the repercussions of Christ's death seem to be out of an apocalyptic Hollywood weather movie. Gibson also inserts a laughable scene of pathetic fallacy, where a tear-like raindrop falls from the heavens, setting off an earthquake. The final scene, of Christ's resurrection, is a comic-book bit of self-serious mythologizing.

The Passion of the Christ left me cold -- this is a bloody piece of propaganda that may reinforce many believers' notions of Jesus' death, but its anaemic plot, cardboard characters, heavy-handed direction, and vilifying tone make Gibson's celluloid paean a banal and lifeless two hours of preaching to the converted.

References:

"Focus on violent death of Jesus unhealthy." (2004) *The Globe and Mail*, April 10, p. A10.

Ma vraie vie à Rouen

Dir: Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau, France, 2002

A review by Florian Grandena, Nottingham Trent University, UK

Released in France in November 2002, the third film of Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau, *Ma vraie vie à Rouen*, came as a surprise. It contrasts with the directors' previous cinematic works, *Jeanne et le garçon formidable* (1998), the militant Demy-like musical on AIDS, and *Drôle de Félix* (2000), the up-beat road-movie that took us through the French hinterland. *Ma vraie vie* differentiates itself from its predecessors in two ways. First, although it also deals with the place of gay people in a hetero-normative society, *Ma vraie vie* does not refer to AIDS as in *Jeanne*, in which the gay activist François (Jacques Bonnafé) militates with the Act Up Paris group, and *Félix* whose eponymous character, interpreted by Sami Bouajila, lives with AIDS unproblematically. Second, *Ma vraie vie* manifests a different cinematic approach, breaking away from the flamboyance and the stunning visuals of *Jeanne* and the idealistic tone of the cinemascope-shot *Félix*. Indeed, *Ma vraie vie* is a low-key, independent low budget work shot entirely with a digital camera and heavily reliant on the subjective gaze of a single character.

Other French film directors have used light, digital recording technology (such as Rabah Ameur-Zäïmeche in his *Wesh-wesh: qu'est-ce qui se passe?* [2001]) but Ducastel and Martineau distinguish themselves from these filmmakers. Instead of making a conventional film with a different type of technology, Ducastel and Martineau decided to flaunt the use of the digital camera and let it influence and determine the structure of the film. Hence the video diary format.

Ma vraie vie deals with the discovery of (same sex) desire and the slow and difficult experience of de-closeting oneself. Sixteen-year-old, Rouen-based Etienne (played by professional ice-skater Jimmy Tavares) is offered a digital camera by his mother Caroline (Ariane Ascaride) and his grandmother (Hélène Surgère). A gifted and hard-working ice-skater, Etienne first uses the camera to film his trainings on the ice rink. He quickly turns the camera to his mother and his grandmother, but also to his best friend, Ludovic (Lucas Bonnifait). Etienne's handsome schoolmate obviously enjoys the attention. Initially, they all find Etienne's new interest rather amusing, but the camera gradually becomes intrusive. The teenager almost obsessively films Laurent (Jonathan Zaccari), his good-looking geography teacher, whom Etienne thinks is the perfect match for Caroline. However, Etienne slowly realises that he is motivated by other deeper, unavowed desires. When he tries to discuss same-sex love with Ludo, the latter freaks out and abandons Etienne. Etienne eventually comes to terms with his attraction to other men when he meets a young man on a cliff.

The video diary format allowed the directors to question the conventions of the classic realist text. In effect, in conventional cinema, the camera is either invisible (to the protagonists) or momentarily takes the place of a character. In *Ma vraie vie* spectator attention is interpellated in a different manner as it is constantly drawn to the camera. This formalism is achieved in

different ways: the actors' gaze is virtually always addressed to the camera (the latter being supposedly held by the film protagonists and, in effect, often handled by the actors themselves). The camera is almost constantly referred to through dialogue, and is sometimes visually present on screen (such as in the bathroom scene where Etienne films his mother's and his own reflection in a mirror). Seamless realism is also challenged by the presence 'imperfect' or 'accidental' shots. Surprisingly for a feature film, the camera flaunts its own imperfections and malfunctioning, hence the presence of altered filmed images. All this also has an ascendancy on the narrative structure as the latter is less linear than in more conventional feature films (interestingly, scenes were re-named 'fragments' in the original script). All this is nowhere more apparent than in the opening sequence, which I will now discuss in detail.

The opening sequence is filmed in such a way that viewers could mistake it for an authentic home movie. However, the well-known face of Ariane Ascaride (the wife and favourite actress of French filmmaker Robert Guédiguian) contradicts this and immediately roots the film in the fictional realm. The sequence is made up of four shots that all posit the camera as the main protagonist. It takes place in Caroline and Etienne's living room. Etienne has just been offered his camera and uses it for the first time. The first shot is a one-minute-and-twenty-one second-long take. It starts with a medium shot of Etienne's mother. The camera is shaky, translating the imprecise technique of an amateur cameraman, and expresses Etienne's utterly subjective gaze. Caroline stares at the camera, briefly looks and smiles at the grandmother who is sitting next to her. She remains silent for no less than thirty seconds. Then the camera awkwardly zooms towards Caroline. Her first line is: "Is it working?" A voice-over (Etienne's): "It is. I think it's recording." The conversation evolves around the use of the camera and the fact that the two women do not like being filmed (Caroline even pauses as if she was being photographed). The camera movements are anthropomorphically modelled on that of head movements: indeed, the camera constantly moves from a person to another, its focus being determined by whom the speaker is.

The second shot is much briefer (ten seconds). It is very shaky and reveals Etienne for the first time (in the rest of the sequence, his presence is 'reduced' to a voice-over). As he holds the camera, he films himself together with his mother. 'Look, it's us', he says. As if he was simultaneously filming and watching himself, both actor and spectator. The third shot is even shorter (two seconds). It is an 'accidental' shot as if it had been recorded by mistake. Diegetically speaking, this shot is not essential and seems superfluous. The insertion of such 'imperfect' and/or 'useless' shots is a technique used throughout *Ma vraie vie* to add credibility to the video diary format. In effect, Etienne's camera often focuses on features that are not relevant to the story development: he films cliffs, his feet as he skates or walks in the grass, or himself riding his bike. Sometimes, there is not enough light (as in the first shot of the second sequence), or the camera is not functioning well: for example, when Etienne films trees from his mother's car, the image divides itself up in small squares. The presence of such shots confirms the use of digital recording technology and is justified by the video diary format. It also has a distancing effect on spectators as these are constantly reminded that what they are watching is a re-creation, a cinematic artefact.

The last shot of the opening sequence is a long take, almost as long as the first one (one minute and sixteen seconds long), suggesting that the sequence as a whole is symmetrically constructed. Again, Etienne is filming his mother together with his grandmother. However, the camera movements now seem more under control: the shaking has almost disappeared,

and the protagonists are more carefully framed. Thus, the *mise-en-scène* is a direct expression of Etienne's relationship with his camera.

Not only does the camera act as an extension of the teenager's intimate and subjective gaze, but it also enhances it: in true Bazinian manner, it magnifies the reality that it films. The camera has a revelatory and ontological function: it allows Etienne to have access to a part of reality that he cannot see (such as the close-ups of his own face and the bruises on his backside) or apprehend (it is by filming Laurent, his face, his hands, that Etienne understands and manifests his attraction to other men). However, one could say that the role of the camera is paradoxical: it allows the directors to strike an interesting balance between seamless realism (that comfort spectators in their belief that what they see is real and that the object filmed has really existed) and formalism (that leads to spectatorial distancing).

Ma vraie vie confirms the pertinence and originality of Ducastel and Martineau's film production and also manifests their willingness to defy and stay away from the increasing uniformity of French cinema. It is a film that is both enthralling and disconcerting, exhilarating and challenging. *Ma vraie vie* will certainly become a reference for all those interested in digital realism as well as (French) gay cinema.

The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King

Dir: Peter Jackson, USA/New Zealand/Germany, 2003

A review by Alice Mills, University of Ballarat, Australia

After seeing the first two films in Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, I was concerned that there might not be enough plot interest to see through the third film, *The Return of the King*. Even though Jackson had withheld for his last film the episode with Shelob that culminates volume two of Tolkien's trilogy, so much of Tolkien's third volume deals either with the minutely described, slow-paced details of Frodo's and Sam's sufferings in Mordor or with the extended celebrations of the quest's successful ending that I was concerned that the film might run out of material and fall into similar tedious cuteness as the third *Star Wars* film, *Return of the Jedi*, where the celebration of victory is interminably fulsome. My concerns were not borne out. Jackson's *The Return of the King* is a triumph of sustained heroic action and even though its magnificently realised battle sequences are too prolonged. Jackson even cuts out material from Tolkien's story, omitting the entire account of Saruman's decline and death and the hobbits' scouring of the Shire on their return from the quest. Despite these omissions the narrative is crammed with action, from the initial dramatisation of Smeagol/Gollum's fall into murderous evil to a scurry through the finding of the seeing-stone at Isengard, from the thrilling sequence of beacon fires being lit along splendidly photographed New Zealand mountain ranges (a sequence inserted by Jackson into the story, along with Pippin's surreptitious climb to light the first beacon) to the petty triumphs that Gollum repeatedly enjoys over Sam. *The Return of the King* is a film of great energy, in command of many narratives and a host of characters.

Jackson achieves both a sustained note of grief, regret and loss (many of the characters in this film are shown in tears) and a strong sense of completion. Frodo and Gandalf laugh together as they did at the start of the first film; a surly hobbit scowls once again as unexpected riders pass his gate; Frodo's hobbit hole is lovingly revisited, and again he cannot stay there. The ending is a series of climaxes and then of resolutions, so that the entire trilogy of films is structured in the manner of a Beethoven symphony.

In the rush of events, what is lacking, for the most part, is complexity of character and a sense of the depth of Middle Earth history. Aragorn, in Tolkien's trilogy, is aware of the centuries of Steward rule in Gondor and the sensitivities of reclaiming his throne after Minas Tirith has been saved and simply claiming kingship. In the film, Viggo Mortensen appears in one scene as a swashbuckling fighter hewing down Orcs, and on his next appearance as the elegantly attired king of Gondor leading his devoted troops against the might of Mordor. This simplification diminishes Aragorn to the dimensions of a cartoon character. The one human being who opposes the return of the king in this film is Denethor, the Steward. In John Noble's performance, Denethor's character is simplified to the petulant, spiteful malice of an insane despot, maddened by grief: a caricature of a ruler whom Gandalf does not hesitate to

thwack. The tormented, gradually corrupted Denethor of Tolkien's book, a study in the dominion of evil under the guise of the greater good, is altogether lost.

Along with the diminution of Aragorn and Denethor comes a diminution of the history of Middle Earth. The sad history of the Palantiri, the seeing-stones, is not touched upon. Pippin sees the dead white tree of Gondor when he rashly looks into Saruman's Palantir, but its significance and the renewal of the tree when Aragorn takes up his kingship, are unexplored in the film. Instead, Jackson invents new material that concerns the future of Middle Earth rather than its past, when Arwen is afforded a vision of the son she could have if she chose life among mortals instead of departure with the Elves. Tolkien's evocation of Minas Tirith as a faded kingdom, in process of becoming unpeopled, is not realised in the film, nor are the years of pollution that help ruin the landscape of Tolkien's Mordor. While Jackson's second film depicted Saruman's despoiling of the forests, his choice of war machinery over living trees, the third film's landscape of evil is a volcano-dominated wasteland with little or no indication that sentient beings are at all to blame for its desolation.

The great depth of Middle Earth's history is absent from the film. In its place, Jackson dips into the history of European art, architecture and technology (in the form of armour and weapons). The Riders of Rohan live in mediaeval times, more Celtic than Tolkien's Anglo-Saxon Rohirrim. They dwell in mediaeval halls where they sit on benches to feast and warm themselves by fires. Their armour is light mediaeval metal and chainmail. The warriors of Gondor wear much heavier Renaissance style armour and Gondor's people live in Renaissance splendour. Instead of human comforts, their city boasts marble pavements and statues, intricately carved gates reminiscent of Renaissance Florence and black and white striped marble reminiscent of Renaissance Siena. As Frodo, Elijah Woods' fine features and heavily lidded eyes are like those of a Fra Angelico angel; at the climax of his quest, lit golden by the lava of Mount Doom, hair in a wild aureole, he resembles Cellini's bronze Perseus. The Orcs of Mordor are quite unlike Saruman's wetly birthed Orcs in the previous film; rather, they are dryly deformed like Leonardo's sketches of grotesque heads.

As the film moves towards its climax, the visual details of its settings move forward in the Western history of art and architecture. The ruins of Osgiliath, with their shattered columns and arches, recall the fondness felt by Romantic artists for the classical fragment. Aragorn's vision of Arwen dying (another of Jackson's additions to the story) is pre-Raphaelite in its carefully posed morbid beauty, like Millais' Ophelia. The ship that carries Frodo and Bilbo away to the world of the undying Elves, dissolves into a Turnerian blur of light as it leaves harbour.

While the good characters traverse the mediaeval, Renaissance, Romantic and nineteenth century arts, evil is consigned to the twentieth century in Jackson's realisation of the tower of Minas Morgul. This building seems remarkably fragile and beautiful for a bastion of tyrannical evil. Delicate art nouveau folds descend its length, and it shimmers and ripples like Tiffany glassware. The building's green glow --undoubtedly intended as sinister -- unfortunately reminded me of a neon-lit art-deco cinema. The evocation of a cinema as a dominant symbol for totalitarian evil provides not the happiest of metaphors for a film about the triumph of good. Apart from this building, architecture and landscape settings are among the film's splendours (as in the two earlier *The Lord of the Rings* films). Jackson even improves on Tolkien in the episode when Aragorn, Gimli and Legolas enter the mountain to gain the dead as allies; here the film strips away an uneasily Kafka element in Tolkien's narrative.

The film's other triumphs lie in the rendition of two characters. Andy Serkis as the computer-enhanced Gollum sustains his eloquent writhings of self-torment from the first two films, and he appears briefly in his own right as Smeagol. Sean Astin as Sam wears his emotions on his face, in a performance that grows ever stronger, as he is wracked with sobs or finds a rare occasion to smile. None of the other actors earns their smile as he does. There is an awkward scene, for instance, where the convalescent Frodo is visited first by a laughing Gandalf, then a frolicking Merry and Pippin, then a Gimli who wipes a sentimental tear from his eye, a Legolas whose slight smile becomes a fixed grimace, and an Aragorn whose grin is also held far too long -- all their smiles shown up as less authentic in comparison to Sam's final slow gaze, seeming to search for gladness rather than assume it as a mask. It is the prolonged trial of Sam and the victory of his generous spirit, not the return of the king or the testing of Frodo, that is the emotional and spiritual heart of this film.

The Return of the King completes the trilogy with power and panache. It necessarily lacks the filmic magic of *The Fellowship of the Ring*; audiences are now used to the smallness of hobbits and the flight of Nazgul. It excels in the movement from vast to tiny, from the fate of nations to that of two hobbits, and as such is remarkably faithful to Tolkien's superlative text.

Elephant

Dir: Gus Van Sant, USA, 2003

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

On April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold walked into their high school in Littleton, Colorado and opened fire on their classmates and teachers. The Columbine shootings came after a rash of similar school shootings in America but nowhere else had the killings been so planned, nor the results so dire. They killed ten and injured another twelve before turning their guns on themselves. If their plan had gone right, the bombs they had set in the school cafeteria would have massacred another 500 people.

Gus Van Sant's film *Elephant* takes place against this background knowledge. Without it, it's unlikely anyone would find the film compelling. But because Columbine made international news, few will view this film without the knowledge that *Elephant* is a "recreation" of the Columbine Massacre.

Only it isn't. And that is one of the fascinating things about the film. *Elephant* does not recreate what actually happened at Columbine; it recreates the myths about what happened at Columbine. In the aftermath of the shootings, rumours flew about a "trenchcoat mafia"; about negligent parenting; about the killers' homosexual predilections. The shootings were motivated by bullying. The shootings were motivated by racism. The killers had been gunning for jocks, for Christians, for "niggers." Their influences had been Nazi Germany or Marilyn Manson or violent video games.

Yet the final conclusions of the Columbine investigation revealed that this was a crime of indiscriminate hatred. None of the actual victims had been on the infamous "hit list" (which also included Tiger Woods). The parents had perhaps been naïve, but not negligent or abusive. There was no gay love affair. The killers were equal opportunity haters; their influence was merely rage. The abiding frustration of the Columbine investigation was that there was, finally, no "explanation" for these teenagers' act.

One of the strengths of Van Sant's film is that it subverts both our film-going expectations and our real life expectations that, given enough time and persistence, we can explain malevolent acts. What *Elephant* does so brilliantly is illustrate what Hannah Arendt, in her coverage of Adolf Eichmann's trial in 1961, called "the banality of evil."

Elephant records an ordinary day at an unnamed high school. The camera follows different "characters" -- all real high school students recruited for the movie -- in long tracking shots as they move around the school doing what high school students do: signing out for lunch with a girlfriend, gossiping in the hallways, purging their lunches in the toilets, suffering the criticism of their peers, suffering the interference of the adults in their lives. The effect of following each character for drawn out lengths of time in which nothing -- in film terms --

actually happens is that the viewer's anxiety is elevated. Which of these kids should we be watching? Who among them is under enough pressure to blow?

But this seems to be Van Sant's point: there was no way of knowing who to watch. More than one of these kids is bullied, and more than one seems withdrawn and pensive. Some are under family pressures, and some are under social pressures. But only two will turn into killers, and Van Sant makes a courageous choice when, after finally identifying one of the killers, he next shows him playing Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata almost flawlessly. Even monsters can play beautiful music, Van Sant implies. Or, as one investigator of Columbine said, "Everybody wants...an easy answer so that they can sleep at night. And there is no such thing in this case. There's not an easy answer."

Exactly how normal these boys seemed is emphasized when the second turns up while his friend is practicing piano. After complimenting his friend's skill, he makes himself at home, picks up a laptop and lazily begins playing a video game. This nonchalant "chill-out" scene is one many viewers will recognize from their own youth, and then suffer a jolt of shock at our empathy with these two killers who are so recognizable. Their lives are familiar and pedestrian; their youthful pangs seem no more or less ordinary than most teenagers' with their angst about fitting in. It's only when the 9mm rifle is delivered to them by post that we realize there *is* something different about these boys.

By hinting at some of the same possible motives which arose after Columbine, Van Sant tantalizes the viewer, toying with our need for explanations. The boys watch a documentary about Nazi Germany the day the rifle arrives, but one asks dimly, "That's Hitler, right? That's in Germany?" Sure, they're bullied, but certainly not as cruelly as some of the other kids. Sure, they seem isolated, but so do others who retreat into their hobbies or wrestle with family problems they can share with no one.

Van Sant deftly subverts our film expectations as well as our real-life expectations. So much of *Elephant* is about nothing happening. As viewers used to the language of story telling, we keep expecting a point-of-view character to do something important, something which will turn out to be meaningful ultimately. But Van Sant has chosen his point-of-view players at random, and emphasizes this arbitrary point of view by switching to a new character, Benny, near the end of the film and after the massacre has begun. For a moment it looks as if Benny will play some important, perhaps heroic, role, and then just as quickly as Van Sant has introduced him, Benny is gunned down. Such choices are emblematic of how randomly, and quickly, death came to victims at Columbine. The arbitrary choice of one perspective over another imitates the arbitrariness of who died and who escaped harm in the real event. Such a fractured point of view also suggests the impossibility of piecing together a coherent narrative.

Elephant is filled with wonderful, weird little Van Sant moments. All his point-of-view characters are tracked from behind, so that we see what they see, rather than see them. Consequently, the film has a naturalistic, documentary feeling with the camera just tagging along. That choice reads differently, however, when we later glimpse the violent video game being played by one of the killers: all the victims are shot from behind, the same angle at which the camera has recorded the point-of-view characters. The parallel angle suggests that everyone is a potential victim, as indeed they are in the film, and were in the real event.

Van Sant has also used sound in some interesting ways in this film. Ambient noise throughout the film sounds a lot like distant gunshots, and this is one way in which prior knowledge of Columbine informs the viewing of *Elephant*. Knowing there's an imminent massacre informs the way we read the unclear noise of a locker slamming or a dropped book. Such noises fill us with an instant dread. But the repeated misinterpretation of these noises suggests a more pervasive and long-term dread, the kind which today's students, who are well aware of the levels of violence in their schools and society, live with on a day-to-day basis.

Elsewhere, Van Sant has peppered the film's soundtrack with random birdcalls or sounds of water running. These present a counterbalance to the elegiac Moonlight Sonata and Für Elise which are used during the film. The effect of veering into these natural sound effects is a kind of surreal disconnect with the hard reality of high school hallways, but it hints that high school may indeed be a jungle for some people.

A more noticeable way that Van Sant subverts the language of filmmaking is by refusing to "complete" his recreation. *Elephant* ends with one of the killers taunting two potential victims, having already having killed his partner-in-crime. Van Sant doesn't give the viewer the final suicide; he just ends the film. But the viewer is likely to know how this story ended in real life and *Elephant's* ending will feel weirdly unsatisfying and incomplete. While viewers steeped in the traditions of Western story telling will feel discomforted at not seeing all the villains punished, the dissatisfaction largely suggests that we are reading *Elephant* against our knowledge of Columbine. The result: we are forced to confront our position as speculators and spectators.

Van Sant says he named his film for the parable of three blind men trying to figure out what animal they were touching; each man touches a different part of the beast and so none guess correctly what it is. The unknowability of the elephant in the parable is clearly relevant to our understanding -- or lack of it -- about Columbine. Yet the title suggests a different kind of elephant, the one in the room which no one is willing to talk about. As Van Sant's film makes clear, however, there never was an elephant in the room we could have identified.

Capturing the Friedmans

Dir: Andrew Jarecki, USA, 2003

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

The recent DVD release of *Capturing the Friedmans* might be of particular interest to those who have already seen Andrew Jarecki's award-winning and much admired documentary. In narrations at the margins of the DVD, Jarecki and co-producer Marc Smerling provide additional information, describe aesthetic choices, and fill in many of the gaps left by the film itself. Relieved of nagging questions, the viewer is free to discover something the film itself did not entirely reveal: that *Capturing the Friedmans* is best understood as a film about the limits of film. That is not what Jarecki thinks, but it is nonetheless what the film does best.

What is most extraordinary about *Capturing the Friedmans*, and an inextricable part of whatever story it tells, is that Jarecki did not set out to make this film at all. Instead, while working on a film about successful New York birthday party clowns, he found David Friedman. Through interviews with David, he found the family and clues to the "secret" (as Jarecki calls it in the film's marginalia) that seemed to haunt David's life. And thus Jarecki found another subject altogether, the Friedmans themselves, a family whose past was enmeshed in a large public story of guilt, innocence, and retribution. Equally serendipitous -- if such a word can be applied to such a subject, a question the film makes implicit -- was the family's habit of relentlessly recording itself: first on 8mm home movies, then on video, and even, in one harrowing instance, on audio tape. Indeed with perverse persistence, the Friedmans had captured themselves before, during, and after the events that would unravel them singly and as a group. *Capturing the Friedmans*, then, interlaces the family history as it is caught in a series of documentaries photographed by a number of filmmakers, most of whom are also Jarecki's subjects.

The end result is Jarecki's weave of the Friedman family and the story he found. The father, Arnold Friedman, is accused first of possessing child pornography, then with dizzying rapidity, of multiple counts of child sexual abuse. The 1987 events occurred amidst clusters of similar cases, among them the notorious McMartin Day Care scandal, during which Los Angeles day schoolers testified to an array of sexual abuses they allegedly suffered at the hands of day-care center staff. The longest court case in American history, the McMartin trial stands as a centerpiece to group hysteria, to the problems of recovered memory, and to the practices of law enforcement as it elicits testimony, especially from children. *Capturing the Friedmans* includes commentary from investigative reporter Debbie Nathan, whose work on allegations of paedophilia, sex rings, and Satanic rituals seeks to distinguish the real from the feverishly imagined. In fact, Nathan remains one of the most interesting reviewers and critics of Jarecki's filmic encounter with the Friedman family and the events that befall and capture them. A strong advocate of Jesse Friedman's innocence, Nathan has suggested, for example that Jarecki edited out exculpatory evidence in order to market the film with the catchy tag line, "Who do *you* believe?" Explicitly defined as a movie about contrary facts and points of

view, this marketing strategy seduces the viewer with promises of mystery and lively post-movie debate.

Jarecki now insists that *Capturing the Friedmans* is a film about family. Its current ads show a small picture of Elaine Friedman atop one of her quotes from the film: "We were a family." And so here they are: a father, Arnold, accused of molesting the children he taught in the family's basement home; a mother, Elaine, whom we see in the glow of early marriage photographs, but who subsequently is ignored or reviled by Arnold and the boys; oldest son David, a children's birthday party clown and such a staunch defender of this father that he blames his mother (whom he calls his father's "wife") for everything; middle son Seth, who appears in footage, but never speaks, having declined to be interviewed for the film; and youngest son Jesse, who is charged along with his father in the molestations.

If Arnold Friedman were the whole story, his fate would not compel us except to suggest a vast unanswering blankness, for Arnold Friedman never rises to be hero of his own tale. He was probably less guilty than the courts declared, but not innocent enough for his punishment to provoke our indignation. In fact, Arnold Friedman so thoroughly eludes capture that not even prison holds him for long. It is Arnold's youngest son Jesse who spends thirteen years in jail and faces a lifetime of surveillance as a sex offender. Charged at age nineteen along with his father, Jesse emerges from prison a man determined to exonerate himself. Presumably David's and Jesse's cooperation with Jarecki are bartered with this goal in mind, the film an agent for them of getting the truth to the public and garnering support for Jesse's cause. But in fact the film doesn't work reliably toward such a goal, in part because it seems never to recover from having been about something else. An interesting film, perhaps a disturbing one, maybe even a fascinating one. What luck, we seem to hear Jarecki say, to stumble upon something so unusual! And all those videos, all those filmed interaction! We are amazed along with him, sufficiently so. In addition to the deep cache of home movies, the Friedman trials are the first in Nassau County to admit cameras to the courtroom. Clearly in the vortex of some technological moment, the Friedmans argue, cavort, play, and stand trial in the eye of various cameras. But in this extraordinary abundance of pictures, where exactly are we supposed to look? What are we expected to see?

Jarecki shoots the town of Great Neck as affluent suburb and even refers to it as "upwardly mobile," but in the Friedmans' house, we see only a modest structure, a bit down at the heels. Arnold is, after all, a retired high school teacher. Does Elaine work outside of the home? If so, at what? Did Seth not only "decline to be interviewed" but seek a broader injunction against referring to him at all? Distractingly, the film resolutely refuses to comment on his very visible absence. We know the Friedmans observe Jewish cultural practices because we see them do so, but what if any deeper role does religion play in their lives? In other words, Jarecki blurs so many means by which we might make sense of the family -- class, ethnicity, aspirations, gender relations, place -- that we are left with a pervasive sense of the peculiar and individual, a feeling that the Friedmans ultimately exist in some odd warp of analysis. Even time frames travel indistinctly from past to present, to filmed past/filmed present, to films of other people filming, past and present. Pictures substitute for detailed or coherent interviews as though the sheer quantity of visual images will produce an understanding far beyond narrative.

Among the Thanksgiving dinners, seders, and staged spontaneity, we find a potentially poignant tape of Jesse on the night before he goes to prison. In it, he begins: "This is the day before I went to jail." "Went to jail?" his brother counters. "The day before I go to jail," Jesse

corrects. But the slip is telling and lies at the heart of the film's unexplored territories: Is it possible to stage a life and also to live it? What do we learn when events and relationships are simulated, performed? Within the DVD package are more Friedman home movies and a section of audience reaction to the various premieres. We see the cast of the movie, all together at the film's New York premiere -- the prosecutors, lawyers, judge, investigators -- react to what they see, and of course, what they see ranges widely. Without exception, law enforcement sees a film critical of its methods, dismissive of police claims while an angry Debbie Nathan interrupts with contradictions and corrections. As yet more films accumulate, we are drawn further into pictures of the story, into pictures of pictures of the story.

When Jessie Friedman pleaded guilty to abusing thirteen children, he seems to have done so within a complicated legal strategy fatally limited by his father's own multi-count plea. At this writing, two of Jesse's accusers have now resurfaced with an open letter to the Academy Award voters, voters who were widely expected to name *Capturing the Friedmans* as the year's best documentary. Accusing the film of "parad[ing]" Jesse Friedman "as a celebrity" and "silencing" their own "plaintive voices," the letter has prompted a denial from Jarecki, who insists that his film is "balanced." The complaint reminds us of what is at stake here, of the complex interplays of silence and speech that attend sexual abuse allegations, the roar of hushed whispers and things unsaid. But it also reminds us of the film's location within causes celebrated, awards given, careers made. Certainly it has given Jesse Friedman something, even if that gift is a blessing so mixed we are unable read its nature or consequence.

Capturing the Friedmans remains deeply interesting but not, finally, because we learn something important or real about Jesse Friedman's complicity in his father's acts. What finally makes the film important is its ability to raise questions about our faith in the visual -- not whom we believe, but what, in the end, do we see?

Finále Festival of Czech Film, Plzen, Czech Republic 29 March - 4 April 2004

A review by David Sorfa, Liverpool John Moores University, UK

Czech film production currently stands at around fifteen films per year and this rather extraordinary output for a country with a population of around the same size as London is celebrated at the annual Finále Festival in Plzeň (Pilsen). It is particularly heartening to note that Czech film accounted for just over 25% of cinema attendance in 2003 which appears to indicate that there is a strong internal market for locally produced films. Still, as we have learned from Hollywood films, popular success does not in any way guarantee that the films themselves are worthy of any serious interest except as sociological documents of taste and marketing strategies.

Czech film culture is also strongly indebted to the existence of a number of film schools, particularly FAMU (*Filmová a Televizní Fakulta Akademie Múzických Umění* / The Film and Television School of the Academy of Performing Arts) in Prague, whose students' work was also screened at Finále. FAMU, of course, is very closely related to the Czech New Wave of the 1960s and it is almost inevitable that it is to this legacy that any consideration of contemporary Czech film must refer (to the annoyance of some younger Czech filmmakers). However, given the astonishing vigour and intellectual complexity of many of these earlier films, it is not surprising that a significant proportion of the films shown at this year's festival were from the 1960s. The festival also featured a full retrospective of the films of Jan Švankmajer, the maverick surrealist, which coincided with an extraordinarily exhaustive joint exhibition of Svankmajer and his wife, Eva, at the City Gallery of Pilsen called "Animation of Memory, Memory of Animation".

While the main interest of the Festival was the competition for best new feature film (with eleven films being considered for the prize), the Festival also has competitive sections dedicated to long and short documentary films -- perhaps most notably, Věra Chytilová's DV film, *Trója v proměnách času* (*Troja in the Transformation of Time*, 2003) exploring the history of Troja, a suburb on the outskirts of Prague, and the charmingly nostalgic *66 Sezón* (*66 Seasons*, Peter Kerekes, 2003) which charts the history of a Slovak swimming pool since the 1930s through the memories, photographs and films of those still living. There were also various round-table discussions on the status of filmmaking in Eastern Europe and other aspects of film production and history.

The range of films in the feature competition was extremely broad: from the populist and vaguely objectionable comedy *Jak básníci neztrácejí naději* (*Poets Never Lose Hope*, Dušan Klein, 2004) to the poetic film essay on the late director František Vlácil, *Sentiment* (Tomáš Hejtmánek, 2003). One of the films to première at this year's Finale was Marek Najbert's *Mistři* (*Champions*, 2004), a tale of "five and a half" people (one is in a wheelchair) stuck in a slowly disintegrating village that appears to have been ignored by the triumphalist capitalism of much of the rest of the country. This sense of being trapped by the poverty of small town

life is a theme that runs through a number of Czech films, both old and new, with last year's *Městečko* (*Small Town*, Jan Krauss, 2003) and Forman's *Laský jedné plavovlásky* (*Loves of a Blonde*, 1965) being obvious examples. The film's central character is the long-haired simpleton Bohouš (Jan Budař), literally "God's child", who has a penchant for drinking mentholated spirits and even sucks petrol directly from the gas-tank of the village's moped. It is during these states of extreme inebriation that Bohouš begins to have visions of the Czech ice-hockey team which appear to accurately predict the outcome of forthcoming matches. The bankrupt pub landlord, Karel (Leoš Noha), and Josef (Josef Polášek), who constantly worries about his dark skin and the possibility that his father might have been a gypsy, decide to exploit Bohouš's talent and bet money stolen from Karel's wife, Zdena (Klára Melíšková), on Canada beating the Czech Republic in the World Championship (which, incidentally, is being held in Prague in April 2004). *Mistři* bleakly explores the seeming impossibility of ever coming out on top and the fundamental untrustworthiness of human beings in general and Czechs in particular, summed up in the film's ironic tagline: "If we don't cheer for ourselves, nobody else will". A rueful tale of unfulfilled dreams, the film ends with a faint possibility of hope for those who are not Czech, white and male. Throughout, the almost robotic figure of the Czech ice hockey goalie looms forebodingly as a double figure of both life and death.

Jan Budař appears again as a simpleton, this time vaguely coded as autistic, in one of the most popular Czech films of the year, *Nuda v Brně* (*Boredom in Brno*, 2003). An ensemble sex comedy in which Budař's Stanislav is invited to stay the night by his girlfriend, Olga (Kateřina Holánová) who is also marked as somehow aberrant mainly through a set of enormous prosthetic teeth. Their liaison is complicated by the unexpected return of Olga's mother from her own aborted sexual adventure; a situation solved by the timely application of Rohypnol and the locking up of mother in the storeroom. Olga and Stanislav's innocent introduction to the adult world of sex is contrasted to the complicated shenanigans of the supporting cast, which are characterized by the rapaciousness of the women and the bewilderment of the men (except for one very specific masochist). The film's gentle misogyny (if there is such a thing) is perhaps at its most disturbingly violent when Miroslav (Miroslav Donutil from Jan Hřebejk's immensely popular *Pelíšky* (*Cosy Dens*, 1999) spits into his mobile phone while drunkenly demanding reassurances from his wife after failing to perform sexually after a pub pick up. This scene raised a great laugh in the festival audience. The film's black and white aesthetic is visually strong but the symbolism seems obvious and contrived (bread-rolls are equated with penises and are mutilated in a variety of ways throughout *Nuda*). Emasculation, the film concludes, is the truth of sexuality and this emasculation seems to be particularly related to the fact that all women will, one day, become the castrating mother that nearly scuppers the one positively presented sexual relation. Whereas the conspirators of pleasure in Švankmajer's *Spiklenci slasti* (1996) recognise in each other the existence of *jouissance*, even if that bliss cannot be shared physically; those bored in Brno can only imagine that true communication is only possible between those who are not of this reality.

A slightly different kind of innocence is explored in Ivan Fíla's *König der Diebe* (*Král zlodějů* / *King of Thieves*, 2004) in which a ten year-old Ukrainian boy, Barbu (Iakov Kultiasov), and his slightly older sister, Mimma (Julia Khanverdieva), are sold by their guardian to join the German-speaking Caruso's circus. The two are smuggled into Berlin where Caruso loses Mimma to sex slavery in a poker game and indoctrinates Barbu into a life of petty thievery (with strict daily quotas to be adhered to). The circus exists only as a derelict tent and collection of caravans in which, Stromboli-like, Caruso maintains his young workforce. Throughout, the crippled and drug-addicted Julie (Katharina Thalbach), Caruso's

former high-wire partner and lover, looks on helplessly until she finally helps to free both Barbu and Mimma, although she is killed in the process, as are Caruso and the brothel-owner. The two children's return to their Ukrainian village was described by the director as a "happy ending" but, if so, it is an ending of great uncertainty since the crushing poverty of their village remains unaltered. The film offers little other than the powerful presentation of the suffering of others and suggests no real political analysis. In this way it is comparable to Lukas Moodysson's *Lilja4-ever* (2002) and, perhaps, even to the Marquis de Sade's *The Misfortunes of Virtue* although there the suffering of the innocent is much more cynically presented as titillation for the palates of those implicated within the very system which it ostensibly critiques.

The cast list of *Jedna ruka netleská* (*One Hand Can't Clap*, David Ondříček, 2003) reads like a who's who of contemporary Czech actors and once again reflects the Czech taste for bawdy comedy. Standy, played by the ubiquitous Jiří Macháček, is a good-natured simpleton who is sent to prison for unwittingly smuggling eagles ("These chickens look mighty strange...") to supply a secret exotic-dining club run by Zdeňka (Ivan Trojan), the proprietor of a trendy vegetarian restaurant. Zdeňka is clearly a parody of the Czech *nouveau-riche* who have profited massively from the country's movement into capitalism and the film makes a rather unsuccessful comparison between unhinged consumerism (the eating of endangered species) and, for some inexplicable reason, fascism (Zdeňka's penchant for dressing like Hitler and ranting in German). The most sought after menu item is, of course, human flesh itself (thus the rather strained title) which is unwittingly eaten by Zdeňka's own dysfunctional children. Featuring oral bestialty, youthful cross-dressing and a clichéd mushroom trip ("I can fly!", for pity's sake), *Jedna ruka netleská* is at times a fun but ultimately pointless Czech take on the Farrelly Brothers' brand of abject comedy.

Pointlessness perhaps characterises the high budget *Mazaný Filip* (*Smart Philip*, Vaclav Marhoul, 2003), a slapstick pastiche of *film noir* clichés dedicated to Raymond Chandler whose main character is called, predictably, Philip Marlowe (Tomáš Hanák). The film consists of a series of episodes in which Czech actors ham it up shamelessly in numerous cameos. *Mazaný Filip* can be compared to the Czech parody Western, *Limonádový Joe* (*Lemonade Joe*, Oldřich Lipský, 1964), but this would only add weight to Fredric Jameson's critique of the emptiness of the postmodern. While *Mazaný Filip* is fairly innocuous in its banality, the same cannot be said of *Jak básníci nestrácejí naději* (*Poets Never Lose Hope*, Dušan Klein, 2004), the fifth in Klein's Poet series of films following the escapades of a young (and not-so-young) doctor, played through all the films by Pavel Kríz. The good doctor is now in his early forties and undergoes a midlife crisis which he solves by sleeping with a much younger woman (the assistant of his current lover) and getting a fancy new car. One can only hope that the film does not represent the thinking of the majority of the population.

Faith in contemporary Czech cinema was, however, restored by the fabulously uncommercial *Sentiment* (Tomáš Hejtmánek, 2003) which recreates a documentary that Hejtmánek was planning to make of the 60's historical fantasy director, František Vláčil, who died before filming could begin. Vláčil's conversations with the director are masterfully replayed by Jiří Kodet, more well known as a comic actor, and Hejtmánek alternates between close ups of Kodet acting out Vláčil's lines (rewritten by FAMU lecturer, Jiří Soukup) and long takes of the various landscapes -- the woods, the snow, the sea -- that set the scene for Vláčil's films. In a brave and controversial move, it was decided that the film would only feature three extracts from the soundtracks of Vláčil's films and no clips whatsoever. While some thought

that this tactic would alienate viewers who were not familiar with the films already, the effect seemed rather to be one of creating an intriguing sense that these films are worthy of further exploration. The film could, perhaps unfairly, be likened to the chance meeting of Tarkovsky and Bergman in a Czech pensioner's flat, but it is affecting and its formal experimental flourishes (the inclusion of various pieces of camera equipment in some of the "natural" shots) add to the feeling of watching two cinematic intelligences at play. An ascending crane shot of the burning of obsolete film stock in a snowy field says almost all there is to say about the hubris of the permanence of memory (technological or otherwise).

Two Czech and Slovak co-produced films in competition employed a similar Dogma-like aesthetic and concentrated on women's experience of family melodrama. Both also shared the Slovak actor, Peter Bebjak, as their leading man. *Quartetto* (Laura Siváková, 2002) seemed *Festen*-like as three daughters confront their neglectful mother when they gather at the news of her cancer. The film's dinner party row did not ring true but did end with a rather inspired magical-realist opera sequence on the steps of the family house. The animator Michaela Pavlátová's first live-action feature, *Nevěrné hry* (*Faithless Games*, 2003), followed the lives of a Slovak composer, Peter (Bebjak), and his Czech pianist wife, Eva (Zuzana Stivínová), as they struggle to live and work together in their newly acquired house on the border between Slovakia and Hungary. Their growing separation, as Eva begins to travel regularly to Prague and has an affair with a mutual friend there, is accented by the presence of a mother and daughter who are forced to live in a smaller flat on the property because of an abusive husband-father. Performances are understated but the rather pessimistic view of the possibility of love in a heterosexual relationship is underscored by the daughter, Janka (played wonderfully by Kristina Svarinska), who begins and ends the film with the whispered words: "And I will never ever get married." Sound thinking, it would appear. While the film seems at first to be a move away from some of the overtly political themes of recent Czech and Slovak films, it may be possible to read Peter and Eva's disillusion and eventual uneasy groping towards understanding as a loose allegory of the Velvet divorce of 1993. *Faithless Games* went on to win the main award of the festival, the Golden Kingfisher. The Oscar-nominated *Želary* (Ondřej Trojan, 2003) and the crime thriller, *Bolero* (František Brabec, 2003), were also in the main competition.

Two films that were particular favorites with Czech youth audiences were the short documentary, *Hip Hop* (Miroslav Bláha, 2004), on US ghetto culture's influence outside of Prague, and the truly ridiculous zombie/ranger film, *Choking Hazard* (Marek Dobeš, 2004), whose odd collection of characters, including a blind, Nietzsche-spouting "professor" and a Jehovah's witness-cum-porn star, were greeted with screams of laughter at the midnight premiere. *Choking Hazard* is undoubtedly one for zombie-completists and is destined for cult status both in and outside the Czech Republic.

Dobeš remarked that he was trying to move away from the legacy of the 1960s New Wave, but, it must be said that the strongest films at the festival were part of the 1964 retrospective strand and other films from that most turbulent decade. Of particular interest were the less well-known films that deserve to be more widely seen. *Loves of a Blonde* scriptwriter Jaroslav Papoušek's 1968 *Nekrásnější věk* (*The Most Beautiful Age*) uses many of the same actors from *Loves* in an exquisitely composed three-part story of sculpture students, bored housewives and nudity. The post-apocalyptic drama *Konec srpna v hotelu Ozón* (*The End of August at the Hotel Ozone*, Jan Schmidt, 1967) has a wonderful title but is less convincing as a science-fiction piece (would survivors be so wasteful of meager resources twenty years after the catastrophe?). The stunning widescreen, black and white *Noc nevěstý* (*Night of the*

Bride, Karel Kachyna, 1967) movingly depicts the period after the communists came to power in 1948 through the figure of a clearly disturbed young woman who returns to her home village just as her father shoots himself rather than submit to the stupidities of the new tractor-exalting administrators. Played by Jana Brejchová, Miloš Forman's former wife, the woman decides to lead a midnight pilgrimage to the church on Christmas Eve in defiance of the new authority's censure and is taken for a personification of Mary by the villagers until she herself is overcome by religious ecstasy and tries to usurp the priest's role during midnight mass. She wanders off to die picturesquely in the snow.

Among many other worthy films, it was perhaps Esther Krumbachová's satanic sex-comedy, *Vražda Ing. Čert* (*Killing the Devil*, 1970), that most deserves a timely resurrection. While Krumbachová is more well known for her contribution to the mise-en-scène of the New Wave as a costumier and set-designer, especially for Jan Nemec's *O slavnosti a hostech* (1966) and, most famously, for the fresh avant-garde look of *Sedmikrasky* (*Daisies*, Věra Chytilová, 1966), it is this, her only directed piece, that most clearly embodies a spirit of experimentation, laughter and the possibility of freedom that should be the prerequisite for any film that claims to be cinema.

There is undoubtedly a certain nostalgia in contemporary attitudes towards the Czech new wave films of the 1960s. In the Czech Republic itself it is as if these films represent the possibility of a future that never happened. The films show a spirit of freedom and defiance in the face of totalitarianism that seems increasingly poignant the more one realizes how soon these naive manifestoes of hope were to be proved wrong. I would even go so far as to argue that these films offer an exquisitely painful reminder of a nation's failure to resist the grim forces of history. Elsewhere, the myth of Bohemia and its exotic intellectualism give the films an aura of sophistication that is hard to resist. The cinema of the 1960s is indelibly marked by the pathos of its doom and, in comparison, many of the contemporary films screened at this year's Finále seem to lack a certain gravity (and also, paradoxically, a certain lightness) under the regime of what used to be called "the end of history". The strongest new Czech films are those that explore the issues of history, memory and freedom as seriously as did the films of the 1960s. In the face of another, seemingly more benign, invasion it is a culture of resistance and irony in the face of the apparently inevitable that will determine the value of contemporary Czech cinema.

Gerry

Dir: Gus Van Sant, USA, 2002

A review by Dan Stefik, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada

If you haven't had the opportunity to experience Gus Van Sant's art-film extravaganza *Gerry* during its theatrical run, you're dealing with a considerable setback. This film should not be seen on DVD or video for the first time. I am afraid that the advent of DVD (and the home theater experience in general) is proving more tragic as its popularity soars. So you happened to miss *Gerry*'s theatrical run? You thought you'd wait until the DVD release? A bad choice, but perhaps the only one available. It is rather unfortunate, but the chances are *Gerry* won't be screening at your local cinemas any time soon.

Van Sant's success with *Elephant* (2003), although somewhat limited to European and art-house audiences, is testament to the fact that he is one of the most interesting and privileged filmmakers working in film, anywhere. He has garnered acclaim with Hollywood and the masses, *Good Will Hunting* (1997) having struck a chord in audiences everywhere. And one cannot deny the possibility that *Gerry* could/should bring a welcomed subversion into the lives of teenagers at the local video club looking for the latest Matt Damon or Casey Affleck vehicle. Their expectations will undoubtedly be thwarted at every turn.

Van Sant occupies a space akin to (but much more impressive than, in my opinion) Wes Anderson. The latter has made films that have in some way bridged the gap between generations, using the star system in very compelling and unorthodox ways. Fans of Bill Murray (i.e. my father) can sit in a cinema alongside fans of Gwyneth Paltrow (no one I know, but statistically, they're out there). And this is encouraging, because Anderson seems to show very little compromise in his vision, especially considering his expansive and developing fan base. The writing teams of Van Sant/Affleck/Damon and Anderson/Wilson are very promising and revealing of each author's intents; good, consistent writing (or writers) is something cinema lacks.

Gerry is in many ways an implicit homage to the work and style of Bela Tarr (Tarr is thanked in the closing credits), Hungary's most consistently interesting and subversive filmmaker. If you've ever managed to experience a Tarr film, you will agree that, like it or not, he is a true visionary and has a style of filmmaking (not unlike that of Andrei Tarkovsky) where time and more specifically the long-take is the foundation of his narratives. Van Sant's awareness, appreciation, and application of Tarr's unique approach is a welcome addition to this otherwise fast-paced, narrative-dependent mode of filmmaking that dominates most American screens. We must be thankful that the cinema of Tarr and Tarkovsky, and a familiarity with their output, is not relegated to the ranks of academics and intellectuals. Consequently, I believe an intellectual approach or analysis of *Gerry* would be a rather trying endeavour. Many of the sequences that make up the slow paced film function on a basic, sensation driven level that purposely bypasses intellectual rigor or accountability. And any criticisms directed at the film for lack of narrative or intellectual stimulation are surely

missing the point. Tarr's films are likely more conducive to intellectual analysis whereas Van Sant has often sought after a much more visceral, sensitive cinema.

It appears as though the cinema (or some aspects of it) may be in a welcome period of transition, moving from city-based films to ones that are preoccupied with the yet unconquered, vastness of nature. As much as the film owes to the distinct style of Bela Tarr, we can observe hints of Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) in the opening sequence, Nicholas Roeg's *The Man Who Fell To Earth* (1976), and the opening and closing credits reference Derek Jarman's *Blue* (1993). All of these filmmakers have been concerned on some level with nature, and the degree to which man succumbs to natural elements.

The film itself, although admittedly short on plot, is nevertheless a dense work and deserves several viewings. Ambiguities structure the film throughout. What exactly is "the Thing" that Damon and Affleck have ventured out into the open to experience? Why the incessant references to "Gerry"? What context do the dialogues on the *Wheel of Fortune* and the *Thieves* video game serve? How did Affleck get stuck on that rock pile anyway? The answers are nowhere to be found, and the questions at its core are neither clear, nor obvious. It should be noted that Van Sant's film is more a work as process than simple procedure.

Stylistically the film has a calm, composed approach, not unlike that which underlies his most recent work *Elephant*. His is not the "wow me with your antics if all else fails" (all else meaning narrative, thematics, or substance) approach to filmmaking a la Quentin Tarantino. This is not necessarily good writing; rather, it is more or less good conceptual filmmaking.

The mood and deceptively simplistic aim of the film could be subsumed quite accurately by a 'conceptual' shot which appears at around the forty-seven minute mark and which lasts almost four minutes, in long-take. The camera follows Damon and Affleck in tight close-up, their heads and shoulders filling the foreground, and the background thrown out of focus. The sound of their feet pouncing on the hard ground is highlighted, offscreen, and is in sync with their movements towards the frame left. The shot is inexplicably moving, demonstrating a purity of cinema and a sound-image relationship that is all too often overlooked in favor of other cinematic relationships (i.e. narrative and motivation, montage and illusion). Van Sant's film shows a marked respect and admiration for the faculties of the human mind, and their relationship to both the body and the natural world.

Seeing the film with an audience is an essential aspect of the film's overall effect on any given spectator. There is an impressive level of self-awareness which accompanies a screening of the film. One wonders to oneself at any given moment, *exactly what is it that he's getting at*. The structure forces the viewer to read the film differently; to approach it from an angle which emphasizes human physiology and its relationship to consciousness and memory. And the vastness of the landscape allows for performances that are physically charged, without the hindrances of technology and architecture. These naked spaces reveal the body in ways that are radically different from the urban spaces. (Take these alternative perceptions into your screening of Bruno Dumont's *Twentynine Palms* [2003] and you'll see what I mean.)

I could not help but wonder -- as the film began its crescendo, and the search for food and water was turning up negative -- at which point might the characters lose an appreciation for their sublime surroundings, as they pass through a series of landscapes, each arguably more beautiful than the next. We, as critical, distanced spectators can easily and unflinchingly revel

at the scope of the landscape, but what might be the thoughts of the characters succumbing to the harsh realities and elements beset before them? At which point might we lose interest in a painterly skyline at dawn? Fascinating questions which very few films ever ask.

Cabin Fever

Dir: Eli Roth, USA, 2002

A review by Ross Thompson, University of Dundee, UK

This incredibly self-aware movie begins with a set-up familiar to any Horror fans: a group of randy American teenagers take a vacation in a rundown, woodland cabin in the middle of nowhere, hoping to indulge in vast quantities of alcohol and guiltless, no-strings-attached sex. There is Paul (Rider Strong), virginal and awkward hero of sorts, who is in love with childhood friend Karen (Jordan Ladd, daughter of Cheryl Ladd, of *Charlie's Angels* fame), the all-American cheerleader type. There is Jeff (Joey Kern), the preppy rich boy, who wastes no time in jumping into bed with girlfriend Marcy (Cerina Vincent) at the earliest opportunity. And there is Bert (James De Bello), the film's most thinly-sketched character, a soccer jock who is given little to do but drink beer and repeatedly call his colleagues 'gay'. Naturally, this cast of timeless Horror stereotypes are punished for their misdemeanours as the rules of the genre dictate, and soon they are picked off one by one in increasingly graphic ways. Before they can begin to enjoy their holiday, they are confronted by a bedraggled hermit (Arie Verveen), who comes to the camp begging for help. The stranger at the door -- yet another Horror movie staple -- is suffering from a nasty skin disease, and so the gang drive him away, setting him on fire when he does not get the point. The dying man falls into a nearby reservoir, which provides the drinking water for the cabin in which our friends are holidaying, and it is not long before the titular bug has infected its second victim.

This concept of the unseen enemy is an interesting spin on a well-worn theme, one that is rendered more frightening by its plausibility, as we now live in a world threatened by biological warfare -- the so-called 'silent killers'. In *Cabin Fever*, the bug is a highly contagious flesh-eating virus that begins working its vicious mojo only a few hours after it has infected its host. In response, the misguided teens turn on each other in true Paranoid Cinema style. Karen is the first of the five to fall sick, and the others show no sign of Samaritan sympathy by locking her in a dirty outhouse. The callous way in which they protect themselves by leaving her for dead is an unexpected development, one which could point the way to further betrayals of an equally brutal nature. However, it is from this point onward that *Cabin Fever* descends in a disappointing downward spiral. The fact that the bogeyman does not manifest itself as a flesh-and-blood maniac with an axe lends the film an exciting edge -- if the teens cannot see what is killing them, they cannot possibly escape -- but director Roth squanders this intriguing premise with knowing, intrusive allusions to Horror films from previous decades.

Firstly, the house that gradually transforms from a place of safety to one of danger is reminiscent of any number of Horror films, but its woodland location is an obvious nod to Sam Raimi's low-budget romp *The Evil Dead* (1981). The way in which Paul, Jeff et al turn on each other echoes the nervous interactions that form the dramatic core of John Carpenter's gory Sci-Fi parable *The Thing* (1982). Furthermore, there is really no logical reason for Marcy to spend most of her screen time in the nude, partially dressed or wearing a skin-tight pair of jeans, deliberately wiggling her backside in front of a voyeuristic steadicam, but then

that was the routine for all 1970s Scream Queens. Essentially, there is nothing wrong with Roth tipping his hat to his spiritual mentors as it is an unavoidable facet of the genre. Raimi's *Evil Dead* trilogy contained both obvious and oblique references to Wes Craven's *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977) and George Romero's revolutionary *Zombie* triptych, while Carpenter's picture is a remake of the classic *The Thing from Another World* (1951).

All of these examples are acceptable but *Cabin Fever* is weighed down with ideas from other, much better movies. Roth's ability to scare his audience is diluted by the recursive game-playing at the centre of his films. He clutters his script needlessly by introducing an angry dog (see Stephen King's *Cujo*) and a troupe of backwoods rednecks straight out of *Deliverance* (1972) -- a far more unnerving film than his own. Convinced that 'those darn youngsters' are up to no good, the slack-jawed yokels pick up their shotguns, taking the film to a higher body count. This subplot is wholly unnecessary, for though it brings more gore and dismemberment, it deflates tension by introducing an unwelcome comedic tone that feels unnatural and out of context. Hereafter, *Cabin Fever* becomes a slipshod, rather incoherent mess, which is doubly frustrating given the promise of its early scenes.

Critics have searched for symbols and deeper meaning within *Cabin Fever*'s narrative. The horrible way in which the attractive though wholly unlikeable teens are disfigured may be a reflection of a society in which image is everything and thirst is nothing, to invert a recent soft drinks advertisement -- ironically, it is Karen's thirst that brings the germ into the cabin first place. One might posit that the destructive disease could be read as a metaphor for AIDS, and there certainly is evidence to support this conceit, such as the script's blatant homophobia and the prolific sexual activity and partner-swapping that goes on within the cabin. Then again, these interpretations might not be accurate at all. Bert's excessive use of words such as 'fags' may just be an invite for cheap laughs, and Marcy's talent for stripping cannot be seen as anything other than gratuitous nudity.

My objection is not a matter of prudishness or piety, but Roth could have reversed this 'one for the lads' approach on the viewer to unsettling effect. Other films have toyed with themes of voyeurism and sexuality, such as Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978), the benchmark for all modern teens-in-peril pictures, in which it is revealed during the opening scenes that the 'watcher' is a young boy. In comparison, the sexual shenanigans in *Cabin Fever* exist only to please the male members in the audience. During one of the movie's nastiest sequences, Marcy attempts to shave her legs, the point being that she is still driven by vanity when her friends are falling to pieces, literally and metaphorically. Sadly, this potentially shocking moment is undercut by the attention paid by the camera to Marcy's breasts. Again, Roth tries to make his audience snigger when he should be making them yelp.

Overall, *Cabin Fever* is a real letdown, tainted by the idea of how thrilling a ride it could have been. It is not a matter of budget, for the success of the most inventive Horror movies -- Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), for instance -- are boosted by the cheap, grainy look of the film stock. Rather, *Cabin Fever* fails to score highly, or scare highly, because Roth does not manage to find the right balance between laughs and screams. It pales in comparison with Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002), a terrifying British film that also focuses on a killer virus but does so with real wit and invention. At the end of a long day in the woods, *Cabin Fever* is worth much less than the sum of its (body) parts, very much resembling the physical state of its protagonists: tired, falling apart and not pleasant to look at.

Sylvia

Dir: Christine Jeffs, UK, 2003

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

I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart: I am, I am, I am."

Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*.

While there was attention paid to her -- however inadequate it may have been -- during her short lifetime, since the famous death of the actual person Sylvia Plath in 1963 there has been a plethora of complex and often competing 'Sylvia Plaths' that have been re-presented to members of consuming global audiences. Plath's life and death are filtered through an industry of media images, autobiographical and literary analyses, and feminist theories of various orientations and persuasions.

Sylvia Plath was apparently familiar with the ambivalences attendant to representation when she wrote her autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas. As has been argued in myriad texts, in *The Bell Jar*, like in many of her earlier works and diaries, Plath also seemed keenly aware of her fraught and not uncommon positionality as a conflicted, intelligent middle class woman living in a suburban landscape during a time of trenchant gender expectations in England and the United States (Evans, 2000). These particular aspects of her persona are disturbingly but befittingly highlighted in the latest Plathian cinematic rendering, Christine Jeffs' *Sylvia*.

As Jeffs' film indicates, Plath's posthumous symbolic potential is seemingly endless, as is the range of its instantiations -- Plath (or, rather, her re-presentation) has become, among other things: an icon for the generationally varied dissatisfactions and difficulties in being a mid-to-late twentieth and early twenty-first century (middle class) "wife and mother" who also has aspirations as a "career woman"; a poster child to demand societal aid for suicidal parents; a theoretically strategic straw (wo)man for some feminist critics and teachers who are understanding of and/or angry at her choice to end her life, and who assertively seek out and want "better role models" than Plath for young women in the academy and elsewhere; a seething commentary on the tragedy of premature death and abandoned children; and a wholesale plea to combat gender inequity. Many of these paradigms are suggested or evidenced in Jeffs' film.

Judith Butler remarks, "It is one of the ambivalent implications of the decentering of the subject to have one's writing be the site of a necessary and inevitable expropriation" (Butler, 1993: 241). Symbol, icon, poster child, straw (wo)man, commentary, plea, and so on, the gathering of stories fashioned out of "Plath" -- a collectivity of "decentered," ongoing, and complex discursive interplays between Plath's self-told story in her own writing, her truncated life, and her death -- like her novel *The Bell Jar*, is constructed from stretched out and varied pluralizable narratives, which in turn may be read as sites or illustrations of "expropriation."

Sympathetic viewers and readers may wonder how the embodied, material, or "real" person Plath might respond if she could to *Sylvia*, as well as to the other images and tales made of or woven about her. Moreover, the obsessive curiosity -- and perhaps sometimes the well-meaning empathy -- revolving around Plath's legacy may be extended to ask how her children have fared, and how they feel today in the wake of the perpetual interpretive hype surrounding (or ensnaring?) their mother's memory, to which I am now also contributing.

In the latest of these mainstream image set incarnations, Christine Jeffs' *Sylvia* at times plays rough and dirty with the perception that Plath indeed surrendered her rights entirely when she put her life to pen and then took that life but not what she had written about it. In Jeffs' film, it is as if Plath did not just take her own life one cold day and thus terribly absent herself forever from the wretchedly depicted Ted Hughes and their children, friends, and family, but that "Plath" as trope and person in her unwitting and non-consensual ironic endlessness is being simultaneously honored and punished in paradoxical ways for taking herself away from "us," the expectant and voyeuristic viewers, the public world.

The film's deeply uncomfortable nude scenes exemplify this honor and punishment framework, and they are accomplished with creepy skill by Gwyneth Paltrow (as Plath). These unsubtle and largely predictable scenes are offered for our consumption by means of melodramatic excesses, using a familiar blending of dim lighting and mournful, dramatic music. The brief scene of Plath naked and alone on her couch is teeming with well-rehearsed stereotypes and presumptions regarding her isolation, sense of rejection, and resigned state of unrelenting pain and injury.

The scene of Plath alone on her couch immediately follows and is explained by a sexually explicit scene between Plath and a fed-up, openly unfaithful Ted Hughes (Daniel Craig), who is visiting at her desperate request but from whom she is already separated. The film explains that Hughes has understandably abandoned her in his impatience and defeat because she is so difficult to live with, and he has sought the love of another woman whom he refuses to leave because she is pregnant with his child. After he and Plath have had sex, he unblinkingly explains his reasoning for his choice not to leave his lover, and it is implied that he will not return to Plath. Hughes' admission is uttered after he first confesses that he has "missed" Plath when, while lying in his arms on the couch, she has naively explained to him how she and he are destined to be together forever.

During and after the sex scene, Hughes as seen from Plath's point-of-view has engaged in a "pity fling," while Plath is depicted as having pathetically tried to win him back. In the two nude scenes, which occur shortly before the suicide scene, Hughes' demonization is presented to heroize and honor the victimized and wronged Plath. This victimization is specifically emphasized in the scene of Plath alone after Hughes has left her yet again. However, the film also unequivocally and differentially genders Paltrow's sexualized body as "negative" and Craig's sexualized body as "positive." Paltrow as Plath is coded as weak, frail, and submissive in close-ups and medium shots both on her own and in contrast with Craig. Conversely, and not surprisingly, Craig as Hughes is exoticized as strongly muscled, virile, and "hunky." The dialogue, sequencing, bodily messages, and manipulative lighting and music deployed in these scenes are both honoring and punishing of Plath.

The entire film and the nude scenes in particular index a representational chasm between two sets of tropes and truisms: Plath as a living private person with a multifaceted existence who happened to take her life; and Plath in her posthumous life as it has been maneuvered and

partially taken from her by a morbidly fascinated viewing public. As suggested above, among those who are familiar with Plath as both a person and a presence, there has of course always been a range of reactions to and feelings about her and her brief life's end. Some members of this film's audience probably feel unforgiving, angry, upset, intrusive, ravenous, and just plain judgmental. Others in this imagined audience are perhaps understanding and have a modicum of sympathy for Plath, and a few may have mixed feelings, too.

In its conclusion, the film problematically stakes a disturbing ideological claim: Hughes' abandonment and betrayal of and refusal to return to Plath were the ultimate precipitating factors in her decision to commit suicide, and beyond being "the last straw," this set of behaviors on his behalf were the most important causative elements for her death. Hughes is convincingly portrayed by Craig as having a nuanced combination of qualities including frustration, disappointment, compassion, and exploitative, selfish meanness. The film's screenplay was largely influenced by what has been described by critics as Hughes' "response" to Plath in his accounting of their life in *Birthday Letters* (1998). Thus, a specific version of the Plath story is perpetuated by the end of Jeffs' project: Plath was a victim, in her deliberate death she victimized her children, and we as audience members should be upset at how she suffered and was betrayed, but ought not to forgive her for the ghastly decisions she made in the wake of her pain.

Earlier scenes in the movie allude to Plath's relationship with an abusive father and effectively bear witness to the impossibility of her pleasing her difficult mother (played by Paltrow's mother, Blythe Danner). The film likewise attempts to create a picture for the audience of Plath's inner worlds by showing her frustration with her domestic entrapment, her dissatisfaction with a sexist literary environment, her history of despair, and the problems attendant to living with a pushy, charismatic, selfish, dishonest, unhappy, and ultimately privileged husband. Unfortunately, Jeffs eventually lets us down by letting us know that it was "really" (and mostly) Plath's failed marriage that did her in. Despite the potential for a complicated set of audience reactions that exist on a spectrum, and the ways that the film does portray the variegated course of Plath's rich life, Jeffs ends with and encourages a troubling stance toward Plath and her remembrance that is as disrespectful as it is simplistic.

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