Babas Bilar (Baba's Cars)

Dir: Rafael Edholm, Sweden, 2006

A review by Lars Kristensen, University of St Andrews, UK

The Swedish critics have not taken kindly to Rafael Edholm's second feature, *Babas bilar*. Perhaps this light-hearted comedy should not be taken too seriously. However, this is what I intend to do, because *Babas bilar* raises issues which reflect upon the direction of the Swedish film industry at the moment. These include a search for a popular genre for younger audiences and the emergence in the last 10-15 years of a regionalisation of film production. *Babas bilar* also underlines the representation of ethnic minorities in Swedish cinema, where the integration of ethnic minorities is seen as complete.

In the article 'The Concepts of National Cinema,' Andrew Higson identified the paradox that in order for a film to be considered part of a national cinema, it has to be recognised internationally. Since then national cinema has been debated widely in academic writing, especially in contention to transnational issues. Addressing the debate ten years later, Higson acknowledges the limitations of what he wrote, but also reasserts that

> if the concept of national cinema is considered troublesome at the level of theoretical debate, it is still a considerable force at the level of state policy. [G]overnments continue to develop defensive strategies designed to protect and promote both the local cultural formation and the local economy [by] exploring and celebrating what is understood to be the indigenous culture.

Swedish cinema seems to me ideal to accommodate Higson's concept of a state supported cinema. In this light, *Babas bilar* offers insight into the strategies of the Swedish Film Institute, which supported the film.

Babas bilar is set in Kiruna in the north of Sweden. Fishing-loving Jojo (Andreas Wilson) has spent his and his girlfriend Anso's (Sara Sommerfield) savings, reserved originally for a deposit on a house, on a gearbox for his Cadillac. Jojo reluctantly goes to Arab-Swedish Baba (Hassan Brijany), Anso's father, to retrieve the money. Anso has rejected her father because of his creative business methods as a used car salesman. Baba sends Jojo to collect a car from Finnish Elena (Laura Malmivaara), the wife of abusive Russian Mafiosi drugs smuggler Ivan (Georgi Staykov). While Ivan is away, Elena sells his Cadillac in order to gather some cash in preparation for her escape from her husband and the isolated city of Kiruna. Ivan's three henchmen, the Finnish brothers Kukka (Pekka is Peter Franzen; Pasi is Hannu Kiviaho; and Penti is Jarmo Mäkinen) are supposed to look after Elena but are safely locked inside the sauna listening to rockabilly music when Elena sells the car to Jojo. The car is stuffed with drug-money destined for Ivan's boss, the mythically Keyser Soze-like Ilja (played by the director, Rafael Edholm!). Soon Baba and Jojo find themselves chasing Ivan's Cadillac, which Baba has already resold to a Norwegian (Per Christian Ellefsen). When the Norwegian crashes the Cadillac into a lake near the statue of a troll -- adding to the gag as nobody seems

to be able to translate troll into neither English nor Russian (troll is a Scandinavian loanword into both English and Russian) -- at the border-crossing into Norway, the prospect of handing the car back to Ivan is gone forever, at least until the spring when the lake is ice free. Jojo and Baba repaint Jojo's Cadillac and drive to Ivan to exchange the car for Anso who, thinking that she was going to view a house for sale, has fallen into the hands of Ivan and his men. After a lot of bullets being fired, blood being spilt, snow-scooters duelling, and the pursuit of people on a fishing rood, the three Swedes, Jojo, Baba and Anso (plus two locals) are finally the only ones left standing. Baba and Anso reunite whilst Ivan meets his destiny in a hole in the ice with three hand grenades tossed in by the boss of all bosses -- Ilja. The end scene has Jojo and Anso in wedding clothes and Baba in the back seat driving south in Ivan's resurfaced Cadillac on a snow-free landscape. To Baba's delight, the money is still under their seats.

Edholm has squeezed into this Northern point of Sweden nearly all the national stereotypes that the region can possibly hold: a raw-onion-eating Russian; sauna-loving-rockabilly Finns; an oil-wealthy Norwegian; drug-buying Afro-Swedes; a dope-smoking Spaniard; and a trigger-happy Dane. I say nearly all, as the indigenous population of the region, the Sami people, are glaringly absent. Either the cosmopolitan mindset of the scriptwriters (Edholm and Björn Olofsson) does not include the Sami people or it might have been judged as a step too far in the non-PC style of the film to mock the indigenous people of the region. It is worth noting that the Sami people have a history of being depicted as stereotypes in Swedish films, particularly in the decades leading up to the 60s. Rochelle Wright comments on these films, saying that frequently the indigenous people as a whole are "depicted as primitive or opposed to technological progress." The dispute over land ownership -- still unresolved today -- is a theme that Wright identifies, resembling the land dispute of the Indians in the American Western or Aboriginals in Australian outback films. In the Swedish Western-comedy of *Babas bilar*, which plays on national stereotypes, the omission of the Sami people signifies that the absence of a national (i.e. nation-state) identity disqualifies you from depiction -- and ridicule. If the Sami people are lacking in *Babas bilar*, then there is no lack of good-hearted Swedes. As the ranchers of the Western film, they are all naturally localised and appear in stark opposition to the criminality of the other stereotyped nationalities.

Jojo and Anso's effort to create a home is regarded as natural and proper -- reflecting a practice in Sweden whereby local authorities encourage people to move to the region in order to reverse depopulation. Baba's business is legal, though it includes a bit of fiddling with cars' speedometers, as well as car sales not always made known to inland revenue. We would expect that from a second-hand car salesman, Arab-Swedish or not. That the two local brothers come to rescue Baba is a sign that he has become like a family member to them; the dictum is, you mess with Baba, you mess with us. The integration of Baba, the non-born-Swede, has already been completed a long time ago. This assimilation is also seen in other Swedish films, for example in Josef Fares' police comedy *Kopps* (2002), where multicultural ethnicity is natural and has no part in the imploding of society (*folkhem*). Films like *Kopps* "present immigrants as a self-evidence part of Swedish society." This does not mean that no antagonistic feelings are heard in Swedish Diaspora cinema, but they are confined to historical retelling of immigration, such as *Made in Yugoslavia* (Miko Lazic, 2005) or *Zozo* (Josef Fares, 2005). The former tells the (hi)story of two immigrants from the Yugoslavia in the late 60s. The latter tells the (hi)story of teenage boy Zozo escaping from the civil war in Lebanon to Sweden in the early 1980s. Within Swedish cinema, filmmakers such as Lazic and Fares "resist being ghettoised as immigrant directors." This differs from the largely North American Diaspora filmmakers that Hamid Naficy identifies. Naficy defines one of the Diasporic traits as the relative independence of the filmmaker working with a small group of

people. By contrast, the Swedish 'immigrant film' is financially supported by the host nation through the Swedish Film Institute, and is politically in line with governmental promotion strategies for multicultural diversity.

The Swedish 'Western comedy,' known as the Paltvästern (Blood bread Western), needs a villain and *Babas bilar* has one in the form of the Russian drug baron, Ivan Kravchuk. He resembles the 1930s villain of Swedish cinema, who was frequently Jewish, with dark curly hair, a large hooked nose, accented voice or a typical Jewish name. The voice and name suit Kravchuk's vilification. Rochelle Wright describes the 1930s Jewish villains in this way: "though occasionally figures of ridicule, they are usually portrayed as a threat, the elimination of which is frequently essential to the film's resolution." She continues: "the Jewish characters are stock figures functioning within predictable narrative formulas and were apparently accepted as such." In much the same way, the Russian villain of *Babas bilar* functions as a predictable formulaic, whose threat is eliminated in the end, and -- more thought provoking -- is accepted as such. Aligning Russian ethnicity with the Jewish reveals ways in which post-Soviet Russians have assumed a place beside Jewish prejudice. If, per Wright, in Swedish cinema Jewish identities may "be related to the representative or emblematic nature of the Jewish Other", then Russian identities may be related to a Russian Other, whose formulaic role is both that of the villain and victim. The latter is evident most strongly from the treatment of forced prostitution in Lukas Moodysson's *Lilja-4-ever* (2002), which Swedish film historian Leif Furhammar calls the "most ruthless, disillusioned, realistic story ever told in Swedish cinema." In contrast to *Lilja-4-ever*, their post-Soviet appearance in the form of labor migration was more subtly depicted in Kjell Sundvall's *Jägarne* (1996), when post-Soviets represented a couple of young berry pickers who were brutally murdered by a gang of local poachers. Ten years later, the victimised berry pickers in Edholm's film are transformed on the one hand into a bullying Russian Mafiosi, but on the other hand into a known (although transitory) resident of the community and on equal par with Sweden's other, ridiculed, geographical neighbours. Ivan Kravchuk is in the same pool as the Norwegian and the Finns, although Russia does not share geographical boarders with Sweden. This neighbouring burlesque happens in a reverse Terry-Wogan-Eurovision-Song-Contest manner, where the neighbour is mocked, not rewarded. However, as with Moodysson's Lilja or Sundsvall's berry pickers, Edholm's Kravchuk is part of an increasing post-Soviet trans-nationalism, where the representation of Russian signifies both the feared and the pitied Other. Kravchuk is not (yet?) a 'self-evident' part of the Swedish society, as with Arab-Swedish Baba.

Although Edholm can not be considered part of the Swedish 'immigrant filmmakers,' he is somewhat an oddball in Swedish cinema. He has no formal training as a director, but has worked as an actor both in theatre and film. Before that he had a career as a fashion model living ten years in New York. Edholm's life outside Sweden might explain his transnational casting strategies. Another reason for the international casting could be what Mette Hjort detects as "a growing tendency among Scandinavian audiences to invest in transnational Nordic identities." While *Babas bilar* might have a viewer strategy of depicting transnational Nordic identities, its plot aims at narrating the national through the local and transnational setting. *Babas bilar* resembles Andrew Higson's view that "the contingent communities that cinema imagines are much more likely to be either local or transnational than national." In *Babas bilar*, where no character is given an explanation for being present in the region, the local is presented as national and the national is set against the transnational. *Babas bilar* has seven spoken languages and highlights transnational border crossing of the Swedish periphery, but this periphery is not scrutinised or investigated for its peculiarities. This

periphery of Sweden is merely the setting for the flying speed of the action, which hardly touches the local ground. Tellingly, only the two snow-scooter-riding brothers, who come to the rescue of Baba, speak in the local Swedish dialect.

The establishment of the regional film production centre can explain the setting of the film in this remote corner of Sweden. Filmpool Nord in Luleå, south of Kiruna, who co-produced *Babas bilar*, began in 1992 with small-scale production. Filmpool Nord improved its status when it took part in the production of Sundvall's *Jägarne*, which had a budget of 17.5 million SEK (£1.2 million), of which one-fourth was spent in the region (www.fpn.se). The local authorities, working with several small councils who own a share in Filmpool Nord, have created a centre of filmmaking at the periphery, which attracts money not only from national film institutions but also from neighbouring countries and the European Union. Language diversity is, of course, one of the trademarks of the film of these regional centres, as is seen in *Babas bilar*. Apart from the success of Filmpool Nord, which has several noteworthy productions behind them, another centre which attracts attention is Film i Väst, which also makes corroboration with neighbour countries, notably with Zentropa and Nimbus Film in Denmark. Film i Väst has in recent years taken part in nearly every other Swedish film. A further indication of the strength of these regional centres is that Stockholm is also aiming at establishing itself as a film region, with the target of stimulating professional film production within the region (www.filmstockholm.se). The plot of *Babas bilar* could as easily have been set in the capital Stockholm as in Kiruna, the centre of Sweden, which is paradoxically promoting itself as yet another periphery. Stockholm might have proved a more appropriate setting for the film.

The action-comedy does not have a long-standing tradition in Swedish cinema. The stylised violence of *Babas bilar* became a hot potato when Edholm stood up to answer questions after the first screening at the Gothenburg Film Festival. A woman wanted to know whether Edholm was content with what she perceived as meaningless violence -- a head shot off, corpses chopped up in a kitchen sink, and countless killings and bloodshed over the 'pure' white snow. Although Edholm retreated from defending the violence of his film, the question well illustrates the type of critical reaction seen around the film in Sweden. Viewer comments posted on the Internet indicate a positive reaction to the film. One commentator noted that the film was a relief from the drab middle-age-crisis cinema that normally comes out of Sweden, whether in form of a romantic comedy or a police-crime film. The fact that there are no police in *Babas bilar* (when Jojo and Baba try to go to the police for help, they find the local police station closed for the winter session) suggest that this is a film which tries to break away from Swedish genre traditions. This seeming innovation explains why the Swedish Film Institute has supported the film heavily; *Babas bilar* received the biggest financial support (6.5 million SEK/ £45.000) in 2005 from the Institute (www.sfi.se). The philosophy of the Swedish Film Institute seems to be that although *Babas bilar* is not revolutionary in cinematic terms, the film might appeal to a domestic audience that has been neglected in the past by the domestic film production. Another film staining the northern region of Sweden with blood on the white snow and released this year was the first Swedish vampire film, *Frostbiten* (Anders Banke, 2006). Together with this film, *Babas bilar* indicates an exploration of more popular genres. In this regard Danish cinema has become a significant role model of the Nordic region, mimicking a Hollywood action genre (albeit locally set) with one hand, and supporting the auteur-driven cinema with the other (Elkington & Nestingen, 2005: 19). For Trevor G. Elkington and Andrew Nestingen this mimicry is part of Higson's governmental defensive strategies. Elkington and Nestingen state:

> even in [Nordic] films aimed solely at national markets, the adoption of Hollywood formulas is an apparent *competitive* strategy. [S]uch films contain elements that are anchored in the national setting; at the same time, differences in style, genre, or aesthetics have become demonstrably homogenized (my emphasis).

Babas bilar reminds me more of a Danish than a Swedish film with its demarcating of a national identity within 'the near abroad'. The non-Swedish style of *Babas bilar* indicates the change within the Swedish Film Institute. If the film succeeds in building a popular base nationally through the genre film, then Sweden might be a country to watch out for in the future. For now, *Babas bilar* disappoints, but also suggests a new direction for Swedish cinema.

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Monster's Ball

Dir: Marc Forster, USA, 2006

A review by Melissa Anyiwo, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, USA

In 2002 the Academy Awards celebrated the year of African Americans. For Hollywood this appeared to serve as compensation for years of exclusion and negative stereotyping. First Sidney Poitier, that misunderstood powerhouse of integration, was honored with a lifetime achievement award. Then, to keep the momentum going, the two most important acting awards were presented to African Americans. The award for Best Lead Actor in a Motion Picture went to Denzel Washington for his portrayal of a corrupt cop in the movie *Training Day*. Halle Berry was awarded Best Lead Actress in a Motion Picture for her role as Leticia in the Marc Forster melodrama *Monster's Ball*. At last Hollywood could claim that acting ability was more important than race in the recognition of honors.

For African Americans, things are never that simple. The controversy surrounding both the movie *Monster's Ball* and the award are indicative of the problematic nature of racial representations in mainstream cinema, compounded by the historically limited range of images of black women in cinema. As Halle Berry herself articulated, this award carried with it a very complex and emotional history. Whether or not it came in recognition of Berry's work in the film, or because this was the 'year of the African American' is open to debate. The movie raises questions regarding whether or not images of African American women in the new millennium have really evolved from the limited stereotypes of days past. Internalization of stereotypes has become so complete that directors appear largely unaware of the connotations of the images they incidentally perpetuate. Modern cinema thus has great potential for the iteration and/or reiteration of dominant ideologies and the perhaps accidental perpetuation of these ideologies under the disguise of political correctness.

Cinematic portrayals of black sexuality have become highly political and central to the articulation of dominant group ideologies, anxieties, and desires. In our politically correct and 'anti-racist' world, we might assume that long-outdated racist/sexist stereotypes and prejudices no longer exist. Yet a critical analysis of mainstream movies reveals a contemporary 'pantheon of black gods and goddesses'. Their presence is covert, hidden within the modern rhetoric of color-blindness and racial harmony which is but one side of an incredibly complex discourse. It is no longer enough to claim that moviemakers are intentional purveyors of intolerant imagery. A cursory look at modern cinema suggests that modern movies, whilst littered with negative images of race, are indeed representations of a modern 'race-blind' industry, or at least one that thinks it is. Black audiences make no comment and even enjoy movies that academic critics label as overtly racist.

Monster's Ball serves as the best example of the problematic nature of racio-sexual presentations in our new enlightened age. Although some might suggest that we no longer ostensibly exist in an era of overt racial sexual exploitation in mainstream life, everything around us suggests otherwise. The only difference between these periods and earlier less

laudable eras seems to be that those who disagree with such limiting representations have a vocal presence and are able to enlighten/inform the viewing audience. Yet that in itself is a moot point given that if enlightenment were enough to elicit change, then this discussion would be unnecessary. *Monster's Ball* nicely illustrates that it is not only the limiting vision of black womanhood that remains a problem in cinema, instead the very presentation of interracial romance continues to exemplify the unequal nature of race relations.

In recognition of perhaps the changing status of black women, before *Monster's Ball* had even entered production it generated a fair amount of controversy. Angela Bassett publicly rejected an offer to play Leticia stating that she considered what would become the controversial love scene to be exploitative and racially demeaning. In an interview with *Newsweek* she said: "I wasn't going to be a prostitute on film. I couldn't do that because it's such a stereotype about black women and sexuality. It's about putting something out there you can be proud of 10 years later. I mean, Meryl Streep won Oscars without all that." White actresses no longer need to sexually demean themselves to achieve recognition. Yet the opposite is clearly still true for black women in Hollywood. Traditionally denied mainstream roles because producers and studios still believe there is little place for leading black actresses, they remain in so few roles that every role takes on an added resonance. A role like Leticia therefore is particularly difficult for an actress of her 'stature' to attempt since Angela Bassett is one of the handful of 'successful' African American movie stars who may feel that it is her place to take on roles that advance the presentation of black women rather than perpetuate existing negative imagery. In the end, Bassett's comments only helped shine a persistent spotlight on a rather simple interracial drama that arguably spurred on a success that led to the Oscars.

Monster's Ball tells the love story of Hank Grotowski (Billy Bob Thornton) and Leticia Musgrove (Halle Berry). It is the job of Hank to lead death row prisoner and Leticia's husband Lawrence Musgrove (Sean Combs) to the electric chair. Hank's son, Sonny (Heath Ledger), working with his father as a Corrections Officer, suffers in an all-male family environment that promotes unemotional cruelty and brutality. After what appears to be a typically demeaning fight with his father, Sonny commits suicide in front of his racist grandfather Buck (Peter Boyle) and father Hank. This tragedy seems to transform Hank on both a personal and professional level.

Shortly after the execution of Leticia's husband, Lawrence, her obese son, is killed in a hit-and-run car accident. Leticia, struggling for survival, meets the transformed Hank, who altruistically provides for her financial needs. She, in return, repays him with her only available asset -- her body. When Leticia encounters Hank's father Buck, she is subjected to a barrage of racist epithets. Following this event, Hank sends his father to a nursing home. Leticia, unable to pay the rent, is evicted from her house and Hank moves her into his home, providing her with much needed emotional and financial support. Their second night together is disrupted by Leticia's discovery of her late husband's drawings of Hank and Sonny. Her realization that she has been sleeping with her husband's executioner leaves her speechless and passive. She lets Hank spoon-feed her chocolate ice cream on the steps of his house while he utters the final sentence: "I think we'll be all right."

Critics and promoters of the film all focused on the sex-scene that comes part way through the film. The encounter occurs at the peak of Leticia and Hank's feelings of uncontrollable desperation, when neither can cope with anymore loss -- a moment of pure hopelessness. Both are crippled under the weight of dual sorrows. Hank mourns the loss of

his son; Leticia mourns the loss of both her son and husband. Under the surface Hank also mourns the years lost to emotional numbness and inexplicable prejudice and his ultimate failure as a father. Similarly, Leticia grieves for her failure as woman -- mother, wife, caregiver, protector -- and her loss of financial independence. In this way, both are victims of a social order that demands far more than it offers for those that are unable or unwilling to conform (Leticia) and for those that do (Hank). While they may appear to be absolute opposites, in this scene they are clearly bound together through tragedy and loss.

At Leticia's house, the desperate couple drinks and confides in one another whilst sharing their personal experiences of tragedy. Leticia talks about her dead husband and son and shows Hank their drawings. As her grief escalates, she throws herself on Hank and begs him to "make [her] feel good." Hank, despite being crippled by grief, becomes Leticia's savior yet again, this time in an attempt to provide sexual relief.

The scene is accompanied by a rather poor use of artistic imagery in the form of a caged bird. The image flickers at brief moments throughout their love-making as interpretative commentary. As the couple copulates, we see what we assume is Leticia's hand inside the cage attempting to capture the bird. The bird, presumably a canary, flies away from her hand in a clearly panicked flapping of wings. There are two interpretations that the viewer can glean from this intentional addition. On the surface, it might appear that the bird represents Leticia's sorrow and helplessness, while the cage represents the prison in which she finds herself. In this scenario, the hand becomes a metaphor for the sexual act, her attempt to release her pain through orgasm. The pain proves immutable, despite her orgasm, recognizing the sex for what it is, merely a temporary distraction rather than true freedom. In this scenario, Leticia is the actor attempting to free herself from pain, an image that fits wells with the rest of the scene where she initiates the sexual contact. In an alternative interpretation, the bird becomes a metaphor for Leticia herself, and the cage represents the emotional and financial prison that encloses her. Here the suggestion is that liberation is being offered to Leticia through intimate contact with a white man. Yet she is unable to recognize the offer of freedom and instead blindly retreats deeper into her cage. In this way, Leticia discovers that fulfilling an interracial sexual fantasy in exchange for financial support only forces her further into bondage. This realization brings to mind the illusion of choice that many black women have had since interracial contact began. As with those white-defined images it is offensive, because Leticia is the initiator of the contact, literally begging Hank to 'fill her up.'

On the surface, this scene is merely the culmination of the utter hopelessness, need, and desperation that the protagonists feel. Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun Times* buys into this simplistic reading when he writes:

> The film's only flaw is the way Marc Forster allows his camera to linger on Berry's half clothed beauty; this story is not about sex appeal, and if the camera sees her that way, we are pretty sure that Hank doesn't. What he sees, what she sees, is defined not by desire but by need.

Apparently Forster feels the same way for Leticia says over and over "I needed you so much," to which Hank responds, "I haven't felt anything in so long." Yet this interpretation is incredibly reductive and superficial. What Ebert sees as the only flaw is in fact the ultimate source of the controversy and exploitative nature of the film. The camera, the white male gaze, reduces Leticia to a mere object disguised by suffering and tragedy. She becomes the

objectified animal-like black body consumed by the white male. In this scene she rapidly goes from tortured victim to hypersexual aggressor, literally begging Hank to fuck her in as violent a way as possible. Hank in fact is the nervous partner at first, unsure of her expectations. The suggestion is that he is not the oppressor but the unwillingly seduced savior of the crazed object. Leticia is thus reduced to yet another representation of the black female body as hypersexual, exotic object.

Halle Berry, as Leticia, represents a suffering black woman devoid of family, lacking economic resources. Like other cinematic black characters in white movies, she represents the black world, yet is removed from it. The only connections she has to blackness are systematically stripped away from her, leaving nothing but the rescue of a white male savior. Like so many before her, her character is "a pathologically dependent dysfunctional mother who's sexually excessive in many ways." She is the symbol of failure. Unable to support her jailed husband, she fails as a wife. The very fact that he is on death row is also a reflection on her character -- choosing such a man as her husband. She fails as a mother, something evidenced by her abusive treatment of her son and her failure to understand the root cause of his obesity. Finally she fails as a functioning economic unit, as an independent woman, by being fired from her job, and evicted from her home. Regardless of the context of her failures (Forster makes an attempt to suggest societal causes), within the context of the movie they are presented as a consequence of her racial identity. This becomes clear when one juxtaposes her blackness and failures with Hank's whiteness and personal success. Hank, though equally damaged, is able to overcome his prejudices, quit his job, buy a gas station, send his father to a home, and gain a sexual companion. Leticia's racial identity is marked as failure, dependency, and passivity, attributes that stand in stark contrast to the white Hank's success, power, independence, and agency. Thus the tragedy for this Mulatta is that the only area where she is allowed any agency is her sexuality, and even that is a reflection of her dependency.

The white male gaze penetrates the entire movie creating an historically typical sexual fantasy disguised in the form of interracial romance. Thus the central character is a beautiful woman of mixed racial origin who provides the dual fantasy of the purity of white womanhood mixed with a healthy dose of the heightened sexuality of black womanhood. As DeWayne Wickham argues, the movie is a "leering, fanciful look at interracial sex from a white perspective" and its highlight is "the union between a grunting, groaning, lust-filled beautiful black woman and an unsuspecting white guy on whom she throws herself." This sexual fantasy is neither original nor enlightened, reproducing yet another version of a time honored image. In this version, once again the ideals of female beauty, as defined by the normalizing white male gaze -- the exotic beauty of a racially mixed woman -- are combined with mythic black sexuality offering itself for exploitation. Hence, in cinematic representations, racially mixed beauties are equated with sexuality, a sexuality exploited by and for the white male gaze.

Here, Leticia is presented as alienated from both white and black worlds, creating a body that is eminently exploitable and thus especially enticing. Yet she is not a traditional Tragic Mulatta because in this scenario her tragedy is not the result of her attempt to 'pass' or the consequence of irreconcilable racial identity. Instead, her tragedy, as mentioned earlier, is a consequence of her absolute dependence on the white male hero -- becoming the willing victim of sexual subjugation. Analyzed in this way, the character created seems particularly offensive as a transparent reflection of white male fantasies of the willing Whore. In this scenario, she is the re-imagined slave girl who offers herself to the paternalistic slave

master. Her post-coital exclamation "I needed you so much," epitomizes a wish-fulfillment fantasy in which the white male supremacist can turn himself into the hero. This counter-hegemonic reading of Leticia seems to defy all suggestions of an enlightened drama with anti-racist motifs.

There seems to be a tendency in modern mass media depictions to construct interracial harmony through symbolic portrayal of intimate interracial contact. Ironically, in *Monster's Ball* this contact is extremely unequal, based on one-sided dependency and an uneven distribution of social and economic power "to the [former] accuser's benefit and at his [perpetual] victim's expense." Furthermore, miscegenation occurs only after the elimination of all black and white characters, after the disruption of all family ties, and previous lifestyles. Miscegenation between Leticia and Hank seems to be a consequence of multiple deaths according to the formula "Kill the husbands, kill the male children, but leave the black female flesh for white men to consume." This seems to be an inadequate solution to white-black relations in America.

There is a tendency within American society, mirrored on screen, to depict racism and prejudice as a phenomenon of the past, the problem of a few evil people who are long dead and buried. This reductionist attitude allows for the creation of new forms of racism and the perpetuation of old stereotypes. Simultaneously, this attitude represents a form of denial of personal guilt and denial of the nation's history that is reduced to a few statistics and national narratives. Thus the most overtly racist character in *Monster's Ball* is the elderly father of Hank, Buck, a relic of an embarrassing and unenlightened past. His disposal in a nursing home illustrates the myth of a racist past that is irrelevant in a non-racist present.

Some critics consider *Monster's Ball* the most racist movie since *The Birth of a Nation*. They judge Buck's racist comments and the exploitative interracial sex scene to be mere scapegoats. There are more implicit racist nuances, which support our interpretation of the movie as a hegemonic discourse, when seen as a reflection of the racist/sexist present. For example, the fact that the only black corrections officer is put on the electric chair during a rehearsal of electrocution is a subliminal comment on the racial attitudes in America that needs no other commentary. Another example of modern day racism and sexism is the scene in which Leticia comments on the state of the black man in America. Berry's character notes that her son's picture of his black father behind bars won a drawing competition. She also expresses her concern over her overweight black son and his possibilities of incorporating himself into the inherently racist social fabric - "black man in America can't be like that." These comments seem to give Berry's character a distinct voice. Yet this black female voice is only a feeble message on the racial state in America that is further negated by Leticia's sexual servitude. In other words, this seemingly anti-racist movie is loaded with baggage from a racist/sexist history that is still embedded in the American subconscious. This phenomenon can be interpreted as modern day racism, an unconscious process of subjugation and control, as explained by Halford Fairchild:

> Racism in contemporary world affairs is disguised, and it is what some refer to as symbolic racism, modern racism or aversive racism. These eschew the old-fashioned, redneck ideology of white supremacy and black inferiority and instead espouse support for the ideals of equality in human affairs. Yet these ideals of equality are discordant with the preference for the status quo of white privilege.

These arguments presuppose the thought process of the director. If this were indeed *The Birth of a Nation* we might correctly surmise that the presentation of imagery was an intended comment on the appropriateness of white supremacy. Of course this is not *The Birth of a Nation* and Marc Forster is in no way a modern reincarnation of the bigoted D. W. Griffith. I suspect Forster is still scratching his head in bemusement at the vehemence of criticism regarding his film. In fact I feel a modicum of sympathy for a man who I suspect believes he is a liberal, non-racist who wanted to present a modern day love story set in the South and prove that interracial romance can transcend its historical problems. Yet ignorance is no excuse for the resultant presentation of white supremacy and male hegemony. Instead, what his film demonstrates so clearly is that these attitudes are now completely entrenched in the white psyche, indeed in the American psyche. Forster is not the victim here; instead he is the unthinking liberal whose prejudices come from centuries of negative imagery internalized by the white male audience of which he is a part. Perhaps the real point here is that we, the marginalized audience, are incapable of viewing racial or gendered images without getting caught up in the signifiers of the past. In the end, is the director at fault, or the oversensitive, alienated, marginalized audience?

Over time the sexualization of popular culture has created a troubling world in which women are primarily templates for male fantasies. The Madonna image has almost wholly disappeared from screens to be replaced by multiple variations of the Whore. This current obsession with sex has allowed the continual denigration of black women to become merely another acceptable part of American culture. Her sexualization is now so entrenched that few notice the intentional and overt reasons for such imagery, failing to see the inherent negatives of the image. All women are overtly, disturbingly objectified regardless of their race, age, class. Thus both Halle Berry and Demi Moore, women separated by race and years, can appear on screen in almost invisible bikinis in unnecessarily eroticized scenes. Beyoncé and Jessica Simpson are equally exploited sexual products for mass consumption marketed both to young girls and middle-aged men.

Monster's Ball demonstrates that there remains a clear difference between the objectification of black and white women. The historical reasons for racial/sexual objectification are still significant despite evidence to the contrary. They remain an implicit expression of the power of the dominant group over a subject minority. Despite extraordinary social progress, black women remain at the bottom of the social hierarchy, the group with the least power in a society controlled by elite white males. Thus whilst Leticia can be seen as merely one more objectified female character in a mainstream film, as Bryan Turner suggests, representations "are not innocent; they carry, for one thing, an irredeemable history of sexual relationships." The Leticia image, like all cinematic representations, transcends the film to preserve these racial/sexual myths. Subconsciously, unconsciously, or otherwise, the audience (and Forster) reduces this character to her sexual acts primarily because she offers nothing new to the image of black womanhood. Halle Berry may have opened doors by winning an Oscar, but Leticia remains a lonely black woman scratching at the back door hoping to be let in.

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Atlantic

Dir: E. A. Dupont, UK, 1929

A review by Carol Donelan, Carleton College, USA

Atlantic is an early RCA Photophone talkie based on a stage play by Ernest Raymond called "The Berg," directed by E. A. Dupont for British International Pictures. It was released in November 1929, just five months after BIP's hugely successful first talkie, Alfred Hitchcock's *Blackmail*.

The narrative of *Atlantic* is classical in construction, consisting of two lines of action: one monitors the stages of the endangered ship, and the other tracks an illicit affair between two first-class passengers, Mr. Tate-Hughes and Mrs. Lillie. The two lines are related via a mutual repression of the truth and the substitutions and displacements of meaning that are typical of repression. The repression or "muteness" of characters, in turn, keeps with the convention of melodrama that often manifests itself in the persecution and silencing of an innocent victim-hero(ine) by a villain, or in the silences that accompany situations of moral antinomy in which two or more morally good characters find that their interests are fundamentally incompatible.

The film opens in a state of equilibrium, with rhythmic sounds accompanying images of the ship's hull slicing effortlessly through placid waters. A cut shifts attention to an interior space, a bar and game room, inhabited by a leisurely group of first class passengers playing cards, including Mr. John Rool and his wife Alice, Major Boldy and his drinking companion Dandy, the Padre, Mr. Tate-Hughes, and young newlyweds Laurence and Monica. The sense of equilibrium is confirmed as Dandy gazes out an open window and pronounces the night "lovely," establishes the time, "eleven o'clock and all's well," and adds a note that is only foreboding in retrospect, "Rest in peace good people all."

The first hint that all may not be well is sounded in an exchange between Captain Smith and Officer Lanchester. "If anybody asks you anything, if you hear any talk, be careful," the captain warns. "I don't want my passengers needlessly worried." This scene is followed immediately by another in which the first-class passengers are themselves engaged in speculation about an incident they've just witnessed, involving, as Major Boldy puts it, the appearance of "the lovely Mrs. Lillie" and the subsequent "stealthy and unnoticed departure of our friend Tate-Hughes." Mr. Rool shushes the gossiping group as Lanchester enters the room, a gesture of repression that parallels that of the captain's in the previous scene. Both lines of action are thus marked from the beginning by repression and censorship.

Dandy proceeds to question Lanchester about a rumor heard at dinner. In the first of the film's many displacements of meaning between the two lines of action, the rumor about which Dandy questions Lanchester does not concern the affair but rather that the ship is in the neighborhood of icebergs. Lanchester dodges the question—both the conscious one regarding the ship and the unconscious one regarding the affair—by tutoring the group in the science of icebergs, in the process, spinning out metaphor upon metaphor for repression. A

"growler," he explains, is a large iceberg that is invisible because its top is melted—a metaphor for how repression renders invisible some of the contents of the mind. With the proper combination of breaks and swells, he continues, the growler is revealed—just as repressed content is sometimes manifested in the "breaks and swells" between the conscious and unconscious mind. "Ice blink," on the other hand, happens when a berg has two sides, one blue and one white, with only the white side reflecting the light of the stars as the berg sways in the water—just as repression divides the mind between conscious knowing and unconscious not-knowing. "What about black ice, which is especially difficult to see?" wonders the Padre, invoking total repression. "We've got good eyes watching for it," Lanchester responds reassuringly. This statement is backed up by a shot of Captain Smith and another officer peering through binoculars into the darkness—blindly, as it turns out.

The pattern of repressing and displacing meaning does not remain confined to the dialogue in these opening scenes. In keeping with Geoffrey Nowell-Smith's analogy between the psychopathology of hysteria and the melodramatic text, wherein repressed content is converted into bodily symptoms, the "body" of Dupont's film begins to express what characters are not able to put into words. Music and sound effects, in particular, are used in this early RCA Photophone film in the service of melodramatic expression. Three scenes are worth noting in this regard. In one, a grand staircase becomes a stage for the playing out of melodramatic conflict as Mrs. Tate-Hughes and her daughter Betty question Pointer as to the whereabouts of Mr. Tate-Hughes. Rather than lie, Pointer stammers until the orchestra in a nearby ballroom suddenly resumes playing, exempting him from the necessity of having to tell the women what he knows. In another, Mrs. Tate-Hughes and Betty seek the counsel of the Padre, who gently deflects their questions until his words are displaced into the sounds of an alarm bell signaling the sighting of an iceberg. In a third, Lanchester is rescued from having to articulate to the Padre the truth about the ship's status when the shrill whistle and explosions of an emergency flare take the words right out of his mouth.

Despite these displacements, *Atlantic* is ultimately concerned with locating masculine virtue in telling the truth, no matter how difficult, rather than in repressing it out of a paternalistic desire to protect women and members of the lower classes. A series of related scenes begins with Lanchester articulating the truth about the ship's fate to Mr. Rool, a cynic initially painted ever so lightly with the brush strokes of melodramatic villainy. Rool is a writer of "dangerous" books, ones Monica has not been allowed to read at school because they "make fun of everything everyone else finds beautiful." Rool's potential villainy is clearly located in his impulse to confront and express difficult truths in a society that prefers to repress and censor them. That Rool is consigned to a wheelchair also facilitates, rather ironically, the initial misrecognition of him as villainous rather than virtuous. Linda Williams describes how the suffering body is central to the orchestration of moral legibility in melodrama. Inasmuch as that body is male or female, "suffering itself is a form of powerlessness that is coded feminine." But because virtue is specifically coded masculine in *Atlantic*, Rool's feminization via his suffering body ironically negates his masculine virtue. The goal of the melodrama is therefore to recognize Rool's qualities as teller of difficult truths and as endurer of bodily pain as signs of masculine virtue.

So Lanchester breaks the code of silence imposed by Captain Smith in announcing to Rool that "the ship has three hours to live." He turns his back to the camera when he articulates these words, thereby detaching the words from their visual source, in keeping with the film's pattern of displacing the truth. Rool is visibly shaken by the news, as is Dandy, who overhears the conversation and cries out in panic. "Steady, see it through old man,"

Lanchester says, invoking the masculine virtue of repressing one's emotions. As Dandy struggles to regain his composure, his expression of emotion is displaced into the next shot of smokestacks loudly signaling the ship's distress. A cut back to Dandy has him silently pantomiming his rising panic to the blast of a distress signal (one that is so long and prolonged, it surely tested the capacities of early theater sound systems).

Rool summons Dandy to sit next to him. "You and I know the truth," he says between loud blasts, "and knowledge is a great responsibility." Whether that responsibility requires one to tell what one knows, no matter how difficult, or to repress what one knows in order to protect others from the responsibility of knowing, is central to the film's project of recognizing virtue. In one scene, then, the question arises as to whether Dandy has told Major Boldy the truth about the sinking ship. Major Boldy suddenly announces to Rool that he indeed knows the score. "Unpleasant, isn't it?" he quips, with characteristic understatement. He directs attention to his more emotionally demonstrative companion, commenting: "Dandy's got it badly." Rool then implicitly validates Dandy's emotional expressiveness over Major's Boldy's ethic of manly repression: "It's natural to be afraid. It would be cowardly to pretend that we are not." Not one to be accused of cowardliness, Major Boldy immediately confesses that he's "got it too," and abruptly smashes his glass to the floor as proof.

Between the first-class male passengers, then, expression wins out over repression as a virtue. In their relationships with women, however, the opposite applies. There is virtue in repressing difficult truths in order to protect women from the responsibility that comes with knowledge. Whereas the first-class male passengers are "masters of their fates and captains of their souls," women have no such control. The challenge for the "masters" and "captains" is thus to convince wives and daughters to get on lifeboats while repressing the truth about why they must do so. Laurence, once informed of the ship's fate, finds himself in the difficult position of needing to lie to Monica in order to save her life. The melodramatic solution to this dilemma involves shifting the responsibility for lying to another man within one's social class, in this case Rool, whose sacrifice on behalf of Laurence in turn allows for the recognition of Rool's virtue. "Darling, on your honor, is everything all right?" Monica inquires of Laurence. A rather bizarre extreme close-up of Rool, almost a flash frame, follows, and then a more conventional shot of the three characters. "On his honor, everything is all right," Rool pronounces on Laurence's behalf. Convinced, Monica does as she is told.

The virtue of protecting women by withholding the truth is complicated in another scene as the philandering Tate-Hughes is informed of the ship's sinking. He has lost all credibility with his wife and daughter. How is he to convince them to get on a lifeboat? Rool offers to speak to them on his behalf, focusing his efforts on Betty in particular. "Do as your father tells you," he implores her. When none of the usual entreaties work, Rool resorts to telling her the truth: the ship is sinking. The act of divulging the truth about the ship substitutes for the truth Tate-Hughes has withheld from his wife and daughter about his affair with Mrs. Lillie. Whereas in the previous scene Rool lies on behalf of Laurence in order to protect Laurence's honor and save Monica, he tells the truth on behalf of Tate-Hughes in order to protect Tate-Hughes' honor and save Mrs. Tate-Hughes and Betty. Both situations allow for the recognition of Rool's virtue.

The issue of class is finally confronted, if only briefly, as Laurence ushers Monica towards the lifeboat. Sailors pick her up against her will and deposit her in a lifeboat, as though she has been pushed through a mosh-pit. She screams and faints as the boat is lowered into the dark waters, as Laurence looks on from behind a rope barricade. Suddenly two male steerage

passengers break through the barricade and attempt to board a lifeboat in violation of the chivalric code of "women and children first." A panicked officer shoots the transgressors and their bodies tumble backwards into the sea. Curiously, both passengers are played by black actors, as if to underscore their characters' social distance from the first-class white passengers about whom the film is primarily concerned. The casting of black actors may also reflect anxiety on the filmmaker's part about depicting an officer of the British Navy shooting passengers, especially those with whom majority white working class British audiences in 1929 may have identified. In any case, this shocking incident serves a narrative function. Laurence, traumatized by what he witnesses, can explain to Mrs. Tate-Hughes and Betty the reason why Mr. Tate-Hughes will be unable to join them on a lifeboat. Laurence then reveals to Rool that Monica is pregnant, expressing via displacement repressed content that potentially also belongs to the censored storyline involving Tate-Hughes and Mrs. Lillie.

Act Three of *Atlantic* presents melodramatic solutions to the dilemmas posed by the policy of "women and children first," particularly as it affects the male passengers and crew. Lanchester offers to get Alice on a lifeboat, but when she refuses to leave behind her wheelchair-bound husband, he promises to use his influence to get them both on a boat. As he departs with the couple in the direction of the lifeboats, however, the ship founders and the lights go out, giving Rool just enough time to rethink the situation. He insists that Alice go alone, the implication being that Rool's manservant Pointer will accompany her and perhaps also find a seat on a lifeboat. Once again, Alice refuses, declaring that she has no intention of getting on a boat without Rool. Acquiescing to his obstinate wife, Rool then proposes that Lanchester take Laurence instead, to join his pregnant wife Monica. This poses a problem, however, given the lesson of the previous scene, wherein the male steerage passengers are shot for attempting to get on a lifeboat in violation of the policy of "women and children first." The melodramatic solution: exempt Laurence from responsibility for his actions. Thus, he faints.

"We gave him too great a struggle between his heart and his will," Alice explains as she tends to him. "And he seemed so strong and active and manly." This remark, in turn, gives Rool an opportunity to recognize the virtue of the suffering body, despite its implied feminization: "There's nothing unmanly in suffering more than the body can bear." Rool then orders Pointer to take Laurence to the lifeboats, thereby exempting his loyal servant from responsibility if he happens to alight onto a boat as he accompanies his unconscious charge. Having orchestrated this solution, Rool pauses to acknowledge the reward he receives at the expense of his own life—the reward of having authored the melodramatic solution: "Laurence goes to a fine life, finer than he could ever hope it to be, if this berg had never appeared. He'll be a hero for the rest of his life. That's damn funny. We did a little bit of creation in that moment, Alice." Meanwhile, the possibility that Lanchester will also be saved is implied when Captain Smith orders him to rescue a little girl and swim with her out to the last lifeboat. The fact that Lanchester is following orders and performing heroically on behalf of the little girl is another melodramatic solution that exempts him from responsibility in the event that he also manages to find a seat on the lifeboat.

The film concludes as the remaining passengers, mostly from steerage, crowd into the bar for free drinks. The atmosphere is almost celebratory. In keeping with melodrama's drive towards moral clarity, the passengers are positioned in the frame hierarchically, such that representatives of virtue are at the top, representatives of villainy at the bottom, with the remaining first-class passengers in the middle, including Rool and Alice, Major Boldy and Dandy, Tate-Hughes and the Padre. Steerage passengers gathered elsewhere initiate a chorus

of "Nearer My God to Thee," gradually replacing the drinking songs and chatter of poker players. The Padre endows the singers with virtue via an eye-line match across a cut, further delineating those bound for heaven or hell. Meanwhile, he turns his back to Tate-Hughes, grouping him with the godless gamblers in the lower portion of the frame. The Padre is not the only figure around whom the image is polarized, however. Rool and his wife Alice occupy the other pole, representatives of a secular virtue that finds its reward in life rather than in the afterlife, in the experience of aesthetic creation, of authoring the self, of mastering one's own fate and captaining one's own soul.

Mission: Impossible III

Dir: JJ Abrams, USA, 2006

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

Tom Cruise has been around for 25 years now and remains arguably one of the dominant forces in the Hollywood hierarchy. Alongside other national treasures Arnold Schwarzenegger and Tom Hanks, he commands incredible slices of the gross theatrical revenue (reportedly 20% of the first-dollar gross) and video earnings of his films as a full partner with the studios. Yet his habit of tainting the star system with his now trademark refusal to stay in character in public and on television talk shows made it somewhat inevitable that studio Paramount would attempt to claw back some of the revenue share it had lost to Cruise in negotiating his three *Mission: Impossible* deals. Last summer *The Hollywood Reporter* concluded the superstar is struggling at the age of 44 to appeal to men and women in equal measure. Comes now the news that against his closest competition and Paramount-based rival, Brad Pitt (whose production pact with Paramount CEO Brad Grey is golden, given the good relations between the two), he is even losing the battle of the "fogies".

What has surprised the industry is not so much the unceremonious divorcement in August of the superstar's company from the lot after their latest film failed to reach $400 million worldwide, as the correspondent and deliberate souring of relations with Hollywood's largest talent agency, Creative Artists Agency. Hardly had Viacom sufficiently integrated the "studioless studio" DreamWorks, completing the course of a lengthy installation period, when it risked the disintegration of relations with former DreamWorks co-owner Steven Spielberg, prominent CAA member and now resident Paramount-based "talent". If Sumner Redstone, chairman of Paramount parent overlord Viacom, saw the Cruise affair as an opportunity to push the studios back to centre stage and 'mogulise' his own premiership by disempowering the world's most formidable star and talent agency, then CAA president Richard Lovett responded in kind by heading to the *New York Times* to portray Paramount as a studio unsure of "who is making the decisions", thus implicating newly appointed chairman Grey. Redstone's now troubled relationship with Grey among others notwithstanding, his endlessly criticised decision to axe Cruise dovetails nicely with last year's mandate to split Viacom into one, a high-growth rate company and two, a moderate-growth but cash-rich company. Redstone is evidently motivated by a desire for corporate clarity and a need to increase shareholder value quickly. Redstone's renewed trajectory towards a deconsolidated unit of companies involved in a wide range of media activities, newly configured to be critically leaner and more focussed towards their respective industries, appears to apply just as seriously to his dealings with elite superstars. Only time will tell if the surgical removal of Cruise will give rise to a new economic situation in which Hollywood studios reassert their standing in the community against elite superstars and their agencies, or whether it will go the way of Viacom's pseudo-meiosis, with many media giants looking on with nothing more than casual indifference.

Since his artistically challenging turn in *Magnolia* before the new century, Cruise himself has been the compelling main attraction in a series of mass-appeal films: *Mission: Impossible II* (2000), *Vanilla Sky* (2001), *Minority Report* (2002), *The Last Samurai* (2003), *Collateral* (2004), and *War of the Worlds* (2005). To the surprise of some, he had successfully honed the persona which emerged in the late-eighties to produce consistent, multiplex- and teen-friendly mega-hits through the nineties and into the zeroes. However, the potential glimpsed in *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) and *The Firm* (1993) has long since been subsumed by a safe strategy of self-glamorisation to protect the star as dependable mass-market commodity. It was in this defensive crouch that *Mission: Impossible III* was borne between the start of principal photography in July 2005 and its theatrical release in May this year.

Following media firestorms about the lifestyle rules of Scientology, a compensation claim filed against Cruise-Wagner Productions, the birth of daughter Suri to fiancé Katie Holmes, and the contentious cancellation earlier this year of a *South Park* episode repeat which revelled in mud-slinging toward Scientology in general and Cruise in particular (prompting suspicions of internal politicking at Viacom, which may or may not have vetoed TV network Comedy Central at Tom Cruise's request), the bedevilled *Mission: Impossible III* finally bowed in the summer season opener slot which last year fell afoul of Fox's dismal *Kingdom of Heaven*. Brad Grey might well have been relieved this particular $150 million monkey was finally off his back, but too much rested on the commercial performance of *Mission: Impossible III* for anyone to turn their backs at all. Unlike Fox, which was well prepared for the 2005 season, with action-adventures *Mr & Mrs Smith* and event of the year *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* ready to make up for *Kingdom of Heaven's* short revenue life and push the studio's global seasonal business north of the billion dollar mark by August, this year's opening tentpole came with very little support from its impoverished releasing studio. With only one other noteworthy film on the Paramount summer slate (Oliver Stone's *World Trade Centre* due in August), and partner DreamWorks Animation's key summer picture *Over the Hedge* (on which it relied heavily, particularly against vintage Pixar animation, *Cars*) set for a late May release, Grey's aspirations for this third entry in the *Mission: Impossible* franchise extended beyond simply wishing to open with a good-natured, kid-friendly bang.

This second sequel, then, in the treasured series is, not unexpectedly, another bone-crunching star vehicle, delivered with relative care by TV director JJ Abrams (he of recent *Lost* fame). Cruise has surprised by working up a straight drama to get things rolling again, and how self-consciously embarrassing it seems in light of his demotion in the Hollywood community. Set in a rather politically featureless modern landscape (with nothing at all in the way of Spielberg's wobbly emotive appeals, as in his *War of the Worlds* adaptation), the script by Alex Kurtzman, Roberto Orci and Abrams echoes the early nineties humanising project that so occupied Schwarzenegger's creative team after the success of *Kindergarten Cop*. It presents Cruise's Ethan Hunt as the ideal husband, a contemporary male classic who has the best interests of recent attachment Michelle Monaghan at heart. He becomes emotionally and physically vulnerable when her life is suddenly put in jeopardy because of his work for the secret Impossible Mission Force.

For black marketeer Owen Davian (Hoffman), an awareness of emotional frailty and the threat of personal loss are the best tools for containing enemies and keeping at bay those with potential. Determined to learn the secret storage place of this episode's classic MacGuffin, the cryptically labelled "rabbit's foot," Davian interrogates the captured Ethan, who is given ten chances to produce an answer. Having failed, Davian executes Ethan's wife, Julia

(Monaghan), before his very eyes. We next see Ethan and Julia together hosting a party in Virginia, some weeks before the killing. Trying to downsize his relentlessly gung-ho role with the secretive organisation, Ethan now runs an exclusive training programme for IMF recruits with the hope of settling down permanently with Julia. However, the kidnapping of protégé Lindsey Farris (Keri Russell), and the subsequent combat operation to retrieve her from a stronghold in Berlin, turns the tide irrevocably. Mourning the death of Lindsey, whom he was unable to save from a doomsday device implanted in her skull by Davian's cohorts, and learning from disgruntled IMF director Theodore Brassel (Laurence Fishburne) that Davian himself will be selling the rabbit's foot to buyers in Rome, Ethan hastily weds Julia and garners her support for his unspoken duty to apprehend Lindsey's killer. He cavorts across to the Vatican with the help of his support team, Luther (Rhames), Declan (Jonathon Rhys Meyers) and the glamorous Zhen (Maggie Q). The *Mission*: *Impossible* series' gleeful merging of the wittily superficial and a Cinema of Attractions-inspired visual unreliability finds its most sexy and glamorous new precedent here, as Ethan's team break out the customised face-masks, fetishised gadgets, and mouth-wateringly bronzed bodies to steal the rabbit's foot, apprehend Davian, and interrogate him on the flight home. During their first intimate exchange, Davian shuns Ethan's weakwilled questioning, and infuses the scene with considerable menace by vowing to terrorise Ethan's loved ones. A mole in the IMF, realising that Davian will in fact soon be in the official custody of the organisation, sends a squad to ambush Ethan's team on the Chesapeake Bay Bridge. While Ethan manages to fight back, Davian is quickly airlifted to safety and dispatches a crew to track down Ethan's wife.

Love is, hence, the principal motivation here, and Cruise's Ethan has found it in stereotypical abundance. As presented in either the sociably 'open' environs of the home or in Monaghan's hospital workplace, the couple are a grinning, blissful picture of action movie romance. Exchanging protracted, melancholic looks whilst entertaining a house-load of partygoers and portentous glances when it's time to talk serious, the new Ethan Hunt domestic set-up continually asserts a specifically adolescent view of adult relationships by recalling the warm-hearted 'look' of *Jerry Maguire*. Trying unsuccessfully, one suspects, to modernise for his teen audience the plot fragments from numerous unheard-of James Bond films (1969's *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* springs readily to mind), Abrams struggles to plumb the depths of an artificial maudlin union operating at the most basic level of dramatic representation. We almost expect Hunt's early bed scene with Monaghan to metamorphose into a *Lethal Weapon 2*-style fleshy consummation, and are barely taken by surprise when the film's hysterical pre-credits interrogation appears to conclude with her execution. Nor is this merely the fault of the actors, for in the context of the film's revenge story, their relationship exists only to proffer Monaghan's nicely elegant Julia as the expendable sacrifice in a narrative with ambitions scantly higher than, say, *Commando*. It's precisely this earnestness and perfunctory attention to character, however, that alerts us early on to the essential powerlessness of Hoffman's hostile antagonist. Once the potentially gripping façade that could have taken over the series and plunged Ethan into irretrievable despair is finally incoherently usurped by yet another impossibly accurate face mask gag (a faux Julia is revealed post-execution in fact to be an assistant of Davian's), Abrams clears a path for a return to the masculinist fantasy of the first *Mission: Impossible* movie. He restores Ethan to the body beautiful, first for some formulaic running, rescuing, and thrilling self-defence, then a bothersome, narcissistic suicide, and ultimately a gasping, red-eyed revivification at the hands and lips of the newly gun-toting and savagely vengeful Julia. In returning the stale filling of the last reel to the soft-centred sentimentality of an IMF family reunion, Abrams's upbeat conclusion bridges the gap between the showy masculine ideals of the *Mission: Impossible* franchise and those of the *Lethal Weapon* films, in which insanely excessive pains

are endured and tolerated by the hero's willing body in the name of those surrogate families which have formed over the course of the narrative – which he exists now to protect. If one thing is certain in these cynical days of internet photoblogging, Tom Kills Oprah vids, and tongue-in-cheek 'free Katie' campaigns, it is that Cruise must do everything he can to become a man's man again. (He even took Katie to a Washington Redskins game recently.)

But if this fictional depiction of Cruise as the jubilant fiancé, who fears marital bliss but will at the same time do anything an eighties hero can to protect it, can indeed be related directly to his off-screen lifestyle in which we have seen him recently propose marriage to, pledge his commitment and loyalty to, and ultimately father a child with, actress Katie Holmes, then Cruise's other project, which is perhaps his most important -- to retain his onscreen persona as the relevant, transcendent action hero for a whole generation of his male audience -- is souring. This is indeed a shame, for the actor is certainly game for sprinting along the waterfront of an overcrowded fishing village in multiple takes and hanging out of a car with guns blazing. It also highlights Cruise's increasing desperation to combine commercial scale with his fading action hero image. The emphasis placed by the film's producers on Cruise's armoured, infallible body, the mastering of acrobatic skills to perform a stunt unaided, and of the boy's adventure ethos which dictates that real action actors place themselves in physical jeopardy for the gratification of the audience, is clearly in conflict with the star's own talent for negative self-publicity.

Predictably, some of the best action scenes are framed with a Spielbergian, *War of the Worlds* sense of immediacy, in which Hunt's body is propelled and blasted through the air as the fashionably cacophonous and unremitting carnage erupts all around. The particularly impressive shootout which takes place on the Chesapeake Bay Bridge inevitably recalls James Cameron's picturesque treatment of same in *True Lies* (1994). When special ops troops skilfully extract Hoffman's chained Davian from an armoured van, one is reminded of Michael Mann's methodical, workmanlike approach to the professional heist at the heart of *Heat* (1995). But the hyper-kinetic visuals that accompany bullets pounding into metal and the bridge erupting in pockets of dust just as equally recall the emptily derivative shootout in Michael Bay's trashy *Bad Boys II* (2002), whose vicious street-level firefight and subsequent Ferrari-lead car chase is largely the blueprint for *M:i:III's* opening close-combat factory sequence and videogame helicopter battle.

Surprisingly, there are few attempts to emulate the naturalistic thrills of either *The Bourne Identity* or *The Bourne Supremacy*, which achieved both box-office success and critical respected stylistic ascendancy in a market dominated by *XXX* and Brosnan-brand 007 films. It is only in the fresh presentation of the ruthless and impersonal IMF workplace, previously marginalised by Brian DePalma's focus on meticulously crafted, out-in-the-field set-pieces and John Woo's languorously shot, holidaying ultra-violence, that *M:i:III* with its Watergate (and now, Bush-era post-surveillance controversy) relevance, acquiesces to the split-narrative structure of the *Bourne* series in order to observe corporate villainy and cover-up at the source. But typical of the franchise, America's reactionary Impossible Mission Force draws in artificial constructs fitted to the stock requirements of 80s action and teen-school comedy. Billy Crudup's Mulgrave is the operations manager, the deceptively moral walking embodiment of IMF idealism who comes to Ethan with the lead about Lindsey's kidnapping; Fishburne's Brassel objects to Ethan's trademark superspy excess and piles on the bureaucratic heat; and Simon Pegg's Benji, whose encounters with the hero remind one of Ethan's gawking interplay with his eccentric Antipodean team-mate in the previous film, endeavours to help Ethan thousands of miles away with self-deprecating one-liners and a

wisecracking computer-geek's wisdom. The organisation is framed like a theme park of attractions. While Ethan is frantically searching the hospital for Julia, Brassel and Mulgrave compete in a conveniently covert game of one-upmanship to determine just who, if anybody, is morally and ethically sound within the company. Brassel has Ethan captured and locked down for interrogation and Mulgrave crosses the line to set him free. Ethan reminds everyone, in his gleefully superficial escape, that he still loves IMF like extended family.

Though commentators have welcomed the series' shift away from the suaveness established by DePalma and concretised by Woo into more artistically risky, 'adult' material, *Mission: Impossible III* is no *Training Day* or for that matter, *Die Hard*. If, with its emotionally and physically vulnerable protagonist, *M:i:III* is indeed any sort of response to the tonal shift of Paul Greengrass's *The Bourne Supremacy* into a more vérité and adult form of spy-action sub-genre, then the result is a slightly more teary-eyed comic-book narrative eventually weakened by blockbuster doctrine **--** Commodity Cruise is ostensibly nothing like the risk-taker Matt Damon is. Moreover, if its aim is to humanise and render as conspicuously reluctant the Ethan Hunt action hero for a post-9/11 cinematic climate in which there simply *are no* heroes, then it is, most hypocritically, a nonsense piece.

Superman Returns

Dir: Bryan Singer, USA, 2006

A review by Michael Duffy, University of Nottingham, UK

Superman Returns brings back to cinemas the iconic superhero that first debuted in *Action Comics* in 1938. Sent to Earth by his parents when his home planet of Krypton exploded, Kal-El learned that on our world, he had extraordinary powers and abilities. He has since used them to aid mankind, fight injustice, and protect his new home. Throughout his history, Superman has encountered all manner of menace, the most powerful often being cultural and social change in America, his original "adopted" homeland. The character that once fought for "Truth, Justice and the American Way" has been interpreted and exploited by all areas of media, most famously in television and film, for over sixty years. During his history, Superman has been creatively revamped in numerous incarnations. He has changed costumes, altered his molecular structure, married, and even died. Though he has not appeared on cinema screens since 1987, Superman has never really left pop culture, thanks to a continuous presence in various television series throughout the 1990s and 2000s, and of course the character's shifting, unending comic book legacy.

In bringing Superman back to the big screen, director Bryan Singer wanted to explore the character's relevance to contemporary culture and, in an age of comic-book film adaptations run amok, return him to his "proper" place in the cinematic pantheon. In *Superman Returns*, however, much of Singer's ambitions seem muddled or misplaced. The first chapter in this purported new film franchise offers little in the way of accessible wonder, childish fascination, spectacle or excitable aesthetic elements. Singer and his two scriptwriters, Michael Dougherty and Dan Harris, have constructed a narrative which has Superman returning to Earth after five years in space (where he was exploring the remains of his home planet, Krypton), only to find his arch-nemesis Lex Luthor again poised to take over the world, and his former love Lois Lane raising a child with another man. The alien central character is thus forced to deal with the very human consequences of abandoning one's "place" in our contemporary social society. At least, that is how the film is set up. Many of the details are either missing or remain open to interpretation, or perhaps, if one follows industry scuttlebutt, left on the cutting room floor (though the presence of the "floor" is even in question, since *Returns* was shot entirely in digital).

Just how Superman's alter-ego Clark Kent can return to work at The Daily Planet newspaper -- at exactly the same time Superman does -- without incident or suspicion remains a mystery (what's *his* reason for going missing?), as does most of the "vague history" that precedes the rest of the main characters in this newest interpretation, which links itself in characterization and approach to Richard Donner's *Superman: The Movie* (1978) and Richard Lester's *Superman II*. What realization caused Superman to leave so abruptly? How did he learn of it? How did he feel when he left? How did he feel while he was away? All this is left to grand speculation as we return to a world where Lex Luthor (maintaining his wig fetish) is surrounded by the same sort of monosyllabic assistants that worked for him in the earlier,

Christopher Reeve-led films, and where Lois Lane, apparently a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, still cannot spell "catastrophe."

Singer's approach to Superman virtually ignores almost thirty years of creative development in the comic books and graphic novels that have kept the Man of Steel's image evolving since his origins. Instead, the director and his writers have rather obtusely designed *Returns* as an homage to Richard Donner's 1978 epic, even going so far as to posthumously "cast" Marlon Brando in the role of Jor-El, Superman's deceased, but Claudius-like, biological father. For this supposedly "new" incarnation, Singer has recycled many basic plot elements and even telltale dialogue from the original film. In essence, *Returns* becomes what one critic has already termed a "requel," meaning that it contains elements of both a remake and a sequel. The film tries to be both, but is too weighted with nostalgia to accomplish either goal successfully.

Many scenes from Donner's first film are referenced (Superman again crashing to Earth in his spaceship) or repeated with little adjustment (a romantic flying interlude, a Lex Luthor land scheme). Early on, a short, fun flashback to Clark Kent's childhood farm life in Smallville, as he jumps through cornfields and discovers some of his extraordinary physical abilities, proves that Singer might have succeeded in a complete remake, but his approach to the character is again confusing and inexplicable. Why is the teenage, already super-powered Clark wearing glasses, when he did not in Donner's original film, nor in the current television incarnation of the superhero's back-story, *Smallville*?

Interestingly, *Returns* also contains many thematic ideas and plot elements developed in previous unsuccessful script attempts at reviving the franchise during the last decade (Lois' child-rearing and pregnancy appear in a Dan Gilroy draft, Superman's apparent "death" and return was a subject broached by many drafts for director Tim Burton and star Nicolas Cage, and a Superman airplane rescue scene, touching down in a stadium full of people appears in a J.J. Abrams draft from the early 2000s). Various incarnations of *Superman* were in what film industry insiders term "development hell" throughout much of the 1990s and early 2000s. When director Bryan Singer became attached to the project in 2004, most comic book fans uttered a collective sigh of relief. Singer had just come off a critically-praised and successful second *X-Men* film (*X2*, 2003), and had basically cemented a reputation as a director who could make smart, cerebral character-driven blockbusters.

Superman Returns creates numerous problems for Singer and his creative team. Singer's typically serious, weighty approach to filmmaking works well for characters like the X-Men, whose stories translate metaphorically for many different cultural and societal groups. For a character like Superman, whose bright red and blue costume is very much tied to who he is, and historically, what he has stood for, Singer's sensibility seems visually and aesthetically at odds with the very nature of who this iconic character is -- or at least how he appears on cinema screens.

Superman's "believability" has often been a source for criticism for certain high-art, and even mainstream, critics. Many ask why no one in the world can figure out that Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter for the Daily Planet newspaper, shields his true identity of Superman with merely a business suit and a pair of glasses. Therein lies one of the main weaknesses of both the plot and narrative approach to *Superman Returns*. Christopher Reeve held court with a wink and a smile in the series of films in the 1970s and 80s, using the dual identities to playfully flirt with Lois Lane and verbally tussle with Lex Luthor in equally charming ways,

bringing a heart to his performance that kept viewers dramatically involved even when the films themselves became flimsy around the edges. *Returns* strains hard to make us believe not only that a man can fly, but that he feels the weight of being the world's "savior," and that we (as the audience) should take his responsibilities seriously. However, in this film, Superman's choices of who to save, and indeed, the decision to (re)appoint himself as savior of the world -- defined in this film as upper-class, Caucasian, American-accented downtown Metropolis -- seem pretentious, overly messianic, and emotionally cold. This heavy-handed approach to a hero who proudly flaunts his colors and arbitrarily chooses to save one city's inhabitants over the rest of the suffering world -- a world that he is shown listening to from above the Earth's atmosphere -- ironically only serves to accentuate the contemporary irrelevance that the character is dealing with in the film itself. It equally steals all of the fun out of this supposed summer blockbuster "entertainment." Even as summer escapism, the film's cultural politics are surprisingly thin. The Daily Planet's editor Perry White treads lightly upon the hero's long legacy of representing "the American way." "Does he still stand for truth, justice -- all that stuff?" he asks. The most indication we get that Superman is living in a post-9/11 world is a brief shot of Clark watching television just after he has returned to Earth; as he catches up on global unrest relayed via 24-hour news channels, his face becomes dour.

The details of Superman's absence are glossed over (it's a wonder Lois doesn't resent him more than she already does). Luthor's scheme to create a real estate landmass out of Kryptonite rocks and crystals seems extraordinarily naive for a "criminal mastermind." Superman returns in a costume that, while aesthetically similar to its comic book origins and previous film interpretations, is strangely drained of its primary colors (is it meant to reflect his state of mind?). Most glaring is the drab, understated characterization of Lois. For a woman who, it is implied, has had an "intimate" relationship with Superman, she fails to emotionally acknowledge that she just might know that her five year-old child, who begins to exhibit super-human behavior and an uncanny knack for locating Superman in troubled ocean waters, may have been fathered by someone other than her current Earth-born partner. It is left to Lex Luthor, of all people, to suss out the secret -- and he does so rather quickly. "Who's the father?" Lex exclaims, upon encountering Lois and her son on his yacht. "Richard White," Lois replies. Lex, after noticing the boy's strange reaction to a Kryptonite chalice he is holding (Lex apparently quite aware of Lois and Superman's past romance), dryly replies "Are you *sure*?" The film isn't helped by the fact that the two actors playing Superman and Lois Lane don't quite come off as old or mature enough to be seasoned at their respective jobs, let alone have a "history" together.

The central problem with Singer's antiquated yet modern approach to the character is its refusal to commit itself to one sensibility. In embracing Superman's spiritual and mythic significance, Clark's bumbling behavior becomes anachronistic silliness, and the fact that no one recognizes that Clark is indeed the Man of Steel (especially Lois) becomes ludicrously untenable. There are also heavy moral ambiguities in the main character. In his first public re-appearance, Superman embraces his renewed fame in front of cameras. He later uses his x-ray vision and super-hearing to spy on his former lover and her new family at night. The characteristic morality and honor of this long-circulating superhero are thus deeply called into question. This attempt to place the character in a contemporary emotional conundrum, while holding on to the goofiness of past cinematic adaptations, convolutes and negates meaning in the film. It creates precious little original emotion to latch onto, despite the return of John Williams' stirring musical themes. The film's few action sequences also fail to achieve the

intensity that is common in most blockbuster films these days, despite impressive special effects paired with expertly visualized landscapes and backgrounds.

Brando's brief reprisal as Jor-El, strangely denied any on-screen time with his own "son," is accomplished through a combination of re-used audio and video footage and digital facial manipulation. The use of Brando's image and dialogue from *Superman: The Movie*, visually inserted in one scene and vocally overlaid throughout the film, literally highlights Singer's emerging fascination with "historical re-creation." This creative choice, reportedly made with the Brando estate's legal permission (and payment to them of a substantial "salary"), accentuates Singer's and the Hollywood film industry's obsession with using digital technology to toy with our collective cinematic histories and memories. In re-animating a past/passed film star, just as Luthor "communicates" with Jor-El's artificial intelligence program when he raids Superman's Fortress of Solitude, Singer is literally using portions of cinema's past as building blocks for a supposedly "new" experience, and essentially dragging a previous-era Superman kicking and screaming (just as Luthor and his cronies literally do in the film) into the 21st century. Using digital "superpowers" to raid our cinematic histories is already creating significant problems in the definition, meaning and ontological status of moving images.

In terms of living actors' performances, there is not much to talk about here. The cast is comprised of minor stars and unknowns who fail to make any lasting impression. Even though he is in many ways "continuing" the previous actor's cinematic character arc, only in a few scenes does newcomer Brandon Routh approach the subtle emotional honesty and dramatic tone that Christopher Reeve attained in his performances throughout his time playing Superman. Reeve's presence and performance in the role from 1978-1987 lifted the first four *Superman* films above their cultural and economic base values. Sadly, even graced with a budget reportedly north of $200 million dollars, Routh fails (but only just) to make Superman his own. The actor's digitally re-colored eyes, and indeed wholly digitized presence in many scenes, beg the question, was a new actor, or any actor, actually necessary at all? Are the ethics involved in resurrecting Brando, Laurence Olivier (in 2004's *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow*) and Bruce Lee (reportedly for a new film project) all that different to those involved in bringing back Reeve? (Ironically, Routh's *Superman* casting announcement came only a week after Reeve's death in 2004.)

Last year's *Batman Begins* accomplished a return of the character to its "roots" with an origin story unrelated to the franchise's previous installments, giving the Warner Bros. comic book film property new life while simultaneously constructing its narrative to make the audience feel like they were welcoming back an old friend. *Superman Returns*, though birthed from the same studio conglomerate and comic book company (DC), does not accomplish the same. *Returns* places its faith heavily in nostalgia and theological underpinnings, and is all but nonsensical in its mythological, narrative, dramatic, aesthetic and marketable pretensions. As a film, it fails to be compelling or memorable. Its narrative, thematic and visual elements do not add up to a coherent pop culture product or piece of art. In its attempts to be simultaneously contemporary and nostalgiac, the film's ambitions become muddled. Its abstract plot becomes rootless and perfunctory, much like the main character as he alights into this digital age. Confused and aghast at the changes in the world around him, this archaic version of the character can do nothing more than stand on the sidelines and attempt to survive in a story that reveals his own contemporary and cinematic irrelevance.

Funny Games

Dir: Michael Haneke, Austria/Switzerland, 1997

A review by William Smith-Bowers, University of Westminster, UK

After the development of the 'peep-hole machine,' the most significant advance made by filmmakers was to create the camera/projector. This resulted in the formation of an audience willing to pay to experience 'moving' and 'talking' images (originally synchronised with a phonograph) projected onto a screen. This 'cinema first' may have taken place for the first time in room five at the Edison laboratories in the second half of 1888.

At this time, we are witnessing equally important developments in the 'film' projection and viewing experience. These changes began in the 1960's when video recording machines were first marketed for home use. The current viewing experience of films includes 'Home Cinema' with 'surround sound,' High Definition plasma screens, access to alternative camera angles, audio commentaries, and handheld technology that allows consumers considerable control over speed, direction and other ways to watch a film. However, what and why are we watching?

Since the 1890s, a number of films have addressed the consumption of the cinema experience and its production processes. A film such as Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1927) provides the viewer with a visual exploration of the cinema experience and some of the elements of 'film language' in sequences such as the seats changing position in a movie theatre in preparation for a film projection, the filming of cameramen filming scenes in Odessa, the representation of the editing process, and the 'stop action' bow by a camera near the end of the film. However, *Man with a Movie Camera* does not address why we are watching and what we are *anticipating* will occur as a film unfolds. One director who has addressed such issues is Michael Haneke. In films such as *Funny Games* (1997), *Code Unknown* (2001), and *Cache* (2005), he provides us with new and 'meta' explorations in 'film language'. He does this partly by using our awareness and understanding of recording and playback technology to 'interrupt' the film diegesis. Each of these films offer a 'disturbing evening,' to use Haneke's phrase. They challenge the pleasure and purpose of our viewing while providing new ways of thinking about how we construct the meanings of films, as illustrated by a closer reading of *Funny Games*.

Funny Games is an innovative film that explores how viewers give meaning to cinematic violence. To achieve this, *Funny Games* disrupts a number of cinematic conventions and questions our consumption of such violence.

Funny Games is like other 'home invasion' films such as *The Desperate Hours* (1955), *Straw Dogs* (1972), *Fear* (1996) and *Panic Room* (2002). They can be summarised as variations on a plot line in which intruders enter a home and take the family hostage. After a number of acts of violence by these intruders, the family 'fights back' and eventually the intruders are slain. In *Funny Games* this plot line is subverted. The 'fight back' fails and each member of

the family is slaughtered. At the end of the film the intruders are about to commence their next 'killing game' at a neighbouring home. The film establishes a number of key dramatic moments that could have resulted in the family 'fighting back,' yet the family fails to do so on all but one occasion.

At the start of the film, the family feels uneasy about their neighbour's behaviour; their dog will not stop barking at two polite and helpful teenage boys who appear on their property. These opening scenes of 'unrecognised' danger are consistent with the home invasion 'genre' and precede the taking hostage of the family by two teenage intruders.

Other scenes in the film narrative suggest that the defeat of the intruders will be a demanding and life-threatening venture. The father receives a broken leg following his attempt to expel the intruders. The father position is reduced to that of a helpless victim and spectator of the ensuing violence (and thereby positions the film viewer as helpless spectator through the process of identification). The hope or wish of the viewer is now transferred to the wife and son to secure the expected 'genre' reversal of fortune. The next opportunity to challenge the intruders occurs when the son attempts to escape. At one point he discovers a shotgun and confronts one of the intruders with it. However, the start of the 'fight back' is aborted because when the son finally overcomes his inhibitions and pulls the trigger, the gun is found to be empty. Later the intruders kill the son using the same shotgun. These scenes are structured to stimulate our willingness to identify with the son's plight and 'will' him to overcome his inhibitions and pull the trigger. By not allowing our 'discharge' of emotion by the son's violence, the director Haneke increases our frustration and feelings of powerlessness and thereby our desire for justice (revenge) through the agency of the mother.

Even after the death of the son, new opportunities appear that suggest it is still possible to expel or even kill these intruders. The intruders leave the house suddenly and without explanation soon after the son's murder. The husband and wife are able to free themselves from their bonds. Their attempts to call for help all fail. A few hours later, they are back under the control of the intruders, who suddenly reappear.

Alongside the reversals of genre conventions, Haneke breaks the 'closed space of the film' by visual and audio references to the viewer. At one point, the intruders force the mother to play a game to find the dog that they have killed. During her search one of the intruder's turns and winks at the camera. This is the first acknowledgement to us that we are known to be watching. By using a wink a certain intimacy and approval is also suggested. This could be interpreted as a visual sign for "things are going well." On the second occasion, the same intruder turns and speaks directly to the camera, asking us. "whose side are we on, presumably the families?" Such 'familiarity' with the audience is used to suggest that we have wanted to watch the violence that has been enacted on the family and that we also want and expect it soon to be transferred to acts of violence by the family onto the intruders.

The next disruptive intervention in the film narrative is even more dramatic. While preparing to murder the husband, the intruders offer the wife a game which will allow her the choice in the murder weapon to be used. During this 'game,' she is able to snatch up the shotgun and graphically discharge both barrels into one of the intruders. The other intruder immediately cries out "where is the remote." He finds and uses a video remote control to reverse the film we are watching. We now discover we are watching a video under the control of one of the intruders, who returns the film to the moment just before the wife snatched the shotgun. The family fight back is 'disallowed' as the mother is stopped from taking the shotgun. What we

thought was film has been converted in front of us into further proof of our powerlessness, because the intruders not only play games, but they can change the 'rules' when they start losing.

In the final scenes of the film, the intruders leave the house and travel to a nearby neighbour, where they quickly gain admission. The film ends with a close-up of an intruders face looking directly into the camera. His knowing 'look' suggests 'here we go again' and 'do you want to have some more fun'.

What have I been watching and why have I continued to watch? Do I want to watch and take 'pleasure' in such representations of violence but only after it has been made acceptable to me by a succession of 'correctly ordered' cinematic conventions? Do I want to see 'my' home, wife and children threatened whilst secure in the knowledge that Fredric March, Dustin Hoffman, Kurt Russell or Jodie Foster will restore order just in time? Haneke's actors do not provide that sort of resolution. Haneke is wise enough to pose questions without providing the answers.

Haneke has recently announced that an English language remake of *Funny Games* is in pre-production, starring Naomi Watts and Tim Roth, with a US release date of 2007. This Hollywood version raises some interesting questions. Will the film retain its current 'unhappy' ending or will it offer the audience an opportunity to identify with the family's fight back against intruder violence? Is it possible that a happy conclusion could be created like in the 1993 *Vanishing*, a remake of the 1988 Dutch kidnap movie *Spoorloss*? In the original, the hero is buried alive at the end of the movie, while in the US version he fights his way out of the grave and signs a book deal to sell his story as a novel. It is hard to imagine that Haneke could make such narrative compromises, but if he does not plan to re-shoot the movie scene for scene, what will he be adding to his German original?