

Lola and Bilidikid

Dir: E. Kutlug Ataman, Germany, 1999

A review by Filez Cicek, Indiana University, USA

Scholars often describe the guest worker/Turkish immigrant in Germany as a mute man/woman, who is unable or not allowed to integrate. I propose that his/her muteness in some cases preceded their Diasporic journey and has been accentuated since he/she became an immigrant. Further, I will argue that until recently, contemporary Turkish-German Cinema has perpetuated this muteness rather than giving a voice to the realities of the immigrant men and women.

This representation of muteness has its roots in the Kemalist reforms started in 1923, whereby the government tried to force the filmmakers to create films that would reflect the idea of a "new Turk" which was supposed to end the image of the "backward Ottoman". This concept ignored the actual realities of the average both male and female Turkish citizen, who remained basically unchanged. It was this population that made up the majority of the immigrants who went to Germany. I will argue that in Germany, the government policy of "affirmative action", which sought to give voice to the mute immigrant, instead "produced well-meaning projects encouraging multi-culturalism that, however often result in the construction of binary opposition between Turkish Culture and German Culture." Thus the immigrant, who was struck mute in his/her homeland, was further silenced by the good intentions of his/her host country. The films, produced with money from the German government, overemphasized the immigrant's victim status and were unable to go beyond the existing stereotype of the "Muslim Turk from the East" complete with the image of the oppressing male and the oppressed female. Lost was the depiction of the immigrant as a modern worker who attempts to adapt to the exigencies of a modern capitalist society and becomes integral part of German culture and economy in the process.

Kevin Robins and Asu Aksoy argue that the western modernity that was introduced after WWI by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of the new Turkish Republic, created a distance between the average Turkish citizen and the State. The new Turkish Republic defined its model "new Turk" by their difference from the Ottoman culture because the Ottoman experience was regarded as non-Turkish and backwards. Therefore the Kemalist reforms abolished the caliphate, religious brotherhoods, attire, language, calendar and so on. Thus began the "tradition of discontinuity with the past which culminated in a state of amnesia imbued in the psyche of the 'new Turks'" Instead, they looked towards the West, which represented modernity. Yet most of the Turks, especially those who lived in countryside, continued to live according to their folk Islamic traditions as they did for centuries. Even the six centuries of Ottoman rule, which was heavily influenced by Persian and Arabic cultures and languages, was not enough to change that reality. The Kemalist reform did not either.

But what Kemalist reforms did was to effectively create a gap between its average citizen and the elitist state. The state-run radio, television and later cinema, all promoted the ideal New Turkish citizen as a reality, creating an ongoing conflict between what he/she should be and

what he/she is. In a sense, the entire country was forced to play a game of pretending to be western and modern. In doing so, they silenced any elements that did not go along with that image and ideal, thus creating a whole new mute population alongside the elite Republicans.

The majority of those immigrants, who journeyed to Germany for better life, were the mute citizens of Turkey coming from the countryside to escape their economic hardship. When in Germany, they came face to face with the same silencing dilemma that they experienced in Turkey, but in a much larger scale. If they were not able to or willing to adapt to the new Turkish citizen image in their homeland, how and why were they going to adapt to their new German identity?

In Turkey, the government by implementing various censorship rules tried to force the filmmakers to create films that reflected the idea of "new Turk" as a reality, not giving voice to actual realities of its average Turkish citizen. In Germany a government policy, an American type of affirmative action, sought to give voice to the mute immigrant. This policy as Deniz Gokturk describes "produced well-meaning projects encouraging multi-culturalism that, however often result in the construction of binary opposition between Turkish Culture and German Culture." She also states: "the postulate of cultural difference, though it purports to be liberating, has obstructed the perception of the cross-cultural exchanges that in fact already exist, and often hindered dialogue instead of facilitating it."

It is hard to disagree with Gokturk: most of the Turkish-German films from *Germany 40squaremeters* to *Almanya Aci Vatan* that were produced over three decades followed the blueprint of Turkish stereotypes regarding such subjects as rape, violence, revenge, prison, hospital, virtue, honour, honour killings, women in domestic space, masculinity in crisis and so on. While such issues do exist in Turkish-German daily life as in other cultures, continual portrayal of pitiful noble victim in these films did little to better the image of the mute Turkish immigrant. On the contrary, it cemented that image and in the process gave the average German audience an outlet to temporarily feel sympathy for him/her but nothing further. In fact it silenced him/her in much the same way Turkish modernism did, portraying his/her traditional values backwards, putting him in an inescapable negative cultural box, without reflecting the greys in between the binary cultural experiences which exist on a daily basis.

But does cinema have such responsibility? Since it is one of the most powerful and influential media outlets in global popular culture, one could argue that cinema has a responsibility to be honest about the reality of the time, people and places they attempt to portray. Cinema could help create a space, perhaps that third space, as Homi Babaha would put it, where an immigrant exists daily, not as a two-dimensional cartoon character of him/herself but as real individual. In this regard, Kutlug Ataman's film *Lola and Bilidikid* (1999) serves as the first Turkish-German film that embodies that honesty, reality, exposing the daily life of Turkish-German's immigrant in Berlin in a groundbreaking way. The irony of the film is that it mobilizes the marginal immigrants in Germany through the voices of most marginal of them all -- Turkish transvestites in Berlin -- to expose the reality of the Turkish-German community at large.

Starting with Kutlug Ataman's *Lola and Bilidikid*, muteness of the Turkish immigrant was complicated. Such attempts were repeated in films like *Short Sharp Shocked* and *Head-On* by Fatih Akin, which are distinctly different than earlier films, such as *Berlin Berlin* by Sinan Cetin. However, Akin's work has competing ideals that further complicate the situation. For

example, Akin's *Head-On* which won the Golden Bear award in Germany in 2004, is a film about two Turkish-German characters' quest for visibility, quest for third space to exist. Turkish German characters in this film are portrayed rather "raw" as some film critics put it, which is a progress considering other Turkish German films glorification of the sympathetic noble victim characters. The film is more entertaining to the general audience than *Lola and Bilidikid*. It has all the usual Turkish film themes of rape, murder, jealousy, and virtue, honour, hospital, jail and so on but the way in which Akin presents these themes doesn't quite deconstruct the stereotypes. Rather, he makes them grander. Also, the epilogues that are built in between scenes further accentuate Turkish culture and Turkey as the promised land. In an interview Akin sates that he wanted to create an imaginary space where his two loveable loser Turkish-German characters could escape. However, that imaginary space ends up being homeland Turkey. This idea of "Homeland-Turkey" comes to serve as a space of resistance to German subordination. The option of being able to go back to homeland is a survival skill to most Turkish Immigrants in Europe. It provides the immigrant in identity struggle with an imaginary space where he/she can negotiate his/her identity: namely identifying themselves as Germans to Turks in Turkey and as Turkish to Germans in Germany. However, that journey back to homeland-Turkey usually doesn't happen. This is problematic, since it creates a vicious cycle of a catch-22 without hope of upward mobility in either of the countries. Unlike *Lola and Bilidikid*, Akin's ending in *Head On* says to us that there is no chance of visibility for his characters in Germany other than being victims and/or criminals and offers no realistic alternative for third space of existence. This feeds into the German-media's focus on the "hyphenated" identity of the Turks, which stresses the national and religious identities at the expense of other forms of identification.

Similarly in his earlier film, *In July*, Akin takes his four characters, both German and Turkish, to Turkey, away from the boring summer in Hamburg. But once in Turkey, they end up with partners of their own race: German girl with German boy, Turkish Girl with a Turkish boy. It is ironic that Fatih Akin, who was born and raised in Germany, and who has achieved success and visibility in Germany, sees Turkey as the Promised Land for his seemingly hopeless (victim-criminals) characters. The international success of Akin's two films, along with German media attention to "Muslim-Turkish" born actress Sibel Kekilli's past as a porn star, to a certain degree testifies to the enduring effects of Orientalism, this time internalized by Turks and aided by empathetic Germans.

On the other hand, *Lola and Bilidikid* is a drama that takes place in the streets, nightclubs, toilets, abandoned buildings and the Turkish ghetto neighbourhood. It tells the tale of Turkish transvestites in Berlin, a group of ultra marginalized people both as immigrants and homosexuals who experience alienation from Germans, from their fellow Turks and, at worst, from each other. Director Kutlug Ataman portrays the homosexual community as confused and ambiguous. Lola's lover Bilidikid, who sees himself as a man since he is the one who penetrates, mimics the homophobic behaviours of his fellow Turks. Not knowing he is Lola's baby brother, he advises Murat to never admit that he is gay and never let himself be penetrated. He states, "living as a fag is no way to live". He insists that Lola should have the operation to get rid of his "dick", and become a woman so they can move to Turkey and live like normal people do. When Lola asks "why not you why me" he answers laughingly, "because I am a man."

Lola works as an oriental belly dancer at a Turkish nightclub. He is happy with being in love with Bilidikid and want things to remain the same. He is realistic enough to know that what Bilidikid wants from him and for them, which is to live like "normal" people, will eventually

destroy them, because he recognizes that becoming a woman would only make Bilidikid leave him at the end because he won't be the same person that he fell in love with. In reality what Bilidikid wants is to be able to live without being discriminated against and he thinks the way to achieve that is to become like everyone else, not realizing that such self-inflicted imitation would only further contribute to his own oppression. Events take a turn for the worse when Lola confronts his older brother Osman and discovers that he has a younger brother Murat. Lola's attempts to befriend his new brother Murat prove to be fatal, as Osman, who acts as the Turkish patriarch of the family, kills Lola.

Murat, the younger son, who is introduced in the dark streets of Berlin, against the backdrop of the statue of an angel, represents the redemption and hope in the film. After exploring his own homosexuality with a German boy from his school, he discovers that he has an estranged homosexual brother -- Lola. After being beaten by the neo-Nazis, he questions his mother about Lola. The mother, who is ignorant of her older son Osman's actions, explains how the whole family disowned Lola after he "came out." She advises Murat that "in these foreign lands they must stick together and obey Osman as the head of the family as his intentions and deeds are essentially good and well intended."

Murat helps Bilidikid to avenge Lola's death. He pretends to be Lola to lure the Neo-Nazi group into an abandon building. There we see the two radical characters of both cultures, Bilidikid, who embodies the machismo of the Turkish male, and the Hitler-inspired neo-Nazi leader, attack and kill each other. After the self-destruction of the extreme elements of both cultures, director Ataman places Murat and one of the neo-Nazi youth at a corner in the building, abandoned both physically and metaphorically. There, in a state of panic, beaten and bloodied, the two are stripped of their cultural differences, they become human, and they become the same.

It is after the deaths of Bilidikid and the Neo-Nazi leader that Murat learns from his German love interest that it was not the neo-Nazis who killed Lola. Murat next confronts his older brother Osman about Lola's death and in the process both he and his mother realize that it was Osman who killed Lola in order to hide his own homosexual inclinations, and to hide the truth that he raped Lola repeatedly in the past. The mother, who saw herself as an uneducated woman, with unquestioning obeisance to patriarchy, recognizes her own failure and strikes the patriarch Osman in the face. She leaves her domestic space, and blends into the German streets as she tears off her headscarf. She transforms and delivers herself and becomes her own other.

Osman is left in the Ghetto crying. Murat now follows his mother. The mother's appropriation of space is repeated by the transvestites as they pass by Tiergarten and the Victory Column, the same column that Murat walked by at night in the beginning of the film. But now, in the daylight, the two transvestites declare to the Turkish cab driver their identity openly: one of them says, "I am a woman with balls, don't say I didn't tell you!"

On a secondary level, the film explores an upper-class rich German mother and son relationship with each other and with the son's Turkish lover Iskender. The son, Frederick, is very gentle and understanding with Iskender but his mother is distrustful of him, thinking he is only after their money. Iskender is equally distrustful of both of them. However, after Lola's death, he decides to give love a try with Frederick. Also, after a bickering car ride together to her house they come to an understanding on a mutual space of existence. The film ends with a Turkish female's transformation from domestic to public space, second

generation Murat's rejection of patriarchy that is oppressive to his identity, transvestites becoming open with their identity, and middle aged Turkish and German men putting their differences aside to become lovers.

What is the significance of Ataman's characters in this film? Ataman tackles the certain stereotypes of German and Turkish cultures. But he does it in a way that complicates the stereotypes without perpetuating them. For example, the orientalist scene where Murat walks into a nightclub is quickly problematized when Bilidikid beats up a German customer who wants to have some oriental sexual delight. The examination of the internal struggles of the transvestite characters, as they interact with each other and the Turkish German society, displays a more nuanced approach than most other Turkish films. Turks struggle to survive daily, yet they mimic the very elements that discriminate against them—the same elements to which they aspire. Such complicit behaviours come from the desire to become visible, as opposed to being invisible if they were openly homosexual men. In the process, they silence themselves in much the same way that the mother is silenced by the patriarchy. As for the patriarchy, there is triple articulation of the silence: first of all, Osman is silenced by his traditional idea of male identity that does not allow him to explore his hidden homosexual desires. Secondly, he comes from a country where his traditional Turkish identity is already silenced: the elitist Turkish government only provides him space to exist as a "new Turk," which requires him to deny his Traditional Islamic identity. Last, German culture silences Osman by keeping him in the ghetto and in the cultural ethnic box, not providing him with the tools and resources to integrate into the society.

It is through the three-dimensional depictions of the individuals in *Lola and Bilidikid* that we get a glimpse of a more realistic look at the daily lives of mute immigrants, without displacing the problem to one or the other culture. Going back to Turkey is an option for the characters in *Lola and Bilidikid*, but there also exists a space in Germany where Turks and Germans can co-exist. There is a space where, at the end of the film, transvestites can come out of the oriental nightclub into the daylight and be visible as who they are.

How realistic is Ataman's realistic portrayals of such characters? Ataman, a native of Turkey who attended UCLA film school and currently lives in London, spent two years in Berlin with the homosexual community before shooting the film. His latest project, which depicts the people of Cuba, a shantytown near Istanbul, won the Tate Museums Turner prize. Critics praised his focus on the individual in this project in many of the same terms that I use for *Lola and Bilidikid*. This attentiveness to individuals is a true breakthrough in Turkish cinema, as this cinema generally operates from the collective's point of view. It is the focus on the individual that enables Ataman to get away from the binary depiction of Turkish-German Cultures. It is through the individual that we get to see a more three-dimensional picture of the collective, and that collective in *Lola and Bilidikid* at the end consists of German and Turks, not one against the other.

Perhaps then it is Ataman's distance to Turkish-German experience that enables him to reflect them in a more fully realized way. And to his credit, he does it through exploring the most marginal segment of that society without being condescending, claiming authority, and most importantly without perpetuating the victim-criminal stereotypes. Akin focuses on east-west conflict, much in the same way the German media portrays the immigrant Turks daily, yet Ataman is able to portray the same subject as a human conflict.

Films such as these help redefine national and gender identities and the identity of Germany. More study has to be done in the area of immigrant films not only in Germany but elsewhere in the continent in order to further understand and contribute to the ever-changing culture of Europe as an immigrant society.

Angi Vera

Dir: Pál Gábor, Hungary, 1979
Colonel Redl

Colonel Redl

Dir: István Szabó, Hungary, 1984

A review by Carol Donelan, Carleton College, USA

The difficulty of "living in truth" under an oppressive political regime, a consistent theme in the writings of Václav Havel, is a useful starting point for a consideration of two Hungarian films, *Angi Vera* (1978) and *Colonel Redl* (1984). *Angi Vera* is set in Stalinist Hungary and *Colonel Redl* in the Austro-Hungarian Hapsburg Empire, but it does not require much of an imaginative stretch to see a parallel between the two regimes. Both demand conformity from their subjects.

Vera Angi (Veronika Papp) is a naïve but outspoken young woman, brought in for questioning after she criticizes the Communist Party for failing to bring about promised changes. Her unhappiness is rooted in a history of personal tragedy. Having lost both her parents in the war, she has grown up in a hospital orphanage. Now eighteen, she is a candidate ripe for political training. "We'll take care of you," declare the officials. "The Party will teach you. We have your interests at heart."

Sent to a camp, she is befriended by an older woman, Anna Traján (Erzsi Pásztor), who teaches her how to consolidate her power by informing against others. When Anna and Vera go canvassing together they seek warmth in a worker's home, only to discover through his own admission that he is a Social Democrat—a "right wing enemy of the Party," according to Anna. Anna devises a plan to denounce the worker and enlists Vera's help. Together, they sign the necessary documents that will bring about his downfall.

Vera's public persona is threatened when she begins to develop feelings for her young married teacher, István (Tamás Dunai). "My life means nothing to me. The workers' movement is everything," he declares passionately to his students. Sensing there is more to Vera's enthusiasm for István than just his teachings, Anna dismisses him as "too young, too inconsistent, not relentless enough." Before leaving camp to attend to Party business elsewhere, she warns Vera not to "disappoint her friends." Despite Anna's veiled threat, Vera makes love to István that night. The next morning, Vera's precarious position is aptly demonstrated by a swish pan from her point of view, from Anna calmly sipping her coffee in the cafeteria to István looking on fearfully.

Mária Muskát (Eva Szabó) and József Neubauer (László Horváth) also represent individuals whose private lives threaten to undermine their standing in the Party. Mária refuses to submit

to the Party demand to disavow her sexuality. "Don't say a pretty breast is a survival of capitalism, historically outlived," she snorts after Anna lectures her in the shower for her lack of modesty. Later that night, Mária describes to her sleepy, giggling roommates how she and her fiancé took a room on the weekend and made love repeatedly. Anna is offended and demands to be moved to another room. The women's laughter signals the eruption of private emotions that are particularly threatening, as her preoccupations are marred by grief. Rather than join in the subversive celebration of laughter, Anna cries as she recalls her lover's execution.

Like Mária, József is unwilling to sever his emotional ties to those outside the Party organization. Midway through his political training, he secretly takes a train home to visit his wife and child. Upon his return to the camp, he is arrested and "tried" in front of his comrades, who agree to accept him back into the collective with his promise to work harder. Vera, seizing the opportunity to reinforce her own public persona, volunteers to assist József with his studies. Like Vera, József is able to begin his recuperation within the Party by transferring his private desires onto his teacher. As József recites party dogma in a droning voice, Vera gazes longingly out the classroom window at her own teacher, István. Her reverie is interrupted by József's invitation to join him at an upcoming party event. Later, József tells Vera of his love for her, which she hastily rejects. "He's drunk. He doesn't know what he's saying," she tells István. While quick to invalidate József's feelings for her, Vera hypocritically acknowledges the existence of her own private life by immediately declaring her love to István.

Two scenes in particular capture the precarious nature of Vera's identity as it is defined in relation to others. The first is a banquet scene, where the pairing and movement of dance partners provides a visual correlative to the ideological affiliations of each character. Mária encourages Vera to join her in seeking out partners during a "ladies' choice" dance. Vera hesitates, and then invites József to dance as Mária pulls István out onto the floor. Vera and István exchange besotted looks until Mária, as if prompted by the desire of the primary couple, encourages everyone to switch partners. A brief cutaway shot to Anna is the formal motivation for the rearrangement of partners, however. Her controlling gaze corrects the ideological mismatches as Mária grabs József from Vera, who then falls happily into István's arms. The members of the secondary couple, Mária and József, mutually defined by their problematic relationship to the Party, are paired, while the alignment of the primary couple provides the narrative motivation for Vera's eventual ascension in the Party hierarchy at István's expense.

A second important scene occurs when the students gather for self-criticism, a ritual designed to assist initiates in the task of reshaping their identities in accordance with Party goals. Comrade Ses reminds the students that the failure of individuals to adopt identities compatible with the goals of the movement is attributable to personal flaws rather than to any inherent error in the movement's demands. "We must transform ourselves. We must change, reshape, adapt ourselves. But the ground slips under those who waver." Taking the lead, István is inspired to assert his private identity through a declaration of love. "Maybe I shouldn't say this, but I'm a Communist because I feel my humanity. Vera and I love each other. Surely we don't want to produce sick liars." István's confession forces Vera to make a decision. Should she publicly reciprocate István's declaration of love? József has been accepted back into collection after his transgression, and Comrade Ses has taught that the Party is patient, but there is the risk of being ousted from the Party, her only source of economic survival, her only family. As Vera nervously contemplates the situation, she seeks

reassurance from others. She looks to her right. Anna stares impassively toward the front of the room, rejecting Vera's gaze. She looks to her left. Mária remains equally unhelpful at this crucial moment. Whether unwilling or unable to help her, each woman represents an ideological option available to Vera. She can either remain committed to the Party, like Anna, or to her own authentic self, like Mária. Determined to survive, she chooses the Party. "I don't love him. He is mistaken," she states coldly. "I loved his authority."

Sexual desire, as the cornerstone of one's private life, is the hook that ironically brings some individuals in line with the demands of the Party. Thus, Vera and József are able to construct tentative identities as devoted Party members by redirecting their private emotions towards Party teachers. Desire can also disrupt the stability of one's public persona, however, as Istvan's love for Vera suggests. István disappears from the camp after his declaration. A new teacher is introduced to the class without explanation. Mária's unwillingness to embrace the exterior realities of the Party as her own also results in her uncelebrated exit from the camp, and her fate is left uncertain. Vera, meanwhile, is rewarded for repudiating her own desires. She is offered a prestigious job as a Party journalist.

Throughout the film, Vera's face bears the inscription of her ideological struggle in light and shadow. A series of side-lit portraits opens the film. The static images take on movement through superimposition, evoking the many facets or masks that constitute identity. When Vera succumbs to her private emotions and makes love to István, her ideological position is reinforced by the image of her darkened face peering from the shadows. Later, when she publicly rejects István's love, her fully lit portrait confirms her willingness to speak from the position of a Party member. The latter moments hint at the possibility of a unified self but cannot compete with the overall imperative of the film, which is to represent Vera as a divided subject, split between a repressed, private self and a politically correct, public persona.

The interrogation that initiates Vera Angi's rise in the Party also signals Alfred Redl's entry into the elite world of the Emperor's officers in Szabó's *Colonel Redl*. Redl's identity is interrogated in the credit sequence as the actor Klaus Maria Brandauer gazes directly into the camera. This "portrait" of Redl starts and stops, shifting from a moving image to a still frame, while the image of a train station appears at intervals. The train station signifies Redl's childhood in Galicia, where his father worked on the railroad. By inter-cutting Redl's portrait with the train station, Szabó links his character's identity to the past.

A number of images from a childhood in Galicia are presented in the opening sequence through the eyes of the boy Redl (Gábor Svidrony), whose point of view is conflated with that of the camera. A guard at the train station waves at him (at the camera), a dog chases him, a hungry family eats, pausing long enough over poised soup spoons to acknowledge his presence, and a mother (Eva Szabó) tucks him into bed while beginning the film's narration in the guise of a bedtime story. "Your grandfather was a friend of His Majesty, the Emperor," she announces as another portrait, this one from history, heralds the boy's ancestral roots. We are introduced to Redl's voice before we see him when, over the next image of a child's notebook, we hear him recite an adulatory poem about the Emperor. "Very nice, young Redl," a teacher responds, finally providing a name for the main character within the diegesis. The teacher arranges Redl's entry into a prestigious military school, an honour not often granted to peasant boys from Galicia. As the mother packs a bag, she softly lectures him about the responsibilities awaiting him. The director's refusal to introduce us to Redl visually reiterates the main character's eventual disavowal of his peasant roots as he struggles to

construct an identity as a soldier in the Emperor's aristocratic officer's corps. Our first sighting of Redl thus occurs only after he is in full military uniform, which remains an important signifier of his identity throughout the film. A mobile camera, in close-up, follows cadet Redl's exercise regime as he struggles through push-ups, eyeballing the lens that interrogates him.

The theme of interrogation continues to develop as Redl accompanies his aristocratic friend, the young Baron Kristóf Kubinyi (Jan Niklas), home for R and R. Redl feels out of place amidst the lavish furnishings and multi-lingual conversations in the Kubinyi home, but he is quick to compensate. He cuts his food carefully and looks to the servants for his cues. "Where are you from?" asks Kristóf's grandfather (Tamás Major) of Redl. "I think...my mother's grandfather...was Hungarian. Yes, they were Hungarians," Redl says. Sensing the positive response, he embellishes the story. "They were members of the nobility. But they lost their whole fortune in the war. Later, his Majesty helped them by giving my great grandfather a position in the civil service." "Then you must certainly have some Hungarian blood in you," Kristóf's grandfather responds reassuringly. Redl nods and haltingly sings a Hungarian song to further authenticate his claim to a favorable national identity.

National and class biases are maintained within the officer's corps and prompt Redl's desire to suppress the truth of his identity. He is, as Colonel Von Roden (Hans Christian Blech) suggests, "without dazzling family connections." Whereas the aristocratic Kubinyi is immune to censure even when he participates in illegal activities such as the duel with Lieutenant Schorm (Károly Eperjes), Redl, without the protection guaranteed to members of the nobility, risks upsetting his precarious status in the army ranks whenever he unduly calls attention to himself. As a cadet, young Redl quickly learns that in order to stabilize his position in the academy, he must learn to embrace the other boys as his brothers and the Emperor as his father. He demonstrates his devotion to his new family by choosing to attend ceremonies in honour of the Emperor rather than his own father's funeral. When the adult Redl is eventually transferred to a post in Galicia, his home region, he refuses to visit his family. His sister Sophie (Flóra Kádár) appears in his office one day, but Redl nervously thrusts money in her hands and pushes her out the door, demanding that she never again attempt to make contact with him.

Although Redl's identity as a Jew is never made explicit, he admits to Dr. Sonnenschein (András Bálint) that his father played cards with the rabbi of Lemberg and that he admires the beauty of Jewish holidays. "Why don't you become a Jew?" Sonnenschein asks. "All right, I'm also a Jew. It's all the same," Redl replies. But the anti-Semitism in the officer's corps soon encourages Redl to adopt a less tolerant attitude towards Judaism, even as rumors about his own Jewish identity begin to surface. Redl overhears fellow officers speculating about his identity, and the local shopkeeper's questions confirm his fears. "Are you a Jew?" the shopkeeper asks. "They say you are." In the restaurant, Redl explodes with anger with a local couple, assuming he is a Jew, invites him to their home for dinner. He lectures his soldiers about avoiding contact with the Jewish population. "You must decide who you are," he declares, projecting his own dilemma onto the other soldiers. "Are you an officer, a Slovak, a Ukrainian, or a Jew?" The Archduke (Armin Mueller-Stahl), always suspicious of Redl, takes pleasure in interrogating him. "Are you a Catholic?" he asks. Redl insists that he is. Sensing his imminent arrest, Redl visits a church and mumbles a pray while lighting a candle. The last vestiges of his authentic identity disintegrate when he offers up a treasured childhood photograph to the flame.

Redl's homosexuality must also be suppressed in his long climb through the military ranks. His desires constantly threaten to destabilize his carefully constructed public identity. His hidden homosexual identity takes shape at an early age in the academy, where the rigorous training fosters strong emotional bonds among the cadets. When Redl and the young Kubinyi accidentally break their weapons during exercise drill, they link bare arms in a show of solidarity as they confront their punishment. The homosexual relationship between the adult Redl and Kubinyi underwrites their interactions with the women in the brothel. Redl asks his female partner to describe the intimate details of Kristóf's body and sexual behaviors while knowingly adding his own embellishments (a skill he has evidently perfected from childhood). Redl and Kubinyi exchange a kiss in the hallway after their encounters with the women. When Redl eventually makes love to Kubinyi's sister Katalin (Gudrun Landgrebe), he relies on his fantasies of Kristóf to enhance his desire, just as he had during his session with the female prostitute. Von Roden warns Redl when the Archduke starts making inquiries about his homosexual activities, and Redl quickly drums up a female marriage candidate in order to quiet the rumors. A metonymic relationship between homosexuality and piano music is established early in the film when young Redl's piano teacher makes a pass at him during lessons. Thus, when a fellow officer asks the adult Redl if he "still plays piano," the subtext of the question is evident. Velocchio, a spy working with the army's ranks, later plays a piano duet with Redl before they make love, after which Redl willingly divulges military secrets that will contribute to his downfall.

Redl himself questions the authenticity of his identity throughout his career. In private moments, he identifies himself as a peasant using his military contacts to advance socially. He chastises himself, for example, after dutifully snitching on his fellow cadets to the commander. "I'm not a soldier. I'm a Judas. They are soldiers. I'm a treacherous peasant." Later, the adult Redl, as head of military intelligence, consults his own file, only to dismiss the photographs as "poses" while penciling in the word "insincere" on the report. Other moments in the film suggest, however, that Redl is not always aware that he is posing. He meets Lieutenant Schorm on the morning of the duel, and their intimate discussion reveals his failure to understand the nature of his double life. "Everyone here acts his part perfectly," Schorm says. Redl is taken aback when Schorm accuses him of being the consummate "game player." As if to defend himself, Redl attempts to demonstrate his belief in the validity of his private life by describing a dream he had had the night before. Hesitant in his description, he is finally forced to admit that he doubts the relevance of one's interior reality.

Despite the failure of Vera Angi and Alfred Redl to "live in truth" in accordance with Havel's idea, secondary characters such as Mária Muskát and József Neubauer in *Angi Vera*, and Lieutenant Schorm in *Colonel Redl*, hint at the possibility of individuals drawing on their own "authentic existence" as a wellspring of resistance to the demands of the state. Havel asks each individual to make that choice in order to affirm human identity, to "live in truth" despite threatening social and political realities.

A History of Violence

Dir: David Cronenberg, USA, 2005

A review by Jo Eadie, Open University, UK

Some reviewers have expressed surprise that David Cronenberg would want to work in a sub-genre that is so persistently mined by cinema: a respectable small-town citizen turns out to have a hidden violent past, and out comes a submerged dangerous personality. This species of film stretches back to Robert Mitchum in the seminal film whose name would do just as well for any of the others -- *Out of the Past*, includes Kirk Douglas in *The Killers*, goes up to Clint Eastwood in *Unforgiven* and Geena Davis in *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, and encompasses innumerable entries known in the UK only to aficionados of those made-for-TV thrillers that turn up in the early hours of the morning on Channel Five. It's a well-worn narrative that seems out of place in the canon of a director who has had little time to visit the pedestrian territories of domesticated criminals in a career comprised of twin gynaecologists, giant flies, hallucinating cockroach exterminators, and men having sex with their televisions.

It turns out that back in 1984, Cronenberg was poised to direct *Total Recall*, the film finally made by Paul Verhoeven with Arnold Schwarzenegger, in which a quiet and respectable labourer turns out to be a brainwashed secret agent with a ruthlessly violent personality submerged inside his head. Or -- and this is the point of the film -- possibly merely hallucinates the entire episode as an escape-fantasy. So the scenario of *A History of Violence* is one which has intrigued Cronenberg for years. And this should make us more aware of the fact that it is congruent with many of his larger concerns. It echoes the problem of the split self, and the impossibility of reconciling conflicting impulses, which lies at the heart of *Dead Ringers* and *Spider*; the lure of a transformative fantasy in which one becomes a more exciting, more dangerous person, a trajectory mapped out in *Naked Lunch*, *Rabid*, *The Fly* and *eXistenZ*; the visceral, and ultimately sexual appeal of violence, graphically rendered in *Videodrome* and *Crash*; the ease with which a surface mask slips to unleash a destructive impulse underneath, taken to its apocalyptic conclusions in *Scanners*, *Shivers* and *The Brood*. At the heart of Cronenberg's work is the question posed by *Total Recall* and revisited in *A History of Violence*: if there were another person living inside you, what would your life be like if they came out?

In a sense, the scenario might be read as an archetypal horror film. Tom Stall (played by Viggo Mortensen) has killed two criminals threatening the clients in his diner, apparently a temporary aberration, but in fact, the unleashing of a larger threat to the community. "We're just trying to get everything back to normal" observes one of the characters -- but in a horror film, "normal" is a place that one never goes back to. The typical trajectory of Cronenberg's films is the steady erosion of the normal by what has been let loose -- think of Seth Brundle's unstoppable transformation in *The Fly*, or Max Renn's descent into obsession and suicide in *Videodrome*. This time, it is the mundane, but no less fatal, emergence of Tom's criminal past as the gangster Joey Cusack, who will prove as alien as the creatures that break out in *The Brood*, and as destructive as the plague that breaks out in *Rabid*. The film terminates in the well-worn territory of Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*: a brutal shoot-out which leaves its victor

only more alienated than ever from the people he tried to help. Although the over-familiarity of this ending is unsatisfying, the film's uncomfortable pleasures lie in the particularly scathing portrayal it offers of the world that Tom/Joey destroys in the process of fighting to protect it.

The prime casualty of his transformation is his own family, and in particular his wife Edie (Maria Bello). Dressing up in her old cheerleader costume to spice up sex with her husband, Edie comments on the gap between the life of adult fulfilment she has with him now, and the relative bleakness of the life that preceded it. As Tom starts to go down on her, she quips, "there wasn't much of this back in high school." A past of sexual banality has given way to a present of sexual equality as the two move on to a mutually satisfying session of sixty-nine -- functioning here as the acme of sexual reciprocity, opposed to the world of sexual inequality which Edie's comment suggests (a world of frustrated small-town heterosexual girls looking at their watches while being banged by their boyfriends).

But a later sex scene opens up a slightly different perspective on this soft-porn pastoral. With Tom now in Joey Cusack mode, the couple fight on the stairs, and Tom grabs Edie in what is either a desperate need to re-find his connection with her through sex, or the emergence of an aggressive and cold sexual violence. The fact that Edie responds well suggests it might be, for both of them, the former; that she ends by bitterly pushing him away, and out of her, suggests that in fact it is the latter.

It's not a comfortable scene. In a sense, anyone who has watched Cronenberg's career closely spends his films waiting for the moment where his view of sexuality as bleak and self-destructive verges on -- or dives headfirst into -- misogyny. Is this a sequence in which a woman consents to being raped? Or merely one in which she regrets deciding to have sex? What is clear is that it functions as a counterpoint to the earlier sex scene: this one brutal where the other was tender, this one selfish where the other was mutual, this one on the stairs where the other one was in bed! It suggests that for Edie as much as for Tom, some new capacity has emerged, so that their journey into realms of erotic violence echoes that of Max Renn and Nicki Brand in *Videodrome*, or Claire Niveau and Beverly/Elliot in *Dead Ringers*. In these narratives, the hunger for a more visceral life erodes the certainties that preceded it. It pushes the characters into such an ambivalence about their "new" desires versus their "old" selves that they lose all points of reference on their lives. Seen from this perspective their earlier sexual equality merges into the boringly conventional sexual past of "high school" as part of that entire pre-Joey time when everything was nice, but dull.

Watching the work of any filmmaker one finds interesting, there is always a challenge in processing the moments that part significantly from one's own position -- moments where one says to oneself, surely he can't think *that*? In this case: surely he can't think it interesting, clever, or original to suggest that women find rape exciting? But then female sexuality has always figured problematically in Cronenberg's work. His male protagonists are typically launched into their descent into madness by women who are on the one hand unusually strong and complex compared with most other female characters in contemporary cinema, yet at the same time so uncomfortably pathologised as to make one wonder whether Cronenberg sees women as fundamentally grotesque. He certainly assumes that the men *in* his films see women as frightening temptresses. It is instructive to think of Dennis Cleg's split view of women in *Spider*, where Ralph Fiennes's character remembers his mother in two opposed forms, both played by Miranda Richardson -- an idealised figure out of Enid Blyton from his

early childhood, and a monstrous sexual adventuress whom, he fantasises, replaces her, as his own dawning sexuality renders his relationship with her more problematic.

Female masochism and the female body have functioned recurrently in his work as metaphors for the vulnerability, the power and the problem of human corporeality - indeed, he once remarked that "gynaecology is such a beautiful metaphor for the mind/body split". But there is a certain wilful naiveté about the idea that one can make films whose subject matter is constantly the desires, bodies, deaths, and pleasures of women -- without ever thinking that those films are in any way about women themselves. Of course, within western art it is the capacity of the female body always to act as metaphor (for nation, for ideal beauty, for corruption, for evil) that has preserved its centrality. We might say that it is the fantasy that they are not really talking about actual women's bodies which has enabled male artists to go on producing work using women's bodies -- as if somehow female embodiment does not deserve to be addressed, and the woman's body gains its legitimacy in art because it refers out beyond itself to those "serious" masculine issue of politics and philosophy. When Debbie Harry burns herself with a cigarette in *Videodrome*, or Jennifer Jason Leigh's nervous games designer of *eXistenZ* constantly begs her minder to "play with me", or Rosanna Arquette is strapped into leg-braces in *Crash*, any notion of what the female body might mean to *women* seems lost under the weight of those bodies operating as vehicles for Cronenberg's own metaphorical concerns.

He has recounted a telling story about his early career -- a lengthy narrative concerning a female actor who asks him to slap her face in order to help her cry for a scene. It is also the first day on set for European horror star Barbara Steele who, hearing -- as Cronenberg phrases it -- "smack, smack, smack; shriek, shriek, shriek" is appalled:

She says, "You bastard! I've worked with some of the best directors in the world. I've worked with Fellini. I've never in my life seen a director treat an actress like that. You bastard!" She was going to punch me out. I said, "No, Barbara don't hit me. She made me do it. I hate doing it. I'm afraid to do take two ..." "Really?" she says. "Yes, really." Barbara lets me go. "How hard were you hitting her?" she asks, "show me." She holds out her forearm and I hit it hard. "That hard?" "Yes", I say. "Hmm", says Barbara. A pause, and then her eyes fix on me. "Do I have any scenes where I have to cry?"

His combination of bewilderment, fear and fascination somehow suggests the way in which female masochism is always central to his work, without his ever feeling any empathy or outrage regarding it -- or any particular interest in the larger social processes which might structure it.

In the absence of any such enquiry (although remembering of course, that there is a more generous reading of Cronenberg's work in which his use of these metaphors might in fact constitute such an enquiry), we are left with Edie's masochism as a symbol for the way in which violence is both abhorred and desired within the family. It's a kind of domestic hypocrisy equally visible in their son, who too is transformed by the violence that his father unleashes. First by beating up the high school bully, and then by taking up a shotgun to save Tom's life, Jack (Ashton Holmes) also acquires the bitter, blank, confused, hateful look that marks all the family (and indeed everyone in Cronenberg's corpus; surely thirty years on Jack will be reprising Spider's attempts to make sense of a family trauma that he recalls only through screen-memories and protective fantasy). All of which suggests that Cronenberg produces a perhaps too familiar analysis of the role of violence in the West -- as that which is

routinely condemned at the interpersonal level, even as it remains absolutely essential at the institutional level.

When he finally returns home, having erased brutally all traces of his past, Tom's family has become cold and appalled. In an uncomfortable irony, his daughter sets a place for him at the table to welcome him home. But then, she is the only one who understands nothing of what he has done. She is unaware of how alienated from them he has become. In Cronenberg's roster of haunted males, Christopher Walken comes to mind -- but less for *The Dead Zone* than for *The Deer Hunter*. If Cimino's point was that the state requires of its soldiers levels of coldness and violence which simply make them unable to return home, even as that domestic home celebrates and sentimentalises the wars to which they are despatched, a similar double-standard haunts *A History of Violence*. However appalled Jack and Edie are, however much they look ready to disown Tom, they remain complicit with the violent trajectory on which he is launched in order to protect them.

It is a cynical view of violence -- that those who protest against it are hypocrites who do not want to admit how they benefit from it. Cronenberg's work has been largely concerned with the errors of self-delusion and self-denial. This is perhaps not least because of his own experience of being persistently castigated for making films which seek to talk about topics so clearly at the heart of the cultures which act so appalled at the topics being made visible (e.g., video pornography in *Videodrome* and the adrenaline of dangerous driving in *Crash*). We need think only of Peter Weller's denial of his own homosexuality in *Naked Lunch* -- in which images of the sex that he cannot allow himself to have return to him as nightmarish hallucinations -- to see Tom's family merely as the latest in a chain of contemptible puritans feigning horror at the events and desires with which they are intimately bound up. It is not, after all, Tom/Joey who has a history of violence -- but them.

And in that sense the film becomes the quintessential horror film, by suggesting that what is monstrous is really only what we are unwilling to admit about ourselves. If this particular trope has been overworked in writing on horror cinema, it is because it has been such a staple of the genre. Indeed, at one point in Tom Savini's remake of *Night of the Living Dead*, one of the characters goes so far as to remark, as she watches the zombies: "they're us and we're them." What *A History of Violence* brings out more clearly, though, is the critical dead-end to which such an approach takes us. If "them" and "us" are mutually implicated in one another then there is no point to the attempt to choose or decide, to exercise agency or reason. As *Naked Lunch's* insect typewriter gleefully informs Bill Lee: "all agents sell-out, all resisters defect." It was a position mapped out with brutal comedy in Cronenberg's first commercial feature, *Shivers*. There, the pampered, sex-obsessed, hungry consumers of a luxury apartment block were transformed by alien parasites into sex-obsessed, hungry zombies prowling Canada, with barely any perceptible change in the process!

Here, peace-loving domesticity and violent crime regard each other with mutual contempt and hostility. It is hard not to read everything that comes out of America at the moment as a post-9/11 allegory -- especially in the case of a film whose point seems to be that those who despise violence are simply hypocritically oblivious to how much they need it to protect them. Certainly, Cronenberg's films work to level out any critical distance or possibility of value judgement between the different levels of reality which they map out. On the one hand, because the opposed realms prove to be such mirror-images of one another -- *Videodrome's* final depiction of Max Renn as masochistic, prosthetically enhanced disciple of "the new flesh" is only another version of the film's earlier Max Renn, corporate pornographer -- and

on the other, because each level simply proves to be a slightly different type of nightmare. In a recent issue of *Sight and Sound* Graham Fuller provides just such a reading of *A History of Violence* by interpreting the entire film as the Hollywood-inspired fantasy of Tom the frustrated rural shopkeeper. He charts the most cynical reaches of post-modern relativism, in which every avenue leads merely to another horror. Preference or ethics become futile -- part, perhaps, of that genre which James Annesley refers to as "blank fiction" in his book of the same name (one of whose key texts, *American Psycho*, was also nearly adapted by Cronenberg).

This sense of despair and futility is expressed with particular intensity through Cronenberg's choice of performers. The parade of blank and bewildered faces, namely James Woods, Christopher Walken, Jeremy Irons, Peter Weller, James Spader, Jude Law, and Ralph Fiennes (whose curious resemblance to one another is matched by their unnerving resemblance to Cronenberg himself), gains a new recruit in Viggo Mortensen. It is this dehumanized aspect that mitigates any simple critique of his treatment of women. He clearly treats men equally caustically: emotionally hollow, neurotically unable to come to terms with their own desires, passive in the face of the choices that they might make, able to resolve their ambivalence only by violence or suicide. No prizes for spotting that Tom *Stall* is in a state of permanent paralysis, suspended between options. And if all this sometimes comes close to suggesting that these variously castrated heroes might benefit from some form of more heroic masculinity, it should be remembered that the step into action inevitably proves as pointless and destructive as the failure to take it. There is, for me, something frustrating and disappointing in this nihilistic rejection of the value of critique and agency. But the tenacity with which Cronenberg pursues it remains -- if both exhausting and repetitive -- an intriguing antidote to cinema's more anodyne versions of hopeful decisiveness.

Kingdom of Heaven

Dir: Ridley Scott, USA, 2005

A review by Ian London, Royal Holloway, University of London, UK

In the transcendent finale to Ridley Scott's heroic tragedy *Gladiator*, death takes its now legendary protagonist Maximus from the Colosseum, that crude and modern arena of mass death, right up to the threshold of the afterlife, and then exquisitely beyond finally into Elysium, a romantic breathing painting of fierce skies and eerie endless Elysian fields. As an evocation of death and eternity, Maximus's vision is a rousing centre-piece for the reuniting of a recently separated mother and infant son with their loving father in perfect bliss. It is at once a dreadful and harmlessly eloquent place, for within its drama, Elysium haunts the main narrative as an incorruptible land of both the dead and of the living, wherein the ghosts of the frozen past interact joyously and rest harmoniously in eternal domesticity. Not subtle, perhaps, but in this conventional, sombre finale the film finds legitimate closure for a mainstream audience of multiplex teenagers and adults of both genders, and is moreover relatively easily translatable for any audience in the world. Maximus "was always going to appeal to men, he was always a great fighter," says theatrical script-doctor William Nicholson. After David Franzoni's first and John Logan's second draft of the screenplay, Nicholson introduced this hopeful perspective on life and death. He goes on: "But [with] *Gladiator*, fifty percent of its audience were women. What they saw onscreen was a man who is very, very strong, but very, very loving." In the aftermath of the epic-mythical slaying of Commodus, the proverbial cast-of-thousands picture becomes reducible to the kind of intimate moment which either enthrals us, or perhaps just as equally prompts us to turn up our noses.

In Scott's latest epic title of quality, the curiously languorous *Kingdom of Heaven* (co-financed by Fox, Scott Free Productions, and Spanish production company, Kanzaman S.A.), this dramatic effectiveness is blunted by a compendium of problems, not all of which can apparently be directly attributed to its makers. Although obviously *Kingdom of Heaven* fits in nicely with the production cycle of large-scale mythical-historical epics -- *Gladiator* still remains the most entirely satisfying, followed by *Troy* (2004), and the rather more uncomfortable *King Arthur* (2004) and *Alexander* (2005) -- it also follows in the rather more adventurous footsteps of pre-summer, comic-book openers like *The Mummy Returns* (2001), *Spider-Man* (2002), and *X2: X-Men United* (2004). Fox's decision to position its grand-scale epic for a May 6 Stateside opening remains its worst of the summer season, given its relatively routinised and successful approach to planning its other tentpole releases, *Star Wars Episode III*, *Mr & Mrs. Smith*, and *Fantastic Four*. The context in which *Kingdom of Heaven* was first received at the box office pretty much reflected the releasing studio's approach. Faced with a picture carrying an R-rating and a dwindling extra-filmic debate regarding the script's possible anti-Islamic stance, Fox reverted to essentially celebrating the coming-of-age of its main star, Orlando Bloom, and accommodated in its marketing the requisite action scenes necessary to attract its primary teenage male audience. Qualities such as these have been the cornerstone of the spectacular New Hollywood blockbuster for quite

some time, but their relative ineffectiveness and weak impact upon the prospective ticketbuying audience in the case of *Kingdom of Heaven* illustrates the extent to which this particular expected-summer-hit's domestic theatrical box-office concerns quickly became secondary to concerns of better foreign box-office -- a factor to which we shall return.

Any cinemagoers anticipating the controversy of a pro-Osama bin Laden picture pandering to Islamic fundamentalism (for such has been the hysterical claim) from the director of *Blade Runner* (1982), *Thelma & Louise* (1991) and the Bruckheimer production *Black Hawk Down* (2001), might be quietly unhinged by the classical utopian sentiment of *Kingdom of Heaven*. As an ambitious retread of a story that has been told countless times before, but with an elegance and beauty that colossal epics such as *Troy* and *Return of the King* (2003) have struggled to attain, Ridley Scott's tale of a brilliant blacksmith's quest to find a noble purpose in life similarly struggles to mix the epic myth of the lavish, big-budget blockbusters of the 1950s, such as *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and *Ben Hur* (1959) (and now most commonly associated with Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings*) with the personal heartbeat of a *Glory* (1989) or notably the director's own *Gladiator*.

Scott's propensity for casting well continues here, though major concessions are made, with the director bowing to the populist marquee draw of some, and the sheer theatrical decadence of others. Bloom is a pale shadow of the horribly tormented soul credibly portrayed by Russell Crowe in *Gladiator*. In his first lead role, as the young blacksmith Balian, the actor does at least demonstrate to all how a fairly moderate grounding in dramatics at the British American Drama Academy and the Guildhall School of Music & Drama can equip a fledgling actor with the necessary skills to keep his nose clean and rarely put a foot wrong in a production of this magnitude. Still, with Bloom's various unquestionable limitations in mind Scott might well have fared better by making some alterations to his script. By replacing the dead wife and infant son backstory which haunts his protagonist, crucially taking away all faith he has in humanity, with something more ideally suited to the young performer/star's persona, the transition of Balian from rough-hewn peasant bereft of faith to princely egalitarian leader may have been more satisfying. The emphasis placed early in the film on Liam Neeson's nobleman Godfrey of Ibelin is, by contrast, the very kind of sub-plot which makes for a credible fit with the Bloom persona (in fact, it nearly parallels the actor's own relationship with his biological father, whom he understood until he was thirteen to be a family friend), and its success instils in Balian a palatable authoritarian discipline which classically resurfaces later. By the time it does, however, the melancholic quest Bloom has pursued feels only partly dramatised, and the battles inexplicably condensed. His call in a series of "last stands" to the disillusioned fighters within Jerusalem's fortified walls to remain steadfast and to fight for a common cause is a rally expressed by a sophisticated and accomplished strategist, but Bloom does not so easily fit the bill.

Yet despite exhibiting -- whether indirectly, through film, or directly, through interview -- an infectious and sincere approach to creating "serious" art, Scott's all-too-blasé concessions in casting to help the film's playability (and to a lesser degree, in the case of Bloom, the film's marketability) results in a string of uneven performances. It is, disappointingly, Brendan Gleeson's Reynald of Chatillon, who is the weakest link in the film. Where Brian Cox's bubbling villain was a suitable counter-point to the excesses manufactured in last year's *Troy*, Gleeson's decision to emulate and heighten the absurdities of the foe whom he warred alongside in that film pepper this film's more levelheaded tone with a multiplex-friendly sense of rousing pantomime. Marton Csokas similarly positions his Knight Templar, Guy de Lusignan, as a scheming, sneering opponent, the very sort of loathsome morally bankrupt

individual whose dangerous lack of knowledge regarding the battlefield typically leads to the death of his followers. Scott's justification for this is standard filmmaker's dribble (one must make it an amusement-park-style attraction in order to maximise an audience), but such comments invite comparison with the admirable lengths to which the director goes to authenticate his own films, particularly at the levels of characterisation, production value, and plotline. (One has only to listen to a Ridley Scott DVD commentary to appreciate his unique high-level standards as a storyteller.) Two interesting conceptions are worthy of special note: Jeremy Irons's portrayal of Tiberias, aide to the Christian king, as a canny and complex politician; and Ghassan Massoud's Muslim king, Saladin, a man of comparable humanity and tolerance to Edward Norton's (unidentifiable, swaddled in bandages, but expressive nonetheless) Christian king of Jerusalem Baldwin IV. Reproducing exactly the white-skinned, regal beauty, as personified by Connie Nielsen in *Gladiator*, Eva Green is the film's affectionate woman-of-power, frustrated with her own limited lot in a traditional failing marriage, but conjuring an acceptable performance in a role that quickly tires.

What makes *Kingdom of Heaven* simultaneously work and nearly tragically fail, then, is its universal and oft-told drama of succession, blended together with Scott's branded archetypal narrative of spiritual transcendence. Perhaps at times overly prudent when it comes to his film's length (far from backbreaking), Scott's emphasis on his protagonist's quest for spiritual catharsis, and the age-old initiation rite that possesses him throughout, is disproportionate in scale to those final shortened coming-of-age battles which ultimately deliver Bloom into manhood, and hence, into the world of mythic idolatry. Bloom himself carries the tale adequately, but his transition is (unfashionably) quick and hurried. Because the wasted effort of war, and moreover the commonness of man on both sides of the divide, is so evidently at the forefront of Scott's thinking here, the final battle scenes depicting the siege of Jerusalem seem to cede almost their very unique largeness of scale to other Hollywood war pictures, notably the crowd-cheering, digital set-pieces of *Return of the King*, and *The Phantom Menace* (1999), with Scott's camera opting instead to only infrequently reproduce the grim business of hand-to-hand warfare. In one special memorable case, his camera even rises high above the battle itself until the image of a vague mass of men, locked in bloodless stalemate, is itself frozen completely, allowing the viewer a moment's poignant contemplation. Indeed, only in a film of such "upscale" prestige and munificent beauty can two of the most magnificent armies seen yet on a cinema screen gather on the battlefield, then decide almost instantly not to fight.

It may well be the case that the simultaneous failure and success across different theatrical markets of a super-epic is nothing new, but the startlingly poor domestic (\$47.3 million) and on-target overseas (\$163 million) box-office of *Kingdom of Heaven* encourages us to consider a notable characteristic of the film's text in any analysis, namely its distinctive mode of address, its very universality and reduction of narrative complexity -- in short, its oversimplification of the storytelling process. Watching *Kingdom of Heaven*, one finds one's self cynically proposing the idea that the film's makers have taken apart the very core ingredients of *Gladiator*, its superspectacular transnational environments, its pagan musical score composed by Hans Zimmer and Lisa Gerrard, even the basic fundamentals of its narrative structure, and reassembled it so that the text is easily saleable, importantly (in these days of heavy warmongering) also respectful of faiths and traditions, and instantly readily comprehensible in the context of a powerful cultural globalisation, enabling the film to be read across the eight main overseas markets, Germany, France, Spain, Japan, Great Britain, Mexico, Italy and Australia. *Kingdom of Heaven* is certainly one of Hollywood's most fashionably integrated and transnational of projects to emerge in the new century, perhaps its

most breathtakingly pragmatic and noble in its quest to identify the very best of the Christians and of the Muslims. In the end, the question of whether the film addresses a modern, secular American audience, or whether it actually has *no* intention of addressing them, given the general surge to overseas markets and the powerful, dependable status of the Hollywood blockbuster-as-event in "outside" nations (or alternatively, if the distributing company shifted its focus in response to early box-office data) is certainly an alluring one. *Kingdom of Heaven* goes further than most in casting predominantly non-US actors and avoiding storylines that might be deemed illegible in its concern for a rising internationalism in Hollywood's output.

A typical strategy of Scott's, increasingly more pertinent today as the director pursues further greater avenues of scale, is therefore to combine his particular brand of unique, big-scale visual-aural spectacle with a wide range of impact-centred characters, of the like already described. The strategy is devised seemingly to boost his project's commercial potential by appealing to distinct national audiences. Helping to boost the film's appeal outside the US, then, are the New Zealand born Csokas, British stalwarts David Thewlis, Neeson, Gleeson and Irons, the French-born Green, and (the totally unknown, although most significant) Syrian, Massoud. Intriguingly, while the film is allotted several key non-US actors in its bid to reach as many national theatres as possible, the attempt to simultaneously position the film domestically as well as internationally for thirty- and forty-something audiences by leaning almost entirely on these well-known names (Irons, Neeson, and rapidly Norton) has been immediately successful. "According to Fox's exit polling," observes the website boxofficemojo.com, the Stateside opening weekend "audience was 66 percent over the age of 25, and 52 percent male". From this data, we might infer the relative success of the film's positioning for the 25- to 34-year-old and 35-plus segments in its opening weekend (this would contest one marketer's remark that "adults don't feel that sense of urgency to see the film, they wait to see it later"), but crucially, the film lacks (and lacked) the good playability to maintain this very demographic pool throughout a steady run.

It is quickly also becoming the case that a substantial part of the appeal of Ridley Scott blockbusters lies precisely in the big-screen, big-focus dramatic arc etched out by his creative team for his newest central protagonist. Here, Scott utilises again the coming-of-age model, (one which we presume would be exceptionally well suited to the flowering Bloom but which finally proves only to be an uncomfortable, inflexible straightjacket with little or no give) precisely because it is so generic and overcommunicated, providing an audience with the means to relate this latest tale of righteous vengeance and merciful passion back to its earlier manifestation in other brand pictures. A not-entirely-shocking number of *Kingdom of Heaven's* set-pieces owe a considerable debt to *Gladiator*, the very kind of branded film which now connotes quality of taste and trustworthiness for its ticketbuying audience, so that buried within the oft-told central everyman-hero narrative are numerous successive nods to the overpowering sense of emotional feeling and spiritual promise which held that film so tightly together. Although *Kingdom of Heaven* conclusively offers an upbeat alternative to *Gladiator's* tragic-emotional death scene, it nevertheless appropriates a near-identical plotline, and conveys identical themes and emotions from the same film's producers, creating a quite literal advertising cliché ("from the storytellers of *Gladiator*") when it comes to addressing the so-called "accumulative preference" of consumers.

In the aftermath of *Gladiator*, Scott has been working his way through the genre minefield with the expensive mainstream projects *Hannibal* (2001), *Black Hawk Down*, and *Matchstick Men* (2003), but with this new digital special-effects extravaganza, it is also clear he has been working further into troubling territory. Busy circling new opportunities and devouring new

ways and methods for creating visual-aural specialness, the director seems by all accounts quietly confident that his strategy for reproducing and regenerating the branded narrative will lessen the charges of routinisation and standardisation-at-the-expense-of-narrative, commonly levelled against him. A veritable magnet for character-actors and playful stars, Scott surrounds himself again in *Kingdom of Heaven* with rugged and gorgeous and talented players, the implication being that they can shift the focus from the conventions of the branded classical narrative structure onto something a little more weighty and by extension intellectually stimulating. When Scott revealed to actor Edward Norton his initial intention to "get a guy with a really good James Mason-like voice" to perform in the role of the unseen, unknowable (and uncredited) King Baldwin, Norton assured the director that he could articulately reproduce the voice convincingly in his narration and was given the role. Though it is dangerous to oversimplify the decision-making processes involved here regarding character realisation in such a high-profile picture based on remarks made in interview, which can sometimes be made as much as a year after production, one might infer from Norton's comments that a performance itself can be partly or entirely commercially motivated.

Just as star Brendan Gleeson's turn as the lascivious Reynald of Chatillon may be deemed melodramatically excessive, so too does the final expression of the Baldwin character become both a talking point, and beyond that, a bankable, marketable element implemented for commercial use -- exemplified later (in interview) by Norton's comment regarding his character's late appearance in the film: "there's this anticipation, this big mystery about him." The film is hence burdened in its gap moments by a range of caricatures (most notably, Steven Robertson's Angelic Priest), so that ultimately it provides little perspective on the Crusades, instead providing the very kind of pantomime econo-aesthetic that is essential to good worldwide positioning; as the film's history adviser, Islamic historian Hamid Dabashi, reflects: "It revisits the Crusades as a means of revealing a common humanity." Arguably this has been the program in Hollywood for decades, but again, the film can be seen to appeal to the concept of cultural homogeneity/integration. Here, the usual interchangeable negative stereotypes are implemented to throw into sharp relief those identification figures with a clear nobility of purpose.

Amid the quasi-religious window-dressing, Scott layers his picture with familiar value-loaded images from other movies: thus a moment of *Gladiator* finds its way into the film when Gleeson's Reynald happens upon Giannina Facio (Saladin's sister) in a wheat field; similarly, Scott introduces the divine *Vide Cor Meum* during Baldwin's funeral to those who weren't treated to its beauty in *Hannibal*. In the end, with studio executives no longer quite as reticent as they were before *Lord of the Rings* to greenlight epic pictures whose running times are longer than the average feature (though not quite attaining the heights of the 1950s and early 1960s: *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) for instance ran for 216 minutes, *Exodus* (1960) for 213 minutes, *Ben-Hur* for 212 minutes, and *The Ten Commandments* for 220 minutes), it's a disappointment that *Kingdom of Heaven* should feel so self-conscious about its own literal size, to say nothing of its concern for its global audience.

Memento

Dir: Christopher Nolan, USA, 2001
Switching

Switching

Dir: Morten Schøjdt, Denmark, 2003

A review by Siobhan O'Flynn, University of Toronto at Mississauga, Canada

Christopher Nolan's neo-noir thriller, *Memento*, has generated polarized responses: fans who love the challenge of grappling with the puzzle of the film's fragmented structure and those who are turned off by either the frustration of the effort required to piece the story together, or a dissatisfaction with the story that is or is not eventually recovered. Within new media studies, *Memento*'s non-linear structure has received a flutter of comments because, in Jon Dovey's words, the film is an example of what he has suggested is "a narrative structure that might respond to a spatial analysis....[as] a film that is of *the cultural moment* of hypertext". Dovey's comment, offered in "Notes Towards a Hypertextual Theory of Narrative" (2002), is predicated on the opposition of film as a passive medium set against the active, immersive, involvement of the interactive piece. What he does not pursue in depth is an exploration of the spatial, interactive experience of this "passive" film that occurs in the viewer's active decipherment of the film. Paradoxically, the lessons gained from a "spatial analysis" of the film occur despite *Memento*'s supposedly "passive" medium. Watching *Memento* can be highly interactive, and the more adept the viewer is at maintaining multiple story lines, the more involved in the story recreation, the more satisfying the experience can be. As such, the film can in fact model an alternative focus to the current, reductive approach to narrative in new media studies and a key insight into the authoring challenges of writing narratives for new media works.

For the filmmaker working in new media, interactive movies are the Holy Grail, where interactivity is at once the gimmick with the potential to lure curious users, and the potential cause of the alienation of those users. Easy to imagine, interactive cinema suggests the combination of the gut-wrenching, emotion twisting, edge-of-your-seat power of cinema with the addictive thrill of action/reaction found within games. What could be better? We get a story and we get to play with it: "You choose what will happen next!" Or, as the recent X-Box game, *Fable*, announces: "For every choice, a consequence." The idea of combining the attractions of film and game is clearly heard in *Interactive Storytelling: Techniques for the Twenty-First Century* (2004), the new how-to work by interactive screenwriter and theorizer, Andrew Glassner, in his call to new medium creators: "In our quest to develop a new medium, I believe we should aspire to something that is capable of deep human expression....I am excited by the idea that we can develop a new form of expression that is

capable of not just entertainment but depth". Why then, haven't interactive movies become as ubiquitous as cell-phones? The challenge for creators of interactive movies is how to overcome the inherently disruptive act of interactivity, of shifting from one story line to another. In giving up control of the plot, the interactive filmmaker must relax the control of the disclosure of information necessary for traditional plots. The absence of a tightly controlled structure presents the creator with the problem of how to construct a narrative that can generate the same (or similar) effects of the traditional plot (drama, suspense, conflict, climax, and character arc, to name a few) when the sequence of the telling is constantly disrupted. If we follow a story that no longer adheres to a linear, author-driven sequence, we risk losing the impact or suspense of the masterfully plotted thriller or melodrama or comedy.

The emphasis on an Aristotelian notion of the function of story and plot established what has been a long-standing opposition of narrative and database within new media criticism and practice. Lev Manovich declared, in an oft-quoted statement from *The Language of New Media* (2001), that:

As a cultural form, database represents the world as a list of items and it refuses to order this list. In contrast, a narrative creates a cause-and-effect trajectory of seemingly unordered items (events). Therefore, database and narrative are natural enemies. Competing for the same territory of human culture, each claims an exclusive right to make meaning out of the world.

Manovich's distinction between database and narrative defines narrative as a sequence of events held together by a discernable sense of causal relationships thereby generating an understanding of consequence and meaning. This definition has remained consistent in most critical examinations of the problem of narrative in new media, wherein "narrative" and "story" are used interchangeably. Yet the Aristotelian distinction between story as the chronological sequence that can be reconstructed from the plot and plot as the often non-chronological sequence of events found in the telling, does nothing to resolve the problem of interactivity, and in fact places the focus of attention on the wrong element. Creators are faced with a vista of either random, user-generated, causally unconnected plotting or the nightmare of endless branching vistas of obsessively plotted multi-stream stories.

The major stumbling block for creators of interactive works has been working with the two central elements of story and plot, and story has been the focus of much recent critical writing on narrative and new media. The paradox of this new medium is, however, that while the technology is constantly improving, amazing graphics, mobility within a virtual space, interaction with beautiful graphics and a fully realized virtual world are potentially meaningless without a good story. However, the contemporary critical focus on story, or as it is often phrased, narrative in new media, will never adequately overcome the problem of interactivity disrupting the "story" because of the reductive approach to story adapted consistently via the same ur-texts of literary theory. When new media theorists or creators turn to literature as an old media modeling a "passive" textual experience, almost universally, discussions focus on the Aristotelian opposition of story and plot. What has been left out are discussions of the non-traditional novel, of the function of language, style, and the poetics of metaphor, symbolism, etc.

Memento's noir story and cast of characters are entirely conventional. A man, Leonard Shelby (Guy Pierce) seeks revenge for the rape/murder of his wife (Jorja Fox), only to find himself duped by the corrupt cop (Joe Pantoliano) and the femme fatale (Carrie Ann Moss). Even the

dual function of the protagonist as the detective/criminal, which the audience is confronted with in the opening sequence, is as old as *Oedipus Rex*. Nolan's innovations within the genre are the "condition" of his protagonist who is unable to create short-term memories and the disruptive structure of the film that replicates Leonard's fragmented experience of time and the world for the viewer. Even Leonard's condition is arguably a new twist on Oedipus' fatal flaw of ignorance. The structure, however, has received critical praise, and Nolan received an Oscar nomination for best original screenplay. The film disrupts chronological time by intercutting multiple time lines and possible-alternate story lines. The first, "Z" to "M" backward time-line is established in the opening sequence and Nolan makes this story line instantly recognizable by shooting it in colour. This sequence starts chronologically after the key violent encounter that opens the film and Leonard's significant change into a tailored suit. The colour sequence further functions as Leonard's "external" journeying through a benighted urban landscape of diners, bars, abandoned buildings, and various motel rooms. The second, b/w sequence, moves from "A" to "M" in a forward moving time-line that is intercut with the colour sequence. In this claustrophobic, increasingly paranoid sequence, Leonard, in his original "grunge" clothes, sits in a motel room, surrounded by the maps, polaroids, notes, and tattooing equipment, he "scripts" his world from. The reconstructed "A" to "Z" story which the viewer reassembles from the disruptive shifting between seemingly distinct yet connected stories, is complicated by suggestions of contradictory details that destabilize the "truth" of Leonard's limited perspective. One such instance is the story of Sammy Jenkis, a man with a mirror condition to Leonard's. This story is embedded in the b/w sequence as a story that Leonard tells repeatedly in order to explain his own "condition." Yet as cinephiles will know, Nolan destabilizes the "truth" value of this story with a subliminal superimposition of Leonard's face on that of the bug-housed Sammy, suggesting that Sammy's story is Leonard's own. This fleeting vision, more readily accessible on the DVD, leads to the unhinging conclusion that Leonard's "story" and the action of the film may exist only within his mind.

Despite its traditional format, *Memento* has earned a level of cachet in discussions on how to theorize interactive cinema because of its fragmented, dislocating structure. By rights, the film's constant disruptions of the story line(s) should alienate viewers, and in fact, it often does. For some viewers, however, the experience is arguably more immersive because the engagement with solving the puzzle demands that the viewer maintain three or more separate and interconnected story lines simultaneously. What the viewer assembles is a spatial mobile of suspended story fragments that intersect and alter each other through the course of the viewing. Dovey's emphasis is on the viewer's "contemplation [of] the static reality of a number of events that have already occurred and then to try and make sense of them". The focus here is on the reconstruction of the static "story" from the fragmented plot. This Aristotelian approach to "story" is pervasive in writings on narrative in new media.

Memento's structural challenge is also no innovation. Literary works such as Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines*, Annie Dillard's *For the Time Being*, and V.S. Naipaul's *A Way in the World* all present fragmented narratives constructed of intersecting story lines and/or thematic threads that challenge the reader to create a sense of a unified whole, in answer to the question, how do all these discrete and seemingly different fragments relate? In the viewing experience of the film, however, a viewer is forced to consider not just the story or narrative but the question of how meaning is generated on various levels that can exist independent of the linear story, more usefully thought of as *narrativity*. When the access to or comprehension of an horizontal, chronological story line is complicated or blocked by the fragmented work (traditional or interactive), the reader/user is forced back to a consideration of what Dovey and many others have termed the vertical axis of narrative that is concerned

with the generation of meaning at the level of theme, symbol and metaphor. From the standpoint of the creator, all of these devices are again as old as storytelling itself, as much a part of Beowulf's "word hoard" as the epithets, similes, metaphors, and ritual set pieces that formed the "database" of the epic poet.

Within the disrupted text, the reader/user engages with the text/world hunting for patterns, echoes, repetitions and inversions, much like Leonard Shelby, all of which function to create associative links between otherwise distinct fragments or episodes. Contrary to Dovey's assertion that *Memento* "invites us to contemplate the static reality of a number of events that have already occurred," Nolan's film offers not a contemplation of static elements but of narrative fragments that are dynamic, mutually affecting and unstable in terms of the meaning attached to each. This understanding of the interrelation of story and narrativity also counters a long-standing opposition within new media theorizing.

Morten Schjødt's interactive feature film, *Switching*, winner of The Cyberloup-IPL New Media Award 2003, also challenges the user to reconstruct a story from a fragmented narrative. In this made-for-DVD work, the viewer/user can "switch" from moment to moment by hitting the "enter" button. The film is designed to suggest an intuitive "switch" window in moments where characters become introspective. Schjødt's decision to use the cinematic moment in which a character turns from external interaction to internal contemplation as the "natural" moment to switch nicely integrates the content with the interface technology, while also suggesting an implicit belief in moments of narrative closure in which we will naturally be ready to move on. However, the DVD allows the user to "switch" at any moment; the user decides when to "end" the experience. The switching experience itself allows the user to move chronologically through short temporal sequences that move forward, then loop back and then move forward again with variations. Some sequences are highly realistic, others hallucinatory, and reactions to the piece read it variously as one story with variations, or multiple parallel story lines with minor differences. Either way, because the sense of temporal relation and causality is unhinged, particularly by the combination of realistic scenes with hallucinatory ones, the question of narrativity resurfaces in terms of what other elements can generate meaning within but especially across fragments.

The story, however, is again entirely traditional. We follow a Danish couple, Frida (Laura Drasbæk) and Simon (Rasmus Botoft) in encounters before and after their break-up. The cast of characters include Frida's sister, Anna (Kaya Brüel), who has designs on Simon, and an oddly knowing waitress (Lærke Winther Andersen) who works in the café all the characters habituate, and who is also interested in the rejected and downcast Simon. The wolfish Patrick (Johan Widerberg), a Swedish DJ in the café, introduces further sexual tension, as he too becomes involved with Anna. Nationalist tensions are also raised in a scene at the urinals in which Patrick derides the size of Simon's "little cock". Clearly, Patrick's self-satisfaction has as much to do with a sense of Swedish superiority over the Danish Patrick as with the relative size of their organs.

The film "begins" in the conventional sense of having a clearly articulated beginning, with a fade-in to the POV of Frida, driving through an underground, fluorescent lit tunnel in the title sequence. The film then alternately cuts to a close-up of Frida washing her face in the café washroom or Frida waking up in the daylight looking for Simon who then brings a cup of undrinkable coffee, or Frida waking up at night with Simon beside her. Other scenes are also presumably possible "beginnings," but these seem to be the common "start" scenes. The website for the film describes the relationship of these two waking scenes as a "vicious circle

in which they [Frida and Simon] are trapped." In an optimal user experience, the user "switches" in an anti-linear way through various moments of the chronological "story," building a reasonably coherent sense of the spatial story outside of the iteration itself. As with *Memento*, the user then builds a spatial cognitive mobile of suspended story fragments that interact and reconnect with each additional story fragment. In extended viewings, the film's disrupted chronology plays with our sense of relationships as functioning simultaneously within and without time. Memories return and invade the present, the future is disrupted by the past. As Simon tells Frida, "Time is relative. It's always related to before and after." Further, the notion of time as a constrictive force, as the cycle of suffering, death and rebirth or *samsara* is introduced in Frida's gift of *The Buddhist Bible* to Simon after their break-up. The idea of *samsara* emphasizes the interactive experience as a "vicious circle" without an ending.

The interactivity can be intriguing, particularly with certain scenes that seem to remain unexplained within the overall trajectory of the film: a hallucinatory bug experience of Frida's in the woods; and a waitress who serves coffees then begins to strip. The film seems, however, to not use fully its potential for narrativity in the way that recurrent details, like bugs, washing, and showering echo across fragments but don't seem to resolve into any more meaningful, or insightful relationship to the story. This gap may simply be an obfuscating directorial choice in the same territory as David Lynch's hallucinatory, meaning-resistant films. "Switching" can also trap the film in increasingly constricted loops so that one is forced to watch sequences over and over in decreasing units of time until through some seeming haphazard stroke of luck, the film releases the viewer and switches into a new sequence. Another dissatisfaction arises from the DVD's scene selection function. Here, as on a standard DVD, the user can choose to watch the story scene by scene. Unfortunately, this option can also reveal scenes which the user missed in the creation of his or her narrative. This "reveal" can leave the user in the ticked-off position of being made aware that she or he has missed potentially crucial scenes and/or sequences.

These structural "bugs" can seriously disrupt the user's immersion in the film and unfortunately, whatever spatial model of the narrative the user has created up until that point can get metaphorically jettisoned with the shift to frustrated compulsive pressing on the "enter" key. This is a serious flaw that presumably interactive filmmakers want to avoid. When *Switching* works, the experience can be as immersive as viewing *Memento*. At its worst, I'd stick with the more "passive," traditional, director-controlled form of *Memento* any day of the week.

The Hand

Dir: Wong Kar-wai, Hong Kong, 2004

A review by Nicholas Y.B. Wong, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

When Hong Kong director Wong Kar-wai was approached by Michelangelo Antonioni in 2001, the Italian director was almost ninety years old and was physically unfit to finish a feature film by himself. This led to the collaboration of Wong Kar-wai, Steven Soderbergh and Michelangelo Antonioni on the production of *Eros*, which was first shown at the Venice International Film Festival in September 2004. Wong Kar-wai has successfully gained a footing in the international cinema with the release of *Days of Being Wild* (1990), *Chungking Express* (1994), *Happy Together* (1997) *In the Mood for Love* (2000) and *2046* (2004). While the world is crazy for kung-fu movies produced by the Hong Kong cinema, Wong Kar-wai has prominently established himself as an avant-garde director famous and notorious for shooting a movie "scriptlessly". The storyline only comes out in the editing room during the post-production stage. This directing style enables him to playfully manipulate time and space in most of his works.

The Hand is the most readable and watchable among the three short films in *Eros*. Soderbergh and Antonioni seem to be drowned in their obsession with bringing out the form of the movies. Both are unable to untrap themselves from their deliberate attempts to situate psychoanalysis and the Romantic/romance pair as the backbone of their films. Their plots become very weak, if not vague. However, Wong Kar-wai's message in *The Hand* is very straightforward. It is all about touching. It touches the hearts of the audience by telling a simple love story between a tailor (Cheng Chen) and a call girl (Gong Li) and their hands.

During the making of *2046*, the whole production crew was affected by the SARS outbreak. This postponed the shooting for quite a while. Every Hongkonger at that time washed their hands as frequently as possible, and there were government advertisements on TV reminding people to avoid touching others with their bare hands. The diseased social context of Hong Kong sparked off a brilliant short movie project.

Interestingly enough, *The Hand* is the first movie of Wong Kar-wai with a dying character. The call girl, Mrs. Hua, contracts tuberculosis by the end of the movie, and her death puts a melancholic but romantic full-stop to her affair with the tailor, Zhang. Usually, failed romances are represented in his earlier works as a result of communication breakdown, urban solitude and wrong timing. In *The Hand*, audiences are delighted to see something new.

If one is not satisfied with the limited aura of Cheng Chen and Gong Li in *2046*, *The Hand* is definitely a film they should turn to. Cheng Chen has always been the director's second favourite actor (of course, Tony Leung Chiu-wai is always at the top of his list). Cheng appeared in *Happy Together* and *2046*, but not as the male lead. In *The Hand*, he impresses the audience by playing a verbally limited tailor who secretly admires Mrs. Hua from the moment he starts his apprenticeship. When Mrs. Hua masturbates for him on their first

encounter, Cheng successfully plays a submissive virgin bewildered by the unexpected sexual offer. On the one hand, he is trying to pull back from the immoral act; on the other hand, he is also waiting for Mrs. Hua's hand to lead him into adulthood. As for Gong Li, if the audience is fed up with her being cast as a typical peasant girl in Zhang Yi-mou's films, we should be surprised by her flirtatious role this time as a call girl. Mrs. Hua never settles on any relationships. She fascinates her tailor's apprentice by offering him a "hand job" in her room. She is sexually inquisitive and repeatedly draws the centre of the male gaze. Mrs. Hua is deprived of financial security, and she always turns to her clients for a stable and well-founded anchor. She starts appearing as a call girl who serves the middle-class businessmen in Hong Kong, but ends by being a cheap prostitute who needs to go outdoors to hunt for her prey. It is the first time Gong Li has taken such an adventurous role and she manages to remind both the director and the audience not to typecast her, and that she can handle a role that the public thinks should belong to Zhang Zi-yi. The performance of both the male and female leads are impressive and also landmarks of their acting career. One cannot wait to see their further acting in Taiwan director Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Three Times* and Rob Marshall's *The Memoirs of a Geisha*.

The Hand is not a love story about human beings, but "hand beings". Wong Kar-wai has seldom pinned down the theme of his movies onto one single object. In *Days of Being Wild*, *Ashes of Time* (1994) and *2046*, the director manifests in relation to the urban space the human alienation within the cast of six to eight characters in the story. Audiences could find the films hard to digest and understand. This is also why they received disappointing box office in Hong Kong where the people are used to the commercial local and Hollywood cinemas. As I mentioned earlier, *The Hand* is about touching, and logically the hands of the characters should be paid a predominantly large amount of attention. The success of placing the theme onto the hands also contributes to the intactness and effectiveness of the plot when compared to Soderbergh's and Antonioni's. In Wong's short film, we see the characters constrained by communicative dialogues. Mrs. Hua never contacts Zhang directly when she wants the tailor to do some fitting for her. She instead calls the senior tailor and let him pass on the message. When Zhang visits Mrs. Hua at her flat, the call girl never answers the door herself. Her servant does so. In some scenes, Mrs. Hua is still flirting on the phone with her clients in the tailor's presence. The only substantial exchange of dialogue appears in the second half of the short film when Mrs. Hua calls again to ask for Zhang. (At this time, she has already moved into a run-down room in Palace Hotel, a cheap inn in Hong Kong on hourly rent for people to have quick sex.) Mrs. Hua tells the tailor that she needs a new dress because she has an important (and wealthy) client returning from overseas. She also reveals her desperate hope for a man, but she never finds one. The dialogue is full of flirtations and hidden sexual agenda. It is the longest scene where the two characters are talking to each other. When verbal communication is so ineffective, their hands simply take over the role.

The short film starts with a scene that appears again later. Mrs. Hua is dying of tuberculosis and Zhang pays his last visit. An off-screen voice of Mrs. Hua can be heard, asking the tailor if he remembers her hand, and the first time they met. This moment is important because it marks the entry to adulthood of the tailor, who knows very well that she is not going to fall in love with him because of his low social status. He can only possibly fall in love with her hand. The tailor even confesses that her hand is the reason why he stays in the business. In this case, the hand becomes the projection of the human. The only possible way Zhang can touch her is when he is doing the fitting for her. In the reunion scene, the tailor gives up using a soft meter to measure her body, but with his own hands. This particular social context legitimizes the hand to take over the persona to attain the lost object of affection. The ending

of the short film gives a complete round-up for the theme. Mrs. Hua is at a critical condition with her disease and in order to thank the tailor for his unconditional devotion, she claims that she has nothing to return but her hands. She then masturbates for him, again. In this scene, the tailor cannot restrain his desire anymore. He attempts to kiss her on her lips, but she covers her mouth with her other hand because the disease is contagious. He therefore kisses her hand. The basic reading of the film is that it is a romance between a tailor and a call girl. To be more exact, one should see it as a story of a male hand loving a female one. It is, in other words, a story about the fetish, the hand.

Another element in the short film that contributes to its success is the director's playfulness. Many of Wong's films are intertextual. Characters in one film may appear in others. In *The Hand*, we have virtually brand new characters, Zhang and Mrs. Hua, yet they both share some traces of Chow Mo-wan and So Lai-chen in *In the Mood for Love* and *2046*. Chow Mo-wan appears in *2046* with a moustache in order to signify to the audience that the new one is sexually liberating and more flirtatious than the one in *In the Mood for Love*. Gong Li plays a role called Black Pearl in *2046*, who helps Chow win back all the money he has lost on gambling. She always wears a black glove on the left hand and later she reveals her true name, which is also So Lai-chen. The same glove can be seen again in *The Hand* when Zhang puts his tailor-made new dress into a paper bag (together with a handbag and a glove) at his tailor's desk. The setting of *In the Mood for Love*, *2046* and *The Hand* is Hong Kong in its 1960s. The three films also share the director's obsession with hotel rooms. In *In the Mood of Love*, Chow Mo-wan and So Lai-chen seek shelter in a hotel room (room 2046) to continue their affair and it is in the room they start to write together. The room 2046 gives rise to another movie title, which also becomes a temporal and spatial marker. In *2046*, the writing process of Chow Mo-wan also takes place in the room 2047 and he falls in love with the woman in the next room, 2046. His writing forms a meta-narrative in the movie. There is no room 2046 or 2047 in *The Hand*, nor is writing the theme. Yet the room in Palace Hotel where Mrs. Hua finally stays in her remaining days also demonstrates the director's unexplainable choice of shooting location.

After directing *In the Mood of Love*, Wong Kar-wai trapped himself in the dimension of 1960s' Hong Kong. Even his long time cinematographer Christopher Doyle admitted that there was no need for a production such as *2046*. In this sense, *2046* seems to be made in order to quench the director's own desire. In *The Hand*, though the setting and personas are not new to the audience anymore, Wong Kar-wai represented a human's hand in a way never found in the world cinema before. The intact, solid, effective and readable plot also makes the short film the best in *Eros*. After watching it, we should all be looking forward to his next project, in collaboration with Nicole Kidman.