Shopping for Fangs

Dir: Quentin Lee and Justin Lin, USA, 1997

A review by Luca Prono, Bologna, Italy

Marketed as a manifesto on "GenerAsian X" and representative of a new generation of Asian American film-makers, *Shopping for Fangs*successfully adds a new dimension to the theme of the quest for a hyphenated identity. Most of the characters in the film are apparently completely assimilated to the American ways and do not explicitly brood over the possible clash between their Asian cultural heritage and their present Americanized life-styles. Yet, as the film progresses, it becomes clear that its central characters are living in a phase of transition between different identities. As Edward O'Neill has pointed out, the film itself mirrors self-reflexively this transition in its narrative, one that borrows liberally from such diverse genres as horror, melodrama, thriller and martial arts. Its situations and characters derive from a wide assortment of film icons ranging from John Woo and Quentin Tarantino to Alfred Hitchcock and Brian De Palma, from Kim Novak to Marilyn Monroe. Therefore, *Shopping for Fangs*affirms a typically post-modern mode of identity, one that "celebrates the picaresque possibilities of inventing and changing identities, of being different from oneself, of assuming other people's lives and living them as theatrical experience."

Set in Los Angeles, the film follows the three parallel, and, for some brief moments, interlocking narratives of Trinh, a lesbian waitress who constantly wears a blond wig and sunglasses, Katherine, an unhappy wife suffering from periods of blackouts and Phil, a lonely accountant working for the corporation of Katherine's husband. During one of her blackouts, Katherine loses her mobile phone and her wallet. Trinh picks them up and develops an obsession with Katherine. She talks about Katherine to her fellow waitresses as her girlfriend and even asks one of the regular customers of the café, a gay photographer from Taiwan, to take pictures of her to send to Katherine. In turn, Katherine becomes intrigued with Trinh and decides to find her. This decision will of course cause problems with Katherine's husband which will lead to a dramatic confrontation between him and Trinh. This first storyline, shot by Lee, is complemented by that of Phil, directed by Lin. Just when he had managed to get a date with a beautiful female colleague, Phil discovers that his hair is growing at an excessive speed and this, coupled with a ravenous appetite for meat, convinces him that he is turning into a werewolf. Phil's and Katherine's stories will intersect at the end of the movie as the two characters join forces in their effort to escape from their ordinary and alienated existences.

Quentin Lee, whose previous work *To Ride a Cow*(1991) has earned him the nickname of "queer video bad boy" for its graphic scenes of frontal nudity, uses the concept of universality both to define the label of GenerAsian X, with which the film and its characters are clearly concerned, as well as for his appeal to the audiences on how they should read *Shopping for Fangs*. According to Lee, GenerAsian X, the current generation of twentysomething Asian Americans has "the broadest point of connection" with the American mainstream: "We still have our differences, we still have a little bit of what you call cultural roots, but we can connect to the general mainstream society and that's what we should be doing." As for audiences, "they should see Asian American films as universal, only the people who solve the

problems just happen to be Asian American." Werner Sollors has identified two opposite poles that structure ethnic narratives: descent and consent. According to Sollors, "descent" represents "relations of 'substance' (by blood or nature)" which emphasize "our position as heirs, our hereditary qualities, liabilities, and entitlements," while consent relations stress our abilities to act according to our will and wishes and choose the type of life we want independently from the demands of (ethnic) tradition and heritage. Both in the interviews quoted above and in *Shopping for Fangs*, Lee seems to be emphasizing the pole of consent relations, while downplaying that of descent relations reduced to a rather vague "a little bit of cultural roots." Yet, it would be wrong to assume that the film neglects completely a confrontation between the two poles. While Edward O'Neill may be correct when he states that in *Shopping for Fangs*there is "a pleasant lack of wailing and gnashing teeth about Old World vs. New, tradition vs. assimilation," his claim has to be completed and complemented by stressing that the film has a stronger sense of its characters' past and the burden it represents for them than it may seem at first. For example, in an intense and moving scene, the apparently fully assimilated Katherine recollects under hypnosis her traumatic escape from Saigon to Bangkok and the murder of her brother that took place while they were on the boat. The recollection of the trauma and the implication that Katherine's blackouts are due to this repressed incident has the function of turning the character from a fully Americanized housewife into a Just-Off-the-Boat refugee. In addition, while the movie never shows the usual family reunions, or, to use Gregg Araki's expression "families eating rice," so common in traditional Asian-American films, the different characters often hint at their parents' likely objection to their Americanized life-style.

A critic who tried to assess *Shopping for Fangs*through what Lester Friedman has disparagingly identified as the twin goals of most criticism on ethnicity and American cinema, "the search for realism and the reliance on realism," would be at a loss. Lee's and Lin's film self-consciously espouses a view of identities, whether ethnic or sexual, as symbolic and hybrid constructions, as performances. Such a view, as Lee points out, is deeply influenced by a playful and non-essentialist sensibility typical of a post-modern outlook: "the problem of this era is that we tend to see people in boxes. You're lesbian, and I am white and heterosexual and he's black … all these identities have become essential and stifling … With *Fangs*we wanted to liberate these identities and ideas and put them back in play. Let's have some fun!" Tellingly, the story of Trinh and Katherine takes place for its most part in the urban landscape of San Gabriel Valley, a space that, according to Lee, "combines transplant Asian culture with California culture" and "is the metaphor for the present subjectivity of Asian-Americans, a post-modern vision comfortably juxtaposing bits of 'Asian' and 'Western' culture in a montage."

From its very title, *Shopping for Fangs* points to consumption and to cinematic fictions as ways of acquiring identity. As Vivian Sobchack has remarked, "we exist at a moment when identity, memory, and history are recognized as mediated and media productions - constructed and consumable images available for countless acts of recombination, revision, and recycling." The film clearly illustrates this point as it uses cinematic characters such as werewolves and star images such as Marilyn Monroe and Kim Novak to fill the identities of its characters. The fact that we find a Marilyn Monroe look-alike involved in a quasi-*Vertigo* plot and a John Woo-like finale paralleled by a werewolf story characterizes *Shopping for Fangs*as one of those "countless acts of recombination, revision, and recycling" that Sobchack finds representative of our contemporary imagination. The film illustrates the mutual transitions between ethnic and mainstream cultures and how the two can successfully blend. Sobchack has claimed that "all those visible markers that once separated the cultures

of ethnic descent from the 'American' culture of consent, that signaled the boundaries of otherness and gave it ethnic identity, integrity and authenticity, are detached from their original historical roots and have become 'floating signifiers' available for purchase by anyone." Sobchack's language of consumption is particularly fitting for the film's title and yet *Shopping for Fangs* also complements such a claim by showing that it isn't only the ethnic markers that have become available for purchase by anyone, but also those very markers of the mainstream culture that seemed to marginalize members of ethnic groups. As O'Neill claims, the dependence of the film on an incredible range of other cinematic texts functions "to index a generalized 'movieness', a glamour and appeal which *Shopping for Fangs*wants to bring to Asian American characters." Through this appropriation of different generic modes the films also signals "the absence of Asian characters from those genres" and combines a political and an aesthetic stance in its "gesture of simultaneous participation and refusal of participation in a genre."

Coherently, the film's ending presents yet more transitions, both at the level of the characters' identities and narrative genres. Trinh gets rid of her blond wig and sunglasses which are then taken and worn by her gay Taiwanese friend. Katherine leaves her husband and, while she is driving away from him, picks up along the way a clean-shaven Phil, adding yet another genre, the road movie, to the film's generic pastiche. Their exchange makes clear the film's rejection of any narrative closure and its affirmation of rootlessness for its characters. "Where are you going?" asks Katherine. "Anywhere," Phil replies. "It's the same place where I am going," concludes Katherine.

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Kurtlar Vadisi – Irak

Dir: Serdar Akar, Turkey, 2005
National Treasure

National Treasure

Dir: Jon Turtletaub, USA, 2004

A review by Gabriel Noah Brahm Jr., Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey

In his book about globalization, *Being America: Liberty, Commerce and Violence in an American World*, the essayist boy-wonder of Harvard and Yale, via rural West Virginia, Jedediah Purdy, incisively, if a touch naively (ah, but that's us…), encapsulates Americans as "migrants, merchants, and amnesiacs" (2003: 62). While this laconic parataxis leaves a lot out -- including occupiers, revolutionaries, technocrats, humanitarians and couch potatoes -- two recent films, one from Hollywood and one straight outta the Near East (made in Turkey but set in Iraq), illustrate and elaborate these roles in different but intimately related (one could almost say "dialectical") ways. In so doing, they simultaneously expose while suturing some of the contradictions, stresses and tears crisscrossing US-American identity narratives today. In the Turk flick I discuss, which has been compared to a kind of "Muslim *Rambo* for our times," *Kurtlar Vadisi*, *Irak* (Valley of the Wolves, Iraq) we're the bad guys. Yep. But don't let that worry you. In the Hollywood movie, we're still just silly. In both of these derivative, stupid, expensive spectacles, what viewers see most of all are symptoms of a wealthy and powerful nation in moral and political decline, even as its commercial and military influence spreads. Why pay attention to either of these forgettable moron-machines? That's why. And this is why. [1]

***National Treasure*: Forgetting Amnesia**

For a bad case of "amnesia" compounded by fake "recovered memories" -- knowing you've forgotten something, though not sure what it could be, made worse by looking in the wrong places for the wrong sorts of things, until someone convinces you that you've finally "found" what it's not -- Jon Turtletaub's *National Treasure* (2004) is tough to beat. It shows us "America the Forgetful" -- a nation nearly hollowed-out by technology and over consumption, in frantic search of a misplaced past to cling to. No future in sight at the "end of history" (Fukuyama 1992), we go back to the beginning in search of what Hannah Arendt once spoke of metaphorically as the "lost treasure" of the American revolution (Arendt 1964), here made over into the form of actual lost loot, sunken treasure, pirate booty. "Honey! Where are my car keys! And I can't seem to find the reason we call this place a ‘democracy,' either. Have you seen my political freedom? I know I had it yesterday…let's see, what was I wearing?" "Must be in your other jacket, dear. Where did you see it last?"

What the political philosopher, Hannah Arendt, once called movingly, if elegiacally and maybe nostalgically -- but anyway, figuratively -- the "lost treasure" of revolutionary *spirit*, reappears in this recent film as -- guess what? -- lost *treasure*. What she saw as the stolen -- or maybe just discarded -- legacy of many modern struggles for self-government, not just in America but around the world, is here directly condensed-and-displaced by Hollywood magic into something more tangible (and simpler to recover). Indeed, it seems as if the political theorist herself might almost have given the pitch for this screwball action adventure pic, when she wrote, "The history of revolutions -- from the summer of 1776 in Philadelphia and the summer of 1789 in Paris to the autumn of 1956 in Budapest, which politically spells out the innermost story of the modern age -- could be told in parable form as the tale of an age-old treasure which, under the most varied circumstances, appears abruptly, unexpectedly, and disappears again, under different mysterious conditions, as though it were a fata morgana" (1968: 5). Turtletaub and his screenwriters seem to have taken this injunction literally. For what Ben Franklin Gates (Nicolas Cage) eventually discovers is a big, huge, gigantic room full of shiny stuff -- hints of which have been popping up and disappearing for centuries… Why would he want all this kitsch? That's another question. As is the real mystery here -- what our fictional Ben Franklin might "really" be searching for, outside the film's cramped dream-work and conventional, ideological revisions of desire.

At one point, however, near the middle, even Gates himself starts to doubt the old family legend that the Founders left us something precious that we've become unaware of. This is not hard to understand. When you're obsessed with something invaluable that nobody alive, including you, has actually seen much sign of for a good, long while, you're bound to lose faith at some point. "There exist, indeed," wrote Arendt, "many good reasons to believe that the treasure was never a reality but a mirage, that we deal here not with anything substantial but with an apparition, and the best of these reasons is that the treasure thus far has remained nameless. Does something exist, not in outer space but in the world and the affairs of men on earth, which has not even a name? Unicorns and fairy queens seem to possess more reality than the lost treasure of the revolutions" (1968: 5). So the film gives it a name, and a location. Money. Underground vault.

But the proper name, and the actual location, as Arendt also warned (this part they left out of the script) is nothing quite so simple or familiar:
And yet, if we turn our eyes to the beginnings of this era, and especially to the decades preceding it, we may discover to our surprise that the eighteenth century on both sides of the Atlantic possessed a name for this treasure, a name long since forgotten and lost -- one is tempted to say -- even before the treasure had disappeared. The name in America was "public happiness," which, with its overtones of "virtue" and "glory," we understand hardly better than its French counterpart, "public freedom"; the difficulty for us is that in both instances the emphasis is on "public." (1968: 5) In a country that seems literally to have forgotten the language of radical democracy that gave birth to the first modern, liberal republic -- buried beneath the freeways, the internet superhighway, tax-cuts for the rich, the war mongering and lies of what has become the U.S. empire -- Americans can hardly speak about the common good anymore, without feeling vaguely embarrassed. We find it difficult, in this cynical age of "privatization," to find words to refer to our shared, collective, "public" inheritance (Bellah, et al 1985).

But a film that wants in some obscure way to remind us of our past-and-future greatness, and yet can only picture this in terms of "awesome" sunken pirates' doubloons and "cool" old Egyptian Mummies, may unfortunately leave us wondering -- why bother?

So much for "amnesia." But will Purdy's restless "migrant" American persona leave the theater, or turn off the DVD player, any more rooted in local tradition after this 2-hour entertainment experience? Doubtful. Instead we will have to go on searching (in an entirely different way, it seems) to find any meaning in the story of democracy's subterranean existence. Should Hollywood film be expected to provide this kind of "treasure"? Maybe not. But when the culture industry plunders anew even the metaphors and parables of revolution to make charming movies with attractive stars and fun dialogue, something very *very* Baudrillardian this way comes -- the further Disneyfication and commodification and "simulation" of a "hyperreal" America (Baudrillard 1989), one consuming, now, with a film like this, *its own ignorance of its own ignorance about itself* [sic] as a form of entertainment. Amnesia? Forget it.

Or is there more here after all? For anyone who ever confused being rich with being free, or mixed up capitalism and democracy, this film probably won't help clarify much that desperately needs clearing-up. Yet, on the other hand, one hardly need be skilled at cultural criticism or schooled in late-Marxist critique to recognize here, tucked in among the simulations, a rather striking allegory of what Herbert Marcuse, in a pre-postmodern critical vocabulary, called "repressive desublimation," or substitute gratification (1964). As prozac now makes us happy by filling in the little gaps in our brains where despair might otherwise creep in, promises of material abundance have taken up the empty cultural space where our longing for political freedom should be. Similarly, the spectacle of the film, and its conspiracy-theory-laden plot, caters to the fantasy of finding freedom by falling into unearned wealth (with a blonde woman at your side). Or of transmuting, through a kind of political-economic alchemy, the one -- riches and good looks -- into the other -- liberty.

Thus, within a few years of Sept. 11 2001, in late 2004, we have (along with much else, I realize) an otherwise unremarkable film proposing that what's missing from American life is something tremendously valuable. And that the way to recover this X is to go back and scrutinize the "original" founding documents -- to literally look closely, very closely, at the Declaration of Independence. In fact, the map to the prize is written on the back, in invisible ink! Not in the explicit text then, but in something easily overlooked because only "virtually present," latent and waiting to be reactivated, we are asked to invest our attention. To read in this case, is also to (re)write. Accompanying the document's all-too-familiar and taken-for-granted concepts, or "intentions of the framers" (signifieds, in semiotic jargon), as the material support of the words (signifiers), we are asked to see traces of a kind of hope for renewal in embodied political acts of "reconstitution." In an obscure, nearly imperceptible underside to its monuments, in the experience of those who actively drew the "map" and those who may one day rediscover it, we are asked to recall hints of our own roots/routes (Clifford 1997). Not in following a Constitution as a Holy Book, but in (re)making our own institutions, according to the express purposes of good government, do we flatter the Founders best -- by imitation.

So the schlock film is true after all. In a way. The primary symbol of genuinely democratic aspirations in America, the Declaration (and, by extension or "metonomy," the Preamble to the US Constitution and the Bill of Rights), becomes the source of an unexpected libidinal cathexis by the protagonist and, through him, the viewer. "Our inheritance," Arendt liked to quote the French poet and resistance fighter, Rene Char, "was left to us by no document" (1964: 215). Our treasure lies not in some unshakeable foundations (lost or otherwise), but in *acts* of (re)founding, renewal and hope -- what Shedlon Wolin has lately called "fugitive democracy" (1996). Sure enough, the film too nudges us to treat the sacred parchment less as

"sacred" and regard it less as a "parchment," seeing it more for what it can do, where it can help lead us if we use it right. In this ambivalent, confused, sacrilegious -- and thus, paradoxically, faithful -- appropriation of the Declaration of Independence not as fixed and finished "nugget," but as living guide, *National Treasure* exhibits both a longing for new beginnings and a nostalgia for old ways.

Could democracy itself, as a distinctive form of (self-)government, after all be the hidden reference point of Turtletaub's otherwise banal action-adventure -- predicated on American forgetfulness about the nature of its political (not merely pecuniary) origins? With this question left hanging, it is the American "merchant" identity that the world sees more of these days -- and sometimes also emulates.

Valley of the Wolves: the New Merchants of Occidentalism; or, Love Hurts

In the space between two rough edges, Europe on one side and George W. Bush's "Axis of Evil" on the other, caught between the EU and its oil supply, the Turkish director, Serdar Akar, portrays Americans (of all people!) as villainous, greedy, psychopathic mass murderers, in his *Kurtlar Vadisi, Irak* (Valley of the Wolves, Iraq [2006]). Representing the globalization of the American "merchant" ethic at its most contradictory and intense, Akar's film, in adopting and adapting certain Hollywood forms for Turkish audiences, sells at once a love of American style and a hatred of America's "crimes." Scapegoating the US, Christians, and Jews for the entertainment of mostly Muslim intended audiences, in order to sell an essentially American product (action-hero cinema), Akar only succeeds in doing the greedy migrant-merchants that his film despises one better at their own game -- paranoiac demonization, nationalism and xenophobic racism as a response to schizophrenic deterritorialization (Deleuze and Guattari 1983), and a Rambo-esque feeling of impotent humiliation overcompensated for by hysterical moaning and stabbing with knives. Indeed, it turns out, the US itself has no monopoly on these eminently marketable commodities in the age of globalizaton.

Like a revenge killing, it's being called "payback" in Ankara, Turkey's capital -- only for what, as the Buffalo Springfield used to sing, "aint exactly clear" (Stills 1966). For Alan Parker's bigoted portrayal of Turks in the apparently not-so-true story of an American youth, busted for drugs in Istanbul and sent to the archetypal "Turkish prison" of many an urban legend, *Midnight Express* (some say). That was 1978, by the way. For Homer Simpson's nasty, and loudly bemoaned reference to Turks as "Cyprus splitters," more recently? That was a cartoon, by the way. Albeit, as subsequent events have clearly shown, cartoons are no laughing matter in this part of the world generally (recall the controversy over representations of the Prophet, Muhammad, in February 2006). For the genuinely unfortunate real-life "hooding" and detention of Turkish soldiers by the US military in northern Iraq in 2003 (where the film's story begins, based loosely in fact [Mango 2004])? More plausible, but that does not come close to explaining everything about the most popular and talked-about film in Anatolia for a long time. For Abu Ghraib, portraid vividly and grotesquely in the film (although not shown as graphically as in the pages of *Salon*, shortly after the film came out, nor as extensively as in the wider American press more than a year before that)? Also vaguely plausible. But as disgusting as these crimes were, they were exposed, loudly criticized, and stopped (something like eight soldiers were prosecuted and/or convicted, I believe). As Christopher Hitchens (2005) among others has pointed out, the reign of Saddam in Abu Ghraib was surely a lot worse for a lot longer. So, what then?

Based on a wildly popular Sopranos-like TV series, recently ended, the big screen version brings back some pretty attractive male characters/actors (well, depending on whom you talk to), already much beloved of Turkish audiences (except for many leftists, who see the actors themselves, and not just the characters, as "fascists"). Only now the four intrepid, rather quiet, strong "young Turks" in dark suits and unbuttoned shirts are calmly fighting Americans in Iraq over the dignity of Muslims everywhere, instead of wiping out the Turkish mafia every week on TV. Well, maybe not quite everywhere, since the Iraqi Kurds don't fare too well in this telling.

With a budget yet modest by Hollywood standards (at a record-breaking 10 million USD, quite a lot for a country where median incomes for the working class are down around a few hundred a month, there has been speculation whether it can make back the investment), *Valley of the Wolves, Iraq*, is at once intensely anti-American in its content and, at the same time, deeply American in its techniques, structure, look and feel. It looks like a Hollywood action movie, and Turks seem proud of the film's production values. Never mind the fact that in the *oeuvre* of a genuinely talented director, like Nuri Bilge Ceylan, for example, we have already a young genius to rival Antonioni. Ceylan's three films, *Kasaba* (Small Town), *Uzak* (Distant), and *Mayis Sikintisi* (Clouds of May) are all stunning, poetic works, far surpassing anything Hollywood is capable of today. Now here is something, in the work of an ordinary commercial hack, to rival Arnold Schwazenegger's egregious, *True Lies*, and Sylvester Stallone's self-pitying *Rambo*. Let's hope these guys don't go into politics someday.

In other words, the most crudely anti-American movie I ever saw is also, at the same time, a product of the most American, most Hollywood, genre -- the violent, racist, nationalist melodrama of wounded male pride and revenge. So it' s hard for a proud Yankee expat to know where to turn with this one, however you look at it.

The combination of resentment, hostility, envy and imitation (so typical of the tidal wave of facile anti-Americanism around the world today [Hollander 2004, Ross and Ross 2004]) is perfect, nearly sublime. The film is a great symbol of the dialectic of disorientation and reactionary identity-formation that Thomas Myer calls "identity mania" (2001), which seems to lie behind fundamentalist responses to globalization that violently reject while eagerly embracing the United States (Heller 2002; Maalouff 2000). In this case, the ten minutes of advertisements that preceded the screening I saw -- for cell phones, luxury cars, Coca-Cola, and the national drink, Efes Raki (the last presented entirely in English for some reason) -- may have seemed to do little, in their bubbly celebration of American-style Western consumerism, to prepare audiences for what followed. But really, they did a hell of a lot, I later realized. For what came next after the ads was more of-a-piece than superficial plot characteristics would suggest.

If, within the logic of the diegesis, we are presumed and encouraged to hate the United States and its evil ways, then we are also presupposed to love its products, its life-style, and its cultural *forms*. Maybe instead of the mournful post-9/11, "why do they hate us?" what Americans should instead be asking is why it is that "love hurts."

The well dressed and stylishly coiffed upper-middle-class Ankara audience I saw the movie with understood this ambivalence implicitly. They certainly didn't seem to mind the juxtaposition of fast cars and tanks, nor see any problematic contradiction between sporting Levis, Hard Rock CafŽ sweat-shirts and NY Yankees caps, while applauding enthusiastically as Necati Sasmaz (a charismatic Turkish James Bond if I ever saw one: Albert R. Brocoli

take note) literally twists a knife in the heart of the film's despicable villain. Played brilliantly by Billy Zane, the fanatical *Christian* fundamentalist (note the inversion of stereotypes), leads a band of over-the-top nefarious US soldiers in a series of crimes against humanity, linked somehow to what is referred to as "American capitalism's" vile profit motive, but seemingly more like random slaughter for its own sake.

And speaking of capitalism …. You see where this is headed? Oddly (yet thankfully) we don't actually get to witness the Jewish physician -- portrayed by a corpse-like Gary Busey, apparently so hard-up for work he'll say and do anything -- get his comeuppance. This sad speculation concerning the motives of a once respectable star, featured in such nice family film's as *The Buddy Holly Story*, I am sad to report, is unfortunately confirmed by his own agent: "It was a paycheck," we are cynically reassured. Zane, on the other hand, reportedly "opposes all war" and participated in the xenophobic, anti-Semitic production for that "reason." Which statement, I wonder, is in fact more hypocritical? Aren't they really in a profound way both the same: total, open indifference to principle in the name of money (Busey), and complete commitment to principles so vacuous that they lead to the same result (Zane)? Like Bush oscillating between our "national interest" and "freedom" as justifications for the Iraq war, Busey and Zane sum up the twin poles of nihilism today -- sheer, bald-faced greed with no shame, and empty moral rhetoric.

But perhaps the producers just couldn't think of any punishment severe enough for the avaricious Jew. After all, what sort of "take-that!" at the hands of Sasmaz ("Polat Alemdar," whose name means something like "Steel Commander," or "one who carries the flag," or possibly both) would suffice for a man who sells stolen body-organs ripped from the bodies of living prisoners in Abu Ghraib, while cackling absurdly about how "we are God's only chosen people"? This Shylock is a surgeon, and he gets more than his pound of flesh. The kidneys go out in ice-chests marked, " Tel Aviv," "London," and "Tel Aviv." I waited in vain, on the edge of my seat, hoping the next one would be sent someplace innocuous, like Canada or New Zealand; but no. I tugged on the brim of my Red Sox cap, slumped back down and turned up the collar of my coat. That night at least, "Crusaders and Jews" (Bin Laden's phrase) were both looking just about the way Osama himself might have portrayed them (er, us).

While there is certainly a case to be made that American cinema has been just as bad in its stereotyping of Arabs for many years (Said 1981), and that it's all just good old fashioned entertainment anyway, the sad thing is that, like a recent best-selling Turkish novel, *Metal Firtina* (Metal Storm [Turna and Ucar 2005]), the film is in fact being received by many Turks as essentially "true," and showing how things "really are." In the case of the book, this is a bit of a stretch, since it portrays a highly unlikely American invasion of Turkey and its even less-likely rebuff by a Turkish secret agent's nuclear attack on Washington. The Turkish college students I interviewed about the book in late 2005 were a little embarrassed when I asked their opinion of it. They seemed to sense quite well the kind of ugly sentiments it appeals to -- whom it makes its readers out to be. And yet, even among this most educated sector of the "moderate Muslim" society, I had several students tell me the reason they liked the book was that it foretold the future.

But this is not so surprising, really. And *that's* what's really surprising. In a country where many will tell you that the US caused the destructive 1999 earthquake that shook Istanbul's obsolete foundations, by means of underground nuclear tests; that no Jews were in the buildings on Sept. 11, a motif echoed in *Wolves* when an Orthodox Jew (what's he doing

sporting peyas on the streets of Baghdad?) somehow knows just when to walk away from a building that's about to be bombed); in short, in Turkey today, where conspiracy theories for everything are rife, many people, even some "leftists," speak as if America were magically responsible for all that goes wrong in the world (Kohn 2005).

For example, as the film has it -- Kurds, Turks and Iraqis really have *no problems* with each other. In this pathetic theodicy, it is the essentially malevolent, pervasive and quasi-divine American Influence that works semi-secretly to set them against their brothers. In the film, all such painful historical rifts are healed symbolically, as representatives of each of these groups are reunited in harmony around the figure of the proud Steel Commander, Carrying the Flag (and his admiring, rescued Iraqi lady), bonded by horror at what "Sam Marshall" (Zane) has done to them all. When the pretty Arab woman eventually dies senselessly at the hands of the hard-to-kill Marshall (blown up, but still gunning for innocents), Polat clutches her bloody nose ring and weeps. Fade-out (but "Not Fade Away," as Buddy/Gary once sang in younger, happier days) to thunderous applause (Holly and Petty 1957). Grab your hat, run next door to Starbucks, where Turkish coffee is not even on the menu.

Representing the Profit: Anti-American Metaphysics and the Commodification of Rage

In what we might call "the metaphysics of the new anti-Americanism," there need be no doubt or uncertainty about anything. Including one's own moral purity. Whatever it is that's wrong: (Uncle) Sam did it to us, with his "martial" plan for total control of everything. Enjoy your over-priced latte (the *real* conspiracy to destroy your country).

Basically, if you liked *Midnight Express* (assuming you can still remember it) and its portrayal of Turks as all bad, you'll love *Valley of the Wolves, Iraq*, and its portrayal of Americans as worse. If you were offended by Homer Simpson's comments about Cyprus, or Homer's comments about Troy for that matter, this should put things right. Too bad Parker didn't think to gratuitously add a Mengele-like Jewish doctor to the prison staff in his film. Then audiences everywhere would really have something to agree on. In place of "overdetermination" by an ensemble of political, cultural and economic factors (Althusser 1969), including human agency and error, metaphysics of any kind always gives us bogus "essences" to blame. The metaphysics of recent anti-Americanism is no different in this.

I've had to push many of my Turkish friends to go see the film. They were planning to quietly boycott, hoping to see the thing lose money. Some still refuse. One even touchingly told me how he had grown up, menaced in the streets during the 1980s by the kind of right-wing nationalist thugs the film glorifies. Then "shooting" was not merely a cinematic term, as my friend reminded me. The wounds of Turkey's "civil war" remain from 25 years ago. Those on the left that have put a bandage over their feelings and gone to see the film out of curiosity were more revolted than I was.

Here I must disagree with them and their strategy of refusal. To emphasize a point lost on most sensitive, progressive Turkish academics: *Hollywood producers take note! Sign up Necati Sasmaz immediately! If you think the Muslims like to riot over "insulting images" in cartoons, wait until you see how much money you can make displacing rage into box-office, with a really cool star like this*. What I'm saying is -- as we continue coping with events like the recent kerfuffle over caricatures of Caliph-maker (February 2006), let's not be afraid to all join together and sublimate our aggression in film after all. If we're going to look for our deepest desires for political liberty and solidarity there (*National Treasure*) we may as well at

least stuff our anger and violence down with it. Just as the latest (who can keep up?) rumors going around Turkey have it -- which seem to imply a sophisticated Althusserian understanding of ideology, as the "imaginary resolution of real contradictions" (Althusser 1971) -- in suggesting that "America" *wanted* this film made precisely in order to sublimate Turk's aggression, let's go ahead and give fake filmic revenge precedence. For if history still teaches anything at the "end" of history (Fukuyama 1992), it is surely that where there are audiences to be exploited, concerns over representations of somebody's prophet are sure to give way to profiting from somebody's representations.

Coda: The End of Innocence and Essences, *Batman Begins* Again?

"It's not who I am inside that defines me," says Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) as the Dark Knight in *Batman Begins* (2005) at a pivotal moment, "it's what I do." Does this mean he can save Gotham (New York) by learning to fight terror with terror (at a training camp in Central Asia, no less)? Or is that his big mistake?

As Sartre might have said, "Existence precedes essence." New beginnings, Arendt wrote, are what America and *politics itself* (and Batman, one might add) have always been all about. In that case, what Benjamin Franklin Gates (Cage) was really looking for in *National Treasure*, I guess, is a way up and out of the mess we are dragged down by now. The Iraq war is just one, gruesome symptom of a much larger malaise. For violence, as Arendt also argues, merely fills the void of politics -- traveling in the wake of the death of politics and filling in for the absence of democracy, by attempting to "project power" where there is no real ability to do anything that matters, but only coercive instrumental technological might (Arendt 1958, 1970). And this "might" can easily prove impotent to control events, especially, though not only, where democratic "regime change" is concerned.

Can the USA redeem the "migrant" and "merchant" aspects of its polysemous symbolic identity by overcoming the endemic national "amnesia" that seems to accompany both the frontier-self and the entrepreneurial subject, on an endless careening quest to avoid looking back (or too far ahead)? Can she "begin" again, with a renewed sense of democratic purpose? Or will many Americans now seek, in reaction to neoconservative and neoliberal failures, to withdraw into a false sense of isolation? Can the powerfully " deterritorializing" dynamics of an increasingly global political economy -- producing so many new "migrants" as well as "merchants," and frequently seen as effecting the "Americanization" of nearly the whole world in the process -- be confronted and brought to bear in ways that articulate a popular desire for something besides, other than, and more satisfying than another Hollywood-style blockbuster action epic (Hardt and Negri 2000)? Or another invasion. A *Transnational Treasure*?

To start to address this question from the perspective opened up by the juxtaposition of some recent popular entertainments, viewers might themselves begin with a heightened appreciation for the seriousness of Jed Purdy's at-first bumpkinish-sounding, but really very important caution, that "Americans' most dangerous quality is our belief in our own universality and innocence" (2003: 62). It is still on display at the cinema -- from Near East to West Coast. And in events outside the theater, which bind these disparate locals together in a deadly embrace. But it sure is taking a beating. This may be a good thing.

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Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle

Dir: Danny Leiner, USA, 2004

A review by Shama Rangwala, McGill University, Montreal, Canada

The trailer for *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* describes the two main characters as "that Asian guy from *American Pie*" and "that Indian guy from *Van Wilder*." In both films, the actors play peripheral, forgettable, and often stereotypical characters. A refreshing change, *Harold and Kumar* is—to use Harold's words—"a very beautiful story about someone who feels unnoticed, unappreciated, unloved." Though they are middle-class males aged 18-35—the most powerful class and age demographic—Harold and Kumar are not white. The film challenges Barbara and John Ehrenreich's definition of class as "characterized by a coherent social and cultural existence; members of a class share a common life style, educational background, kinship networks, consumption patterns, work habits, beliefs." Rather, the conception of class *Harold and Kumar* more closely follows is John Frow's model, "defined in each of the economic, the political, and the ideological spheres. [. . .]. The inclusion of gender, race, and ethnicity as an 'ideological' moment within the domain of production [. . .] indicate[s] the way in which ideological values attributed to gender, race, and ethnicity work to structure relationship of production." Although they are firmly middle class, Harold and Kumar's racial identities often supersede their class affiliation. To use Louis Althusser's terminology, society and culture hail Harold and Kumar in different ways regarding their race and class positions. Race complicates the middle-class experience, and Harold and Kumar must negotiate between their different racial and class interpellations. The American Dream in this film is not economic, but rather a reconciliation between racial and class identities and the ability to engage in a spectrum of cultural practices without the restriction of preconceptions.

Using Fredric Jameson's analytic category "the ideology of form"—the formal, generic, and intertextual aspects of a text—we can place *Harold and Kumar* within the tradition of the Hollywood stoner road trip movie. Yet the typical stoner film is filled with younger white boys, whose main concerns revolve around sex—heterosexuality is the primary determinant of their identities. Class and race are practically non-issues, contentious topics better left to more serious films. Unlike the high school and frat boys who populate the other films, Harold and Kumar are at an important point in theirs lives regarding their class positions—post-college, deciding on a career path or further education. The purpose of the journey is not sexual gratification, but rather the acquisition of White Castle burgers. They encounter many opportunities for sex, but these are always secondary to their ultimate goal.

The characters of Harold and Kumar also exist within the context of other representations of Asians in American popular culture. One of Harold's favourite films is *Sixteen Candles*, which is indeed about someone being overlooked, but is in turn guilty of overlooking racism against Asians. The film announces each appearance of Asian foreign exchange student Long Duk Dong with a gong—a precedent for representations of Asian in teen flicks thereafter. Another Asian character the film explicitly invokes is Apu, the Indian

convenience store owner in *The Simpsons*, whose thick accent and catchphrase "thank you come again" is mocked by the film's Extreme Punks. The characters of Harold and Kumar must work against this tradition of stereotyping even before the film begins.

Our first image of *Harold and Kumar* does not depict the title characters, but rather white middle-class labour. The scene initially uses the familiar language and clichés that could have been poached from another teen comedy film. J.D. tries to convince Billy to forget about his heartache and go drinking instead: "Billy Boy, get your ass ready! It's almost five o'clock and this bad boy needs to get his drink on." At this moment the film aligns the audience with Billy, whose girlfriend dumped him. J.D. asks Billy, "How do you think I get all my shit done? Those Asian guys love crunching numbers. You probably just made his weekend." When they give their work to the "quiet little Asian guy," our sympathies immediately shift to Harold. In a more traditional film, the narrative would follow J.D.'s and Billy's parallel journey to White Castle. In *Harold and Kumar*, we see the story of the usually overlooked characters, reversing our expectations of where our alliances should lie. Kumar's med school interview also highlights one of the central problems that differentiates the film from others of the genre: the (mis)articulation of race. The interviewer went to med school with Kumar's father, and stumbles when describing the name of their basketball team: "A play on the name of the famous coloured, Negro basketball squad . . . black, African-American. You know, people of colours."

Although both Harold and Kumar negotiate between race and class, they do so in different ways. Harold seemingly accepts his racial limitations, though he does not embrace them or live under false consciousness. He allows his co-workers to take advantage of him, and carries his laptop—the signifier of his middle-class job—with him wherever he goes. He is in love with Maria, a Puerto Rican girl who lives in his apartment and with whom he shares cultural experiences, such as a fondness for *Sixteen Candles*. His elevator fantasy of Maria does not involve sex, but simply getting the courage to speak to her without racial differences coming between them. Yet Harold is certain he will "end up with [Korean] Cindy Kim whether [he] like[s] it or not." By contrast, Kumar actively tries to resist his race position. Just as we see first see Harold at work, our initial image of Kumar is at a medical school interview, following the path to middle-class success. As soon as we hear his phone ring—with a bong-like sound—we know that he resists the stereotype that "successful minorities place a premium on ambition, persistence, and deferred gratification." Instead of following Harold's example, Kumar lives off his parents' money, has a filthy bedroom, and uses hip-hop discourse. (The soundtrack includes hip-hop artists such as the Black Eyed Peas.)

Yet Kumar's rebellion consists of occupying alternative middle-class positions, not forging into new territories of class; in other words, Kumar does not rebel against his class, but rather his racial position. Smoking pot is not a true rebellion against his class, as the practice is a relatively safe and tried way to resist the middle-class work ethic of deferred gratification and what Ehrenreich calls a "fear of falling." In fact, when they lose their pot, they naturally decide to go to Princeton University, certain that at that bastion of middle-class youth they will find some drugs. The film emphasizes the normality of marijuana by juxtaposing a ridiculous public service announcement about the fatal consequences of pot with the toking Harold and Kumar. While Harold seems to balance his pot-smoking with his middle-class job, Kumar explicitly links his preference for hindering his intellectual capabilities by smoking pot—he places his stash within his MCAT prep book and uses the pages as rolling paper. We can interpret Kumar's line "just because you're hung like a moose doesn't mean

you've got to do porn" as "just because I'm an intelligent Indian doesn't mean I have to be a doctor." To Kumar, becoming a doctor does not signify class success, but rather submission to a racial stereotype—his reason for resisting the profession is a race rebellion.

The desire for White Castle stems from a television advertisement that explicitly hails Harold and Kumar. They want "the perfect food," and as if in response to their request, the advertisement starts: "Don't you like food that's tasty and delicious? Then what are you waiting for? Head over to White Castle. It's what you crave." Kumar points to his chest, responds "I do" to the advertisement voiceover's questions and allows himself to be interpellated into the position of consumer. He wants to be like everyone else—the white mainstream—addressed by this advertisement without having to think about his racial position. Thus the decision to go to White Castle is not an original one; while Kumar attempts to resist interpellations into the racial position of Indian doctor, he embraces the interpellation into the position of a (raceless) middle-class consumer. In this light, we can read the journey to White Castle as a struggle for the erasure of race in cultural identification.

One of the first stops on the way to White Castle is Princeton, where Harold goes to an Asian club meeting while Kumar looks for pot. In the university, we encounter a number of deviations in Frow's "ideological moments" within the middle-class. Kumar encounters a self-proclaimed "business hippy [who] understand[s] the concept of supply and demand"—someone who simultaneously reconciles his identity as a leftist hippy with his position within capitalism. Yet later, when his well-dressed mother hands a policeman a cheque to bribe her son out of jail, we learn that he is not truly a hippy. The students in the Asian club similarly have split identities. At the club meeting, they are almost farcical caricatures of upwardly mobile second-generation Asian-Americans. Kenneth Park even asks Harold for help getting a job at his investment banking firm, though their only commonality is race. Yet the Asian party after the meeting is typical of ragers in other films of this genre; like J.D.'s and Billy's parallel journey, we only see a glimpse of this mainstream party before moving back to Harold's and Kumar's alternative narrative. Harold and Kumar do not want to have to compartmentalize their behaviour, acting as model minorities one minute and frat boys the next. They desire a synthesis of their racial and class identities.

When Harold and Kumar are in the hospital, Kumar must confront the expectations of both his race and his class. The stereotypical Asian-Americans stress "family unity, respect for authority, a tradition of hard work, and personal discipline." In this scene, Kumar feigns these values to his father and brother, but we learn that he manipulates them for his own ends. Because the non-Asians cannot tell the difference between Kumar and his brother, hospital staff usher him into the operating room to perform complex surgery. Kumar becomes his idol—Doogie Howser, MD, who performs middle-class professional labour without the trials of medical school and apprenticeships, what Ehrenreich calls the cannibalization of the young. Tension-filled and theatrical, the scene of Kumar saving the patient's life could be from a thriller or hospital drama. In short, he does not perform banal middle-class labour, but a scene from popular culture. He wants the prestige and excitement of being a doctor, but does not want to follow what he perceives as specifically Asian-American values of hard work and discipline.

After leaving the hospital, the car swerves off the highway and Harold and Kumar find themselves in a foreign world. Most immigrants settle in cities or suburbs, and highways connect these places. In this film, the highway is the path to White Castle and the American Dream, and as Harold and Kumar stray from this course, they enter what Kumar calls "the

twilight zone." A monstrosity of a human being named Freakshow picks them up to fix their car, all the while singing Christian songs, mispronouncing their names, and asking if the two Asian stoners have accepted Jesus as their lord and saviour. Freakshow is definitely not middle-class or Asian, and the film depicts him as not only different in values, but also in body. The soundtrack and cinematography implicate Freakshow as a vague threat; here Harold and Kumar are in peril both because of racial and class differences. Freakshow's aberrantly attractive wife Leanne sexually entices Harold and Kumar, but even this seduction—familiar from other youth comedies—becomes surreal as the hideous Freakshow attempts to join them. Similarly, Neil Patrick Harris (the actor that played Doogie Howser) exists outside the middle class; he earned his money as a child actor and now spends his time sniffing coke off of strippers' bodies and ends up stealing Harold's car. The encounters with Freakshow and Neil Patrick Harris emphasize the hollowness of Harold's and especially Kumar's class rebellion. By smoking pot and blowing off his medical school interview, Kumar purports not to care about middle-class success, but he cannot relate to—and in the case of Freakshow, flees from—that which is truly outside the middle-class experience.

After Neil Patrick Harris steals the car, a policeman arrests Harold for attempted jaywalking. The cop is undeniably racist, but Harold does not want to acknowledge this racism. As an Asian who can enjoy *Sixteen Candles*, he wants to believe that the police and the state are always on his side since he is middle class. For the policeman, race becomes an excuse for him to retaliate against his own class limitations; when Kumar protests against Harold's arrest, the cop retorts, "That's not the kind of tone you want to use on a cop that can bust you ass. [. . .]. What kind of name is that anyhow, Koo-mar? What is that, like five O's or two U's? [. . .]. What happened to good old American names like Dave or Jim?" Harold points out his own name, and the cop answers, "You should be proud of that name, son." The policeman represents the repressive force of assimilation. Although the police should be the protectors of the middle class, obviously this officer has some resentment towards his working-class position; the only way for him to feel superior is the enforcement of his narrow race-based definition of American-ness. Kumar realizes this:

You were probably the big asshole in your high school, right? [. . .]. Used to pick on guys like us every day, right? [. . .]. Then graduation day came and we went to college and you went nowhere, and you thought, 'hey, how can I still give them shit? I know, I'll become a cop. [. . .]. So why don't you just take this little quiet Asian guy with the Anglicized name that treats you so well and give him a couple other tickets? Better yet, just take him to jail.

The policeman confirms Kumar's hypothesis by indeed taking Harold to jail. In jail, Harold and Kumar encounter structural racism and grasp how repressive state apparatuses use race as a scapegoat to work out class anxieties. Harold meets Tarik, a middle-class Rutgers University professor in jail for "being black." He teaches Harold that he should not internalize the racism he faces or allow others' ignorance to get the better of him: "Look at me, I'm fat, I'm black, I can't dance, and I've got two gay fathers. [. . .]. I learned a long time ago that there's no sense in getting all riled up every time a bunch of idiots give you a hard time. In the end, the universe tends to unfold as it should." Kumar calls in a fake shooting, and the cops return with a pyjama-clad black lawyer who was in bed at the time—yet another case of the police using race as an excuse to exercise power over someone in a higher class position. By meeting someone who is in a worse position than he is according to the white mainstream—but who takes this discrimination in stride—Harold takes another step further in becoming more comfortable with his racial position.

Harold and Kumar both have surreal fantasy sequences that demonstrate their desire for recognition beyond their race. An enormous bag of marijuana sparks Kumar's fantasy of a romantic relationship with the drug. Yet this fantasy is not one of living the good life, but is instead unquestionably working-class—Kumar does not demonstrate a fear of falling; rather, his fear is of rising into racial stereotypes. The song "Crazy on You" by Heart is the soundtrack to this scene, with lyrics such as "We might still get by. Every time I think about it I want to cry. [. . .]. The kids keep coming/Nowhere to breathe easy/no time to be young/But I tell myself that I'm doing alright." We see Kumar in a run-down apartment, balancing bills and abusing his wife in a scene that could belong in *Blue Collar*. Kumar often uses rap discourse that is derogatory towards women. Within black culture, one of the contributing factors to this misogyny is the black man's perceived impotence in the white world; denigrating women is a way to assert some authority, just as the police officers assert racial authority over the non-white middle-class. In this scene, his wife does not have a race—as a literal object—so his attitude towards her stems from gender, not race, anxieties. The abuse is a play on the stereotype that the working-man wears a wife-beater—which Kumar does in this sequence—and that the garment is a literal signifier. Indeed, his fantasy is a caricature of a hyper-masculine, working-class raceless existence—the opposite of his real position.

Harold's fantasy is a Bond-esque adventure in which he must rescue Maria. As is Kumar's fantasy, Harold's is full of cultural references, and is formally a cross between a film and a video game. He inserts himself into a scene out of popular culture without concerns as to race. This addresses problems of identification in white cultural texts; his fantasy is a way to see someone like himself in a mainstream cultural product. Harold vanquishes his nemesis—the cop to whom he submits in real life—with confidence and a hand gun. He reaches Maria and the shot freezes their embrace into a movie poster with the names "Harold Lee" and "Maria Quesa Dilla" along the top. The juxtaposition of the two ethnic-sounding names is perfectly natural in Harold's dream. Unlike Kumar's fantasy world, Harold's is not raceless, as the soundtrack has a Spanish flavour and the poster is a homage to Zorro. Yet the emphasis on Maria's race, rather than Harold's, does not indicate Harold's assimilation into or submission to Maria's Puerto Rican culture. Rather, because of his feelings for her, Harold wants to involve himself with every aspect of Maria's personality, including her race. Harold's fantasy is world in which he neither has to deny nor be limited by race. Both fantasy sequences are mise-en-abyme moments in which the film expresses a desire for cultural artefacts in which—unlike in this film—race does not matter. In fact, *Harold and Kumar* often uses parody and pastiche for comedic effect, conscious of the position of the film in a larger class and race discourse and the stakes of filmmaking in race-conscious culture.

Throughout their journey they encounter the ubiquitous racism embodied by the uncanny reappearances of the Extreme Punks. Like the position of stoner, skater punk is a middle-class youth category. Among their many racist remarks, the punks tell Harold to learn how to drive—following the stereotype that Asians are bad drivers—and ask Harold and Kumar if they're going to "share a curry slurpee." In the convenience store, they harass the Indian cashier and defy gravity by kayaking through the air; one of the skater punks also makes a pterodactyl-like noise indecipherable to Harold and Kumar. By contrast, Kumar is able to communicate successfully to the working-class cashier in Hindi. Although Kumar has more in common with the skater punks in terms of class and cultural capital, because he is the same race as the cashier his solidarity and comprehension lie with the working-class man. Indeed,

at this moment, the skater punks—as was Freakshow—are literally alien and incomprehensible to Harold and Kumar.

The turning point in the film is when Harold realizes that he too wants to go to White Castle, despite his stint in jail, his destroyed laptop—and consequently his precious work—and Doogie stealing his car. He sees his Jewish friends, Rosenberg and Goldstein, eating at Hot Dog Heaven and understands that satisfaction is possible: "I want that feeling, the feeling that comes over a man when he gets exactly what he desires." Once again, the Extreme Punks appear. When they call Harold "Mr. Miyagi," referring to the stereotypical karate sensei from *Karate Kid*, Harold hears Tarik's voice in his mind: "The universe tends to unfold as it should." Instead of allowing himself to be bothered by the punks, or internalizing their racist comments—as he was doing before—Harold takes action with his new-found confidence. He hijacks the Extreme Punks' truck and as they drive off, Kumar gives the punks the finger and says in an Apu voice, "thank you come again." He reappropriates the racist language used by the skater punks by turning the words against them. In the truck, they discover that the punks' "extreme mix" includes songs from Christian singer Amy Grant and Wilson Phillip's "Hold On." Like the Asians at Princeton and the business hippy, the Extreme Punks have split identities; they pretend to be hardcore "misled youth" but are actually mainstream middle-class "posers." "Hold On" becomes a source of strength for Harold and Kumar; as the song comes from the Extreme Punks, we can see this as another example of reappropriation. They realize that they should not internalize racism or allow people like the Extreme Punks to get in the way of their goals. In a climactic moment of the film, Harold and Kumar can see White Castle in the distance, but to reach their destination, they must find a way down a cliff. They find the Extreme Punk's hang-glide, but Harold hesitates—he is unsure the burgers are worth the risk. Kumar's subsequent speech is the thesis of the film:

Our parents came to this country, escaping persecution, poverty, and hunger. Hunger, Harold. They were very, very hungry. They wanted to live in a land that treated them as equals, a land filled with hamburger stands. And not just one type of hamburger, okay? Hundreds of types with different sizes, toppings, and condiments. That land was America. [. . .]. Now, this is about achieving what our parents set out for. This is about the pursuit of happiness. This night is about the American dream. Dude, we can stay here, get arrested, and end our hopes of ever going to White Castle. Or we can take that hang glider and make our leap towards freedom.

The hamburgers represent the different opportunities and positions—such as quiet math-loving Asian and Indian doctor—into which society hails them because of their race and class; the freedom to which Kumar refers is ability to resist these interpellations. The use of the Extreme Punks' hang-glide demonstrates how racial limitations do not stem from the racists themselves, but rather one's perceptions of and relation to that racism. The racist punks prove useful in the end because Harold and Kumar alter their response to them.

After realizing the dream of White Castle burgers, Harold and Kumar undergo a change regarding their relationship to their race and class positions. Kumar has "a major epiphany":

My whole life I've just been scared of being one of those nerdy Indian guys turned doctor, but tonight got me thinking. There are far worse things in this world than being tapped for having a natural ability in medicine. Plus, how cool was that, saving that guy's life last night? It was somewhere between that, getting yelled at by my dad, and seeing Neil Patrick

Harris that I realized that I've always wanted to be a doctor but I've just been too scared to admit it to myself.

After all the experiences of the night—or hamburgers, to use the symbolic language of Kumar's monologue—Kumar realizes that being a doctor is not an identity into which external forces are positioning him, but rather what he himself wants to do with his life. He can occupy this seemingly stereotypical position because after this adventurous night he understands he has the ability to occupy other positions—he can only embrace medicine once he realizes he is not limited to that profession.

Similarly, Harold has a renewed understanding of his own race and class position and no longer feels any limitations. The parallel journey of J.D. and Billy also ends at White Castle, and Harold no longer submits to them. In fact, he is able to confront them about his exploitation and threaten them with a higher power, their mutual boss Berenstein. When he returns to his apartment, he sees Maria. Their subsequent actual exchange is easily much more exciting than his fantasy in the beginning of the film. He tells her, "I had the craziest night of my life tonight, and I guess I learned that if you want something or someone, you have to go for it. And if Leanne can marry a guy like Freakshow and I can hang-glide and I can ride a cheetah, then I guess…" and then confidently kisses her. As in other youth comedies, the film ends with the guy getting the girl. Yet in *Harold and Kumar*, the narrative is not about wooing of the girl, but rather a bildungsroman highlighting the personal growth of the hero. When Harold realizes—like Kumar—that race is only a limitation insofar as he believes it to be, he is able to transcend the differences between himself and Maria and make his move.

In the end, both Harold and Kumar are able to reconcile their race and class positions with their personal desires. The film argues against Ehrenreich's theory of a coherent middle class that exhibits a fear of falling. Frow claims that "the particular articulation of class and ethnicity [. . .] seems in many cases to have greater force in relations to the working class than to the more nationally unified middle and upper classes." Yet *Harold and Kumar* demonstrates the often subtle ways in which race colours a middle-class experience that is patently *not* nationally unified. Indeed, this fragmentation extends to the characters, many of whom we can term un-unified subjects with different identities based on different expectations and interpellations. Harold and Kumar ultimately realize that both "middle class" and "Asian" are American categories—no matter what the police officer or Extreme Punks may believe. The film does not attempt to deny racism; during the closing credits, we hear Tarik say, "I still trust and love all white people, all of them. And Asians. And a few Mexicans as well." We understand that racism exists, but like Harold and Kumar, by the end of the film we also realize that we should not allow the bigotry of others to get the better of us and we are thus able to find the ironic humour in Tarik's remarks. Taking a step back from this happy ending, though, we can also read this conclusion as a bourgeois denial of structural racism, one that indicates the investment of this stoner comedy in the middle-class ideology of individualism. However, as a comedy, the film must necessarily leave us thus reassured in our own bourgeois positions. *Harold and Kumar* clearly attempts to rework a genre filled with often clichéd and formulaic works; in true postmodern form the film grounds the comedy in parody and pastiche. Positioned thus within a tradition of youth comedies, *Harold and Kumar* signifies a welcome change that the film argues the real world should parallel—a cultural product whose smart social commentary only enhances the comedic and entertainment value.

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Match Point

Dir: Woody Allen, USA, 2005

A review by Wendy Knepper, Humboldt University, Berlin, Germany

Match Point has been hailed by many film critics as a return to form on the part of Woody Allen. While the general consensus seems to be that the film does not rank with the best films of his career, such as *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan*, most contend that it holds its own against *Hannah and her Sisters* and *Crimes and Misdemeanours*. It has been seen as a "return to form," which prompts the question of what form this film takes and what role form plays in Allen's oeuvre, which is more often praised for its gifted screenwriting than its cinematic brilliance.

Set in London and on a luxurious country estate, it strikes me that *Match Point* marks a departure for Allen not only in its setting but in its visual rhetoric. With its stylised cinematic techniques, Allen finds an effective visual language to communicate this tale of adultery, murder and a young man's rise to wealth and fortune. While some might argue that style wins the day, I would like to demonstrate how the form and visual style of the film "serve up" a substantive critique of this game of life we play.

The operatic score of the film is appropriate for *Match Point* has a plot worthy of an opera with it many twists, turns and reversals of fortune. The tale focuses on the loves and fortunes of a young Irishman named Chris Wilton (Jonathan Rhys-Meyers), a tennis player of some talent and considerably more ambition. Working as a tennis instructor to the rich, Chris's luck seems to turn when one of his tennis students, Tom Hewett (Matthew Goode), invites him to join his family in their opera box at Covent Garden. There he meets his future wife, Chloe (Emily Mortimer). The camera offers a close-up of Chloe as she turns to gaze at Chris in an expression filled with the desire to possess: fortune seems to smile on him.

This is so until Tom's fiancée, an aspiring American actress, named Nola (Scarlett Johansson), appears on the screen. The sexual chemistry between Chris and Nola is instantaneous. When Nola rejects his overtures, an event that takes place during a performance of *L'elisir d'amore* at Covent Garden, Chris decides to marry Chloe. Not long after, the relationship between Tom and Nola falls apart, leaving Nola open once more to a relationship. Unable to overcome his lust or love for her, Chris enters into an adulterous relationship with Nola. When Nola becomes pregnant and threatens to tell his wife, Chris enters a crisis, which he resolves by murdering Nola and her next-door neighbour, an elderly woman, making the crime appear as if it were a drug-related break-in and shooting. "Luckily," Chris manages to avoid being charged with murder and the film closes with a traditional comic ending in which Chris, Chloe and the extended family celebrate the birth of a new child.

All's well that ends well, or is it? As many have noted, the plotting and amoral perspective are reminiscent of *Crimes and Misdemeanours* (1989). In this movie, Judah Rosenthal

(Martin Landau) murders his mistress, Dolores Paley (Angelica Houston), and overcomes his feelings of guilt in a short time. Thus, what might have been a tragedy, with the possibility of "redemption" is a more thoughtful and sinister tale about the human ability to adapt its conscience to its deeds. Like *Crimes and Misdemeanours*, *Match Point* may be seen as a cinematic response to Hannah Arendt's thesis concerning the banality of evil. *Match Point* like *Crimes and Misdemeanours* is all the more affective because it dramatizes Allen's post-Holocaust philosophy, inspired by cosmic theories of relativity, rather than serving up diatribes or jokes on the subject.

Not only chronologically but also thematically, *Match Point* is a follow-up to *Melinda and Melinda* (2004). From a generic perspective, Allen continues his exploration of the symbiotic relationship of tragedy and comedy. Whereas *Melinda and Melinda* is based on the premise that tragedy is the stuff that comedies are made of and that comedy relies on tragedy, *Match Point* seems to collapse the generic differences, suggesting that melodrama serves to marry comic and tragic perspectives in an ambivalent but elegant coupling of equals.

The screwball murder mystery genre with its hapless detective persona is also in evidence, a genre we have seen Allen explore before in *Play it Again Sam*, *Bullets over Broadway*, *Manhattan Murder Mystery* and *The Curse of the Jade Scorpion*. Self-conscious in its proliferation of interpretive clues, *Match Point* exploits the tensions of its references to create an interpretive thriller. We know who the murderer is and are shown him in action. Will he be caught? How will it end? Typically, the narrative offers a kind of "showdown" ending with the capture or death of the killer. Like the conventional thriller, the tension of the narrative arises from suspense involved in the pursuit of the killer. The detectives suspect Chris, interrogate him and one of the detectives even has a dream in which he sees how the murder took place. However, unlike the thriller, the film disappoints the expectation of a chase scene. Fortune as well as the killer's own wit and cool nerves enable him to escape arrest.

Intriguingly, Allen's interpretive thriller exploits metafictional and metaphysical narrative tensions. Metafictional tension arises from the pursuit of the narrative as we the viewers wait in suspense to see which narrative outcome will survive and which will be abruptly terminated. Intertexts abound, such as the film's references to Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and George Stevens' *A Place in the Sun*, which is an adaptation of Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*. Intratextual references to Allen's oeuvre are also in evidence: such as Chris's quotation of Sophocles' observation that it is best not to be born at all, a remark that was previously cited in *Deconstructing Harry*, but here rendered particularly bleak as the Chris is attempting to justify having murdered his unborn son. The questions of guilt related to the killing of the innocent old woman in exchange for money as well as the possible redemption achieved through confession in *Crime and Punishment* are dismissed in this cynical citation of Sophocles. Russian tragedy loses the debate with Greek cynicism.

More subtle echoes of motifs and themes through Allen's oeuvre are also in evidence. In *Match Point*, references to opera and tennis echo *Annie Hall*. Where Annie Hall and Alvy Singer meet on the tennis court, Nola and Chris first confront one another across a ping pong table. The insertion of operatic and musical performance provides a kind of metaleptic "play within a play" or case of "art imitating life/life imitating art," where the performative space of art or sports seeps into daily life. Such motifs are also evident in *Annie Hall*, *The Purple Rose of Cairo* and *Hannah and Her Sisters*, to name a few examples. As in *Manhattan*, we are

witnesses to the fantastic re-visioning of the metropolis, though this time Allen turns from New York to London to construct his artificial world.

For all that the film seems loaded with references, it remains focussed on its own game. The word that comes to mind is "taut," which is surprising if one considers that the plot is melodramatic, replete with the kind of reversals and irrational impulses of the operatic performances that structure the narrative as well as provide background music to the unfolding events. In part, this is because the actors are refreshingly self-confident in their delivery of Allenesque dialogue.

Similarly, the visual style and cinematography evidence a confidence that reminds one of the visual elegance and architectonic structuring of many a Stanley Kubrick film. Indeed, it is hard not to think of the film as a modern tribute to *Barry Lyndon* with which it shares the tale of a man who compromises ethics, morals and emotions in his quest for wealth and power.

What is it that sets this film apart? Inspired by the game of tennis, the film draws on game theory. The opening scene of the film focuses on a tennis ball hitting the net and teetering. The viewer of the film or spectator of the game is presented with the observation: "The man who said 'I'd rather be lucky than good' saw deeply into life. People are afraid to face how great a part of life is dependent on luck. It's scary to think so much is out of one's control. There are moments in a match when the ball hits the top of the net, and for a split second it can either go forward or fall back. With a little luck, it goes forward and you win …or maybe it doesn't, and you lose."

This visual and philosophic thesis about the role of chance and luck in the game of life is repeated when a ring is tossed over the fence and guardrail at the river Thames. The ring teeters for a moment before falling backwards into the player's side of the court. According to the rules of tennis, it would seem that the ring's backward fall should symbolically represent the protagonist's downfall. With Chris's fingerprints covering the engraved ring, this crucial piece of evidence to a murder investigation is sufficient to prove his culpability.

A reversal of expectations is brought about because the ring lands in the hands of a drug addict and thief who is killed while breaking into an apartment in the area near to that in which Nola was murdered. Thus, through coincidence, another man is arrested for Chris's crime. The notion that life is a game with rules of fair play is thus subverted by the narrative of the film, at least at the level of the plot.

However, the visual rhetoric gradually discloses another kind of game with a different set of rules, which is far more intriguing than the image of the ball balancing on the net. Rather, the image of the net is the *leitmotiv* that hauntingly structures the visual rhetoric of the film. The use of the tennis match and the net as a structure for the narrative begins in a realistic manner as Chris is seen teaching various students and playing the game. Gradually, the framework of the net is transposed into the structures of life, suggesting that Chris is continuing to play his game off the court.

The net is a metaphor for erotic entanglement and seduction. The net is literally and symbolically evident in the contrasting scenes of interplay and seduction between Chloe and Chris and Chris and Nola, played (out) on the tennis court and the ping pong court respectively. When Chloe comes to the court, Tom comments that his sister Chloe has better

legs, which the camera focuses on as they play, suggesting that Chris is involved in displaying his prowess while taking in her body, seen across the net.

This scene on the court is replayed in a more intimate way at the ping pong table, where Chris quickly demonstrates his sexual interest in Nola. Putting aside the role of patient instructor who holds back from unleashing his full prowess, Chris enters into the game, quickly overwhelming Nola. He then crosses the table and stands to hold here close while demonstrating the correct follow-through with the racket. Nola comments that he plays a "very aggressive game."

The image of the net quickly comes to express the various themes that dominate Chris's erotic relationships. Chloe's father tells Chris that as long as he is in a relationship with her daughter, he will always have a safety net. Implicitly, Chris is seen as a kind of tightrope walker who will survive the perils of walking through life so long as he manages to keep Chloe satisfied.

When Chris begins his first day on the job, arranged for him by Alec Hewett (Brian Cox), the camera pans slowly around the structure, with its framed windows and criss-crossed beams, creating a mesh-like pattern. He has made the transition from one match to another sort. With his cool head and ready replies to any volley, he soon proves to be equally skilful at this new game.

Soon, however, the office becomes a source of claustrophobia for Chris: a net in which he is caught. Medium shots are used to show Chris caught in the web of personal intrigue. This professional network merely extends the framework of gridlines that also trap him at home. Chloe and he live in an apartment that is structured in glass and girders as well as pillars, which serve to frame and separate the players as they traverse the space.

By contrast, the net-like web is not evident in inner architecture of Nola's apartment. Rather, a decorative wooden "N" in the shelf behind her bed (presumably signifying Nola) suggests another kind of linearity that is open rather than closed. Book shelves line her bedroom wall and serve to create a cosy sense of order, a harmonious background framework rather than a prison-like structure. By shooting Nola in open spaces or in close-ups, she seems to escape the claustrophobic space that entraps both Chloe and Chris.

Sensuous images of women are found in the apartment, including an image of Sarasvati: the goddess of music, sculpture, literature and painting. One myth of this Goddess is that she is a jealous rival of the Goddess of wealth, Lakshmi, and that pursuing wealth alone will assure that Sarasvati's gifts will desert you. In Nola's angriest, most jealous tirade, she is seen standing next to this image of the goddess Sarasvati, a clue that we are to see Chloe and Nola as symbols of the inner crisis Chris undergoes as he betrays her to attain wealth and material security.

Gradually, as relations between Nola and Chris disintegrate, Allen's camera moves from shots that include the linear mesh of the bookshelves to shots that focus on a large mirror in which the reflected image of Chris is seen, sometimes in focus and sometimes out-of-focus, arguing with Nola. Reflective glass surfaces are also seen in the office and at home, suggesting perhaps that Chris himself is undergoing a transformation into a mere reflection.

The theme of entrapment arises in the relationship with Nola when she becomes pregnant and threatens to tell Chloe about their extra-marital relationship. Panicked, Chris responds to this crisis by setting the stage for a murder that will appear to be an unfortunate incident in a string of drug-related crimes. Tennis as a motif is evident as Chris conceals the gun and shells in his tennis bag. However, as he enters the hallway to Nola's apartment, the grid-like framework of elevator and a long close-up of the door with its yellow and black grid serve to remind the viewer that he is caught in the net.

The social net is broken as Chris kills the elderly woman and Nola. While he and Chloe attend a performance of *The Woman in White*, the viewer is presented with scenes from the criminal investigation. This investigation soon catches up with him and references are made to the fact that the detectives are on fishing expedition. In this context, Chris is a potential game to be caught in the net. The predator has become the prey.

The detective tells Chris that he is reluctant to "fish around" and thus it seems that he has escaped the net once more. This promise soon turns out to be true when the thief with the ring is apprehended and the investigation against Chris is dropped. The net as the structure that defines the boundaries of the game is ripped apart by the murder. There is no moral order in a universe where the best intuitions and most driving passions are sacrificed to probable cause and secure investments.

Yet, for all this, the game continues. The film ends with Chloe and Chris standing facing one another, with a girder from the building in the background serving as a line separating them. She leans forward and tells him that the next baby will be a girl. It seems that Chloe has finally won the match point.

King Kong

Dir: Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, USA, 1933
King Kong

King Kong

Dir: Peter Jackson, USA, 2005

A review by Jonathan E. Goldman, Tulane University, New Orleans, USA

The most interesting choice Peter Jackson and his *King Kong* crew made when updating the 1933 classic is also their most obvious choice, one that colours every aspect of the film: setting their movie in 1933. Almost all movie remakes contemporize their stories, setting them in their own time and translating the details accordingly. But while the new *Kong* updates the story's sights and sounds, using twenty-first century CGI to improve on the ginormous ape's movements as he rampages across Skull and then Manhattan Island, it does not update the story's cultural moment to the twenty-first century itself. While this decision allows the filmmakers to cram their movie with all kinds of depression-era period detail and Hollywood in-jokes appropriate to the movie-within-a-movie framework they inherited from the original, it yields some unfortunate results as well. True, Jackson's *Kong* impressively expands and modernizes the special effects of the old, providing Kong with a trio of T-Rexes to battle instead of just the one of the 1933 version. The new movie also corrects the scientific errors of the old, incorporating our greater understanding of the prehistoric food chain; the brontosauruses here are herbivores, dangerous to humans only because of their wild stampeding as they flee from a pack of velociraptors. The problem, the unnerving maddening problem, is that the new movie fails to modernize the sensibilities of the old, retaining much of the baldly racist-primitivist implications of the original.

The new *Kong*, in fact, in its compulsion to outdo every aspect of the original, makes greater use of the fact that the story starts in a depression-era New York City. The movie's opening moments announce loud and clear that Jackson's people researched the original *Kong*'s setting thoroughly; the scenes of poverty-stricken New York, replete with a shantytown in Central Park, soup kitchens and labour demonstrations, not only reveal an American underside that 1930s Hollywood rarely acknowledges, but also pays homage to the few films of the period that have done so, like *Hallelujah I'm a Bum, Modern Times*, and *Sullivan's Travels*. Of course, to generate the obligatory irony, the soundtrack for these shots is Al Jolson's "I'm Sittin' on Top of the World" (also a joke about the film's finale at the top of the world's tallest building in 1933). In both of these versions, Ann Darrow (Fay Wray once, Naomi Watts now) is compelled to join Carl Denham's film crew/sea expedition mostly through hunger and a desire to avoid entering the less reputable professions available to

young women of 1933. The new one gives her a whole vaudeville background backstory, including an anachronistic reference to the Federal Theater (which started in 1935).

Most emphatically, the period detail in Jackson's film emphasizes and enlarges upon the racist discourse the original was both enlisting and perpetuating. Stop and think for a minute about the 1933 version, directed by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack. A group of white filmmakers travel to an island somewhere in the tropics that is populated by prehistoric fauna and a primitive, dark-skinned community that sacrifices blonde-haired white women to the giant ape who terrorizes over the whole place. The film crew scraps the movie idea and decides they can do one better by abducting the ape and putting him on a stage on the Great White Way. The body of the other, on display, for the tonily-dressed white audience. The racial undertones of all of this are obvious enough, and are even vaguely acknowledged in the movie: when the film crew first meets the natives and begins backing away nervously, one of the men whistles the tune of "St. Louis Blues," the W.C. Handy standard (frequently recorded and heard in the 1920s and 30s) in which an African American woman laments losing her lover, perhaps to a white woman, as if the blues will placate the savages' anger. While the people inhabiting the island are not directly equated with Kong, they share the main attribute of being somewhat human, but less so than the whites. Having a white woman captured by a dark male, of course, would set off plenty of anti-miscegenation alarms in a film released less than 20 years after *Birth of a Nation* was a hit. Cooper was aware enough of this blatant racism that for his next film, an adaptation of Rider Hagard's *She*, he took a novel set among savage peoples in Africa and transplanted the events to . . . Siberia.

Cut to 2005. Jackson's *Kong* replaces "St. Louis Blues" with "Bye Bye Blackbird," one of the most vexed songs of American popular culture, at least from the standpoint of racial history. This is the song that a steamboat orchestra was playing as it pulled away from the docks during the New Orleans flood of 1927, carrying white passengers to safety and leaving African Americans stranded in the flooding city. It's also a song whose most famous version was recorded by Josephine Baker, who was herself an icon of the primitivist obsession which gripped western culture throughout the 1920s. The song arises on the soundtrack of the new *Kong* immediately after the scene when the ape has been unveiled to the Broadway audience, surrounded by dancing "savages" – African-American dancers clad in outfits not unlike those that Baker herself was wearing in 1933. The film cuts from this scene to that of a vaudeville stage where a troupe of white-clad white women, including Darrow, dance to "Blackbird." Here the new movie seems to be exposing the problematic racial structures.

But the 2005 *Kong* does nothing to address the backwards and sinister associations of non-whiteness with sub-humanism. The new bone-in-the-nose Skull Island denizens are both more violent and more creepily unearthly than their 1933 equivalents. When they attack the film crew they are filmed in close-ups, in low-angle shots, turning them into flailing, moving parts of black bodies, effectively dehumanizing them. In fact, with their hoarsely whispered, guttural speech, their dreadlocks and primitive clothes, they superficially but unmistakably recall the orcs of Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. In other words, they carry the earmarks of Jackson's most evil, inhuman, near-human race from his recent epic. Furthermore, another text casts a strange racialized shadow over the film. Adding a note not found in the original movie, Jackson takes on references to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as ballast. This is a book whose dark-skinned natives never seem to be whole human beings. Conrad depicts his Africans as being "a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling." The new *Kong* actually quotes the text immediately before and after that description while omitting these phrases, and does so right

before the islanders attack. The filmmakers are admitting a debt to *Heart of Darkness*, but eliding the way it dehumanizes non-European bodies by turning them into a dizzying mass of black body parts.

This gets more complicated. In the movie, *Heart of Darkness* is being read, implausibly enough, by a half-literate character, Jimmy, the film's coming-of-age cabin boy (who has his own savage past). Jimmy likes to ask reading-group style questions about the book to the ship's mate, a gruff African-American named Hayes. These two are engaged in a mentor/mentee relationship, which is hard not to read some homoerotic hints into. (After all these are sailors.) Furthermore, and obviously enough, both the May-September and the white-black aspects of the pairing point toward that erotic relationship at the heart of the movie plot.

Ah, that romance. From the moment of the white folks' arrival on Skull Island, Darrow and Kong are locked in some sort of symbio-erotic dance. Her primal scream when she is seized by the natives is answered by the monster's distant, earth-shaking roar. This is jungle fever. Of course, as everyone who has ever read a word about either the original or this *Kong* knows, the ape is meant to be, and indeed emerges as, an all-too-human, sympathetic character. Again, Jackson's version outdoes 1933 in this regard, providing the ape with interiority in his scenes with Darrow: the ape laughs at her jokes and howls angrily at her rejections. Indeed, when Kong momentarily escapes to Central Park with Darrow (not in the 1933 version) the scene is endearing enough to put all those mawkish Nora Ephron-style movies to shame (not that they needed any help). But humanizing the ape is a problematic thing in light of the movie's treatment of racial others; it is as if the Big Lug has received the human characteristics that have been denied the Skull Island natives.

The Darrow/Kong romance is complicated, of course, by the difference in species and, furthermore, by the love triangle, in which Adrien Brody plays the third leg/wheel/man, Jack Driscoll. Driscoll's participation is fraught with the erotics of race. Hollywood movies have a history, of course, of coupling two appropriate white protagonists at the end of films, regardless of whom the characters might have been attracted to along the way to the conclusion. (In some ways, this *is* Hollywood's history, the dominant feature of its aesthetic.) The 2005 *Kong* injects Driscoll into its ending in a way the 1933 *Kong* does not, emphasizing the way the narrative has successfully returned the white woman to her proper partner. It is a telling moment, the movie's very climax, visually as well as thematically. Probably Kong's most famous physical feature is his flattened boxer's nose. Meanwhile, probably Brody's most famous physical feature is his elongated hawk's beak of a nose. Jackson likes cutting from one to the other. He does this at the movie's finale, on the top of the Empire State building: flat nose, Darrow, big nose, all on top of a pointy spire. The elements seem almost laughably Freudian.

In a way it's fascinating to see how painstakingly Jackson's team has renovated the stylistic aspects of a classic film, updating its scenes of prehistoric adventure for the post-*Jurassic Park*, CGI generation, while utterly failing to address its racist undertones, except to make them overt tones. In another way, it's disturbing. One of Jackson's goals was clearly to use technology to make his *Kong* more realistic-looking and realistic-sounding than the original. Reducing the camp factor of movie serves to turn the story's racist sentiments into a matter of film style, as if to deny their actual import in a world in which racism persists and African Americans still, in a pinch, get left out in the cold. The new *Kong*'s aesthetic and

stylistic upgrade makes the film's sinister qualities all the more dangerous and difficult to swallow than that of the original.

The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe

Dir: Andrew Adamson, USA, 2005

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

After the enormous box office and critical success of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy of films, it must have seemed an obvious ploy for C. S. Lewis' seven-volume series of fantasy novels, the Chronicles of Narnia, also to be filmed largely on location in New Zealand. After all, Tolkien and Lewis were closely associated as colleagues and friends, each forming part of the first adult audience for the reading aloud of the other's fantasy work. Like Tolkien's long novel, Lewis' Chronicles offer the film-maker opportunities to excel in the portrayal of a range of fantasy landscapes and fantasy creatures. In the first volume of the series, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (*The Magician's Nephew* is a prequel), Narnia is a land of snow and ice in which the four Pevensie children, Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy, unexpectedly find themselves, to be faced with the task of fulfilling a prophecy that four humans will conquer the wicked White Witch, end winter and rule the country. Narnia is inhabited by dwarves, a giant or two, various mythical creatures and a host of talking animals, and ruled over by the usurping Witch and the true King, Aslan the Lion. The opportunities to rival *The Lord of the Rings* in spectacle and fantasy character are evident. There is much less, in this first novel of Lewis' series, in the way of battle campaigns—one battle, briefly narrated by Lewis—but plenty of dramatic potential in the White Witch's lying promises to Edmund Pevensie, her cruelty towards him later, her propensity to turn those who offend her to stone and her ritual sacrifice of Aslan.

In many respects, Andrew Adamson's 2005 *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* builds on Jackson's successes. Narnian winter is evoked by means of New Zealand's magnificent, seemingly pristine winter landscapes. Narnian battle is expanded in the film from Lewis' modest dimensions, to become a lengthier, dramatic clash of massed troops; many of the forces of evil look quite like Jackson's Orcs. The success of Adamson's special effects, however, is mixed. The good talking fox, for instance, is very much in the Disney tradition of mingled wisecrack and sentimentality, not fitting in stylistically with the much more naturalistic talking big cats and beavers. Puzzlingly, these beavers are given comic Cockney accents, despite the facts that they do not live in cities and are not native to Britain. The most magical of Adamson's special effects is the repeated moment when a petrified Narnian is restored from stone to living flesh.

Adamson's film is at its closest to Jackson's in two episodes. When the beavers and children hear a sleigh coming up fast behind them, they believe it to be the Witch in pursuit of them and hide in a hollow place under the side of the path. This scene closely resembles the powerful episode in *The Fellowship of the Ring* where the hobbits hide from the evil Black Rider, but here the shadowy threat is quickly transformed into the joyful promise of Father Christmas' arrival. There is something factitious about this episode in Adamson's film: after

all, could this benevolent Father Christmas not have called out to the frightened children and animals to reassure them, as he saw them running away and trying to hide? Adamson has opted for momentary excitement at the expense of believability. Similarly, he stretches out Lewis' brief account of the battle, the climax of the good Narnians' struggle against the Witch. The film provides a lengthy depiction of both forces mustering, discussion of tactics, address to the troops by the Witch and some inane dialogue between Peter and his second-in-command just before they gallop into battle ("Are you with me?" "To the death!"), Adamson further adds a new strategy to Peter's handling of the battle, when large talking hawks fly aloft to drop large rocks on the enemy. The film then presents aerial shots of the massed troops racing towards each other and, once they meet, individual vignettes of violent clashes, characters falling or becoming petrified as the Narnian leader, Peter, and the wicked Witch move towards their inevitable single combat. All of this is reminiscent of the magnificent battle sequences in Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* with their clash of multitudes, vignettes of derring-do and focus on the battle-lord, Aragorn.

These close similarities between the films do not always work to Adamson's advantage. The battle between good Narnians and the Witch's evil forces is noisy, vivid and full of spectacle, but it shows up the lack of depth in Lewis' imagining of Narnia. Tolkien's Middle Earth is a region imagined in great historical, geological and geographical depth. The novelist carefully grounds its conflicts in ancient wrong; its warriors are seasoned by frequent sorties to deal with border raids. In comparison, Narnian war is unconvincing in that the Witch appears to have quashed all physical opposition for a hundred years. The good Narnian troops have not fought a long campaign or even desultory border wars, to sharpen their skills, yet they prove equal as warriors to the opposing host. The Narnian warlord, Peter, has until very recently been an ordinary English child and has only just begun to take lessons in swordplay, yet he can somehow instantly take command of an adult army and almost match the formidable Witch as a fighter. There is thus a strong element of make-believe about Narnian fighting, as opposed to the meticulously developed and credible contexts for each fighting force in Tolkien's novel and, to a lesser extent, Jackson's films. It was probably unwise of Adamson to add a sequence, shortly before the battle, in which the Pevensies practise with their new weapons. Susan creditably hits the target with her arrow, while Lucy manages a bull's eye at the same target with her dagger, a feat that stretches belief, and the two boys, Edmund and Peter, ride past cheerfully discussing and practising basic swordplay. This episode unfortunately draws attention to the unlikeliness of the Pevensie children becoming expert warriors in time to fight an adult battle on equal terms with seasoned fighters on the other side, used to hunting down and killing the Witch's enemies. In contrast, Tolkien, and Jackson following him, are careful not to give the unpractised hobbits any such remarkable skills in battle.

As with the battle scenes, Adamson's magnificent New Zealand settings do not altogether help the film as a whole, however ornamental they are in their own right. According to Lewis' story, the Witch has tyrannised over the land of Narnia as well as its inhabitants for a hundred years, fixing the weather at perpetual winter. Part of the joy of Lewis' novel is its evocation of the thaw, the breaking of winter's icy hold and the return of life-giving spring to Narnia. The film's depiction of winter, however, carries little sense of anything stuck, sterile or evil. Rather, it provides landscapes of beauty, expanses of unblemished snow that seem to invite the winter tourist. There is little indication in all this scenery that Narnian weather has long been held prisoner by the Witch. Adamson does represent evil visually in some night-time scenes, when Edmund is in the act of betraying his siblings, floundering through the snow towards the Witch's castle; when the others struggle in vain to reach him and bring him

back; and when the two girls keep vigil as Aslan is mocked, disfigured and killed by the Witch and her companions. This shift from daytime's resplendent whiteness to night-time's blues and greys defines darkness as deathly, the Witch's domain, and suggests that pure whiteness and daylight, in contrast, must be the domain of Aslan and his forces of goodness and renewed life. Any impression of the Witch's power over the land generated by her first appearance in her sleigh, her false promises and bribes to Edmund, is thus in danger of being dissipated.

Adamson is aided here by the well-chosen casting of Tilda Swinton, a woman of other-worldly but far from ethereal beauty, as the powerful Witch-Queen, who is a ruthless warrior in her own right. Swinton's command of the screen makes up for the paucity of evidence that the Witch's reign has had adverse consequences for the land. Visually, it is the evil characters who dominate the film Aslan, the divine Lion, a figure of Christ militant and Christ the saviour, speaks melodiously (voiced by Liam Neeson) and is convincingly embodied, but does little more than pace and roar his way through the requirements of the story; his glorious romp with the girls is eliminated from the film. The Witch is far more interesting as she tantalises, forces a false smile and delays plunging her knife into Aslan so that she can savour her victory. James McAvoy as the treacherous faun, Mr. Tumnus, is equally adept in his mingling of charm, pathos and ineptitude as a would-be kidnapper, instantly and reassuringly proven to be no real threat to the human child, Lucy Pevensie, when he panics and drops his parcels at first sight of her. Skandar Keynes as the treacherous Edmund convincingly glowers and sulks, but his transformation to a good, reliable and noble helper to his older brother Peter is less believable, especially when the brothers first meet after Edmund repents. Aslan has just told the Pevensies that Edmund's past behaviour need not be discussed further, yet Peter's first brief response to Edmund contains an admonition (invented for the film script) not to wander off again, a direct allusion to his furtive exit from the beavers' house to seek out the Witch: no wonder that Edmund's smile here looks a little forced. Susan's (Anna Popplewell) transformation (again the film's invention) is equally forced. She keeps counselling prudence and is eventually told off by Peter for being too "smart"; at this she suddenly becomes cheerfully and completely compliant. Adamson's rendition of physical transformation, as the Witch's victims are turned back to living flesh, is far more convincing than these characters' spiritual transformation to total goodness.

Part of the problem here is the way Adamson shifts the film's emphasis away from spiritual and towards psychological reality. When the story is understood as allegory, as Lewis himself admitted it to be, with Aslan as a figure of Christ, then the transformations of Edmund and Susan are understandable as the workings of divine grace. In Augustinian terms, they have chosen a lesser good—safety or Turkish Delight—that can readily be cast off as soon as the greater good of Narnia and Aslan becomes apparent. It takes Aslan's sacrifice of his own life to redeem Edmund from the consequences of his sinful choice, but neither child needs much convincing to turn away from spiritual error. The problem Adamson brings on himself, however, is that he also gives the children psychological motives for their behaviour, motives that in some cases detract from the spiritual theme.

Lewis' novel begins with the children's arrival at the Professor's country house, evacuees from the war. Adamson provides in the film's opening sequences a detailed realist context for their evacuation: German warplanes are shown bombing London, then the Pevensie mother and children seek refuge in an air-raid shelter, then the mother reluctantly farewells her children at the railway station, they travel through the countryside by train, and are finally met and taken to the Professor's house. These scenes provide ample psychological motivation

for the behaviours of Susan, Edmund and Peter, while Lucy alone seems barely touched by the Blitz. Peter and Susan, charged by their mother with responsibility for their siblings, try very hard to act as grownups and as such are resented by Edmund. Their war experiences account for Peter's tendency to nag and Susan's to shrink from risk-taking. When Peter rebukes Susan for all her cautious advice, she can be understood as gladly relaxing back into childhood obedience, relieved of the pressure to sustain adult responsibility. Edmund's case is more complex. When the Pevensies are fleeing to their shelter, he suddenly rushes back to save "Dad," who turns out to be a photograph of a man in military uniform. While the others miss their father, away on active service, it is only Edmund who grieves so much that he risks his life for a mere photograph of Dad. Is it, then, Edmund's grief for his missing father that causes him to be so sulky, so antagonistic to his older siblings whenever they attempt the role of parent? This would be a reading of Edmund not as sinner but as emotionally disturbed child.

In the scramble to the shelter, the glass on this photograph is cracked: this suggests the wounding, if not the death, of the absent father, for which Edmund is symbolically responsible. In this reading, the self-sacrifice of Aslan on the Stone Table which then cracks, replicates the "death" of the flesh-and-blood father. Again this death and breakage is Edmund's fault. To emphasise the point, the film embroiders Lewis' account of Mr. Tumnus' house by introducing his father's portrait, whose glass is also broken: again Edmund is ultimately to blame, having betrayed the faun to the Witch and thus brought about the capture of Mr. Tumnus himself and the wrecking of his house. Insofar as portrait equals person, Edmund has killed the elder Mr. Tumnus by betraying his son to the Witch. The younger Mr. Tumnus is another guilty son weeping over his father's absence at war, his misery redoubled because his father would have disapproved of his treacherous behaviour. Thus Mr. Tumnus, too, can be understood as an emotionally disturbed son, his better judgement troubled by grief.

If the cracking of the elder Mr. Tumnus' portrait and the breaking of the Stone Table are fantasy equivalents of the breaking of Dad's photograph glass, the film promises a happy ending for the realist family in the actual Blitz with its happy ending to the Narnian war. Like Aslan, the missing father is not permanently absent and will return (Lewis' *Last Battle* confirms this). Edmund's relationship with his mother is not so happily resolved, in this reading. The children's mother, entirely absent from the book, weeps and hugs in the film but cannot protect her children. Reluctantly she sends them away to the countryside to safety. Lewis' misogyny has been amply established by the critics. The film intensifies the book's misogyny by rendering Mrs. Beaver foolishly vain and amplifying the role of Mrs. Macready, the Professor's stern housekeeper. The film's good mothers, Mrs. Pevensie and Mrs. Beaver, cannot protect the children from war's effects; the evacuation of the beavers' house, as the children flee into the countryside, recapitulates their evacuation from London. The film's worst mother is the White Witch, who at first meeting with Edmund, winds her furs around him and offers him hot chocolate and Turkish delight in a parody of maternal care. She pretends instant attraction to him promising to adopt him as prince of Narnia. The readiness with which Edmund believes this unlikely scenario suggests that he has been psychologically damaged by being sent away from home, taking it as personal rejection. The forcefulness of the Witch's anger, not entirely hidden even in this first encounter, further suggests that the boy has interpreted his evacuation from London as symptomatic of his mother's anger against him. It is, after all, the Witch who has brought war to Narnia. Symbolically, then, the Blitz is associated with the murderous mother.

The Narnian troubles are resolved when the Witch is killed. The film ends with the children's return to the ordinary everyday world and a hint of Narnian adventures to come, but without any mention of Mrs. Pevensie. If Aslan's death and resurrection promise the salving of Edmund's grief for his absent father, there is no such promise with regard to the mother. The wicked witch is dead, without any process of forgiveness or reconciliation, and it is fatherly rather than motherly figures who intimate hope for the future.

This reading of the adult females in the film as flawed or parodic mothers does not conflict with an allegorical reading of the work as Christian, given the long sad history of misogyny in the Christian church. It is the representation of absent flesh-and-blood fathers and their effect on their loving children that clashes with the allegorical reading, so that Edmund's sin appears not so inexcusable as to need the self-sacrifice of Christ to redeem him. As with the allusions to Jackson's *Lord of the Rings*, as with the picture-perfect New Zealand landscapes, the realist sequences at the start of the films are in serious danger of sabotaging the film's spiritually charged story.