

American Beauty

Dir: Sam Mendes, USA, 1999

A review by Peggy McCormack, Loyola University, US

The commercial and critical success of Mendes's debut, *American Beauty*, has been striking; since it was released, it has earned a prodigious return on its producers' investments and was immediately hailed as a classic of American cinema. [1] What has not yet begun is scholarly examination of this extraordinary film's complex psychological rhetoric of narration and style. As Hitchcock so famously acknowledged about his skill as a rhetorician of film technique in *Psycho*, "I played [the audience] like an organ." This essay analyzes extensively the specific film techniques that director Sam Mendes utilizes so brilliantly to create specific affective responses towards its main character, Lester Burnham. In so doing, Mendes's auteurist direction, now clear in *Road to Perdition's* motif of beautifully lit water cinematography and *Jarhead's* scorching light and sound-effected war landscapes, is first evident in *American Beauty's* astonishingly beautiful cinematography and masterful control of determinist narrative as rhetoric. What all three films share is Mendes's craft in set design used to create vividly depicted worlds for his protagonists that appear strongly deterministic of their protagonists' outcomes. Mendes, in visual language, like Stephen Crane's and Ambrose Bierce's prose, sets his characters afoot in environments and narratological traps that explain the protagonists' outcomes.

The cultural study of cinema often uses more global approaches in reading the film as text. As a consequence, such readings may not address Mendes's determinist vision translated into film techniques working together as one cinematic engine geared to act upon the audience's responses. My approach is to examine very specifically how Mendes uses film technique to create psychological effects in the audience; these effects are the consequence of the director's ability to manipulate cinematic technique to envelope the viewer in the protagonist's world, causing the viewer to identify deeply with the protagonist's responses to his world. There are five interwoven cinematic and narrative elements in *American Beauty*: first, the system of traits encoded in Carolyn Burnham's character (Annette Bening); second, the functions of the film's creation of subjective points of view sequences for some characters and omission of that same cinematic element for other characters; third, a parallel between Carolyn's personality and that of her next door neighbor, Col. Fitts (Chris Cooper). Fourth, an implicit parallel between the nexus of heroic meanings localized in Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey) as sympathetic underdog turned hero who forms an opposite to Allison Janney's brilliant performance as the psychologically broken Mrs. Fitts. Finally, the essay examines the doubling of the audience's sympathies for Lester as protagonist through Ricky Fitts's character (Wes Bentley), who in Lester's mind evokes his lost youth. Ricky and Lester are the two characters to whom the film's narrative, dialogue, photography, and editing give repeated subjective or first person points of view that create intratextual reinforcements of Lester and Ricky's relationship as the older and younger heroes of the film. These elements function as some of the film's most powerful devices, thereby demonstrating Mendes's skill and highlight his directorial traits. This essay focuses upon Lester Burnham's character as created through narrative and stylistic elements of the film and will briefly reference the four foils and or antagonists to Lester's character: Carolyn Burnham, Col. Fitts, Mrs. Fitts, and Ricky Fitts.

Carolyn Burnham's first appearance establishes how we will see her and shapes how we will react to her character. She is Lester's chief antagonist. Significantly, she is initially mediated to the audience by Lester's opening voiceover. The opening sequence of shots show Carolyn to the audience through Lester's eyes as we listen to his first voiceover and as we watch him stand inside their house watching Carolyn first alone in her garden and subsequently talking with neighbor Jim (Scott Bakula). Carolyn, then, is initially Lester's construction of her. An evidential argument can be made that all later sequences that include, focus on, or reference Carolyn cohere with and reinforce only Lester's own interpretation of her such that, even when Lester is not present, his introductory view of Carolyn substantially influences the film. From Lester's voiceover introduction of Carolyn as an emasculating female, she is represented as controlling, demanding, unloving, materialistic, adulterous, and abusive toward Lester. Mendes consistently depicts Carolyn's negative traits and denies her a point of view sequence in which she could be portrayed sympathetically. She bears the brunt of the movie's more negative satirical thrusts to clear the torturous path for Lester to become *American Beauty's* unlikely hero. [\[2\]](#)

Through narrative juxtaposition and character similarity, Mendes skillfully compares the Burnhams with their next door neighbors, the Fitts. Carolyn and Col. Fitts are the dominant, abusive heads of their households; she is represented as less controlling than but headed in Col. Fitts's direction. As antagonists to the film's two valorized figures, Lester and Ricky Fitts, Carolyn Burnham and Frank Fitts appear to be polar opposites. Carolyn's high maintenance, contemporary style is notably different from Fitts's 50s crew cut, cardigan-sweatered mindset. Nonetheless, Mendes's repeated crosscutting between the two homes demonstrates their roles of negative spouse and parent. In additional crosscutting, Mrs. Fitts constitutes a foil to and parallel with Lester as the abused, submissive partner of a domineering spouse. In comparison, Col. Fitts's need for control has taken its greatest toll upon his wife. She appears to be a walking catatonic. As a blasted victim of decades of domestic abuse, this stay-at-home wife is never seen outside her house, and every time she speaks, she prefaces her remark with "I'm sorry."

Ricky Fitts, Lester's self-described "personal hero," fulfills two people's fantasies: Jane's Oedipal fantasy, but also Lester's nostalgic sexual fantasy of his youth and reinvention of that lost youth in the character of a young man as Lester wishes he had been: "so confident" (Jane's description of Ricky); "I don't get scared" (Ricky's reassurance to Jane as they prepare to move to New York on their own); and seemingly with no need for social approval. This image inspires Lester. Ricky's father, Col. Fitts's final homosexual, then murderous actions toward Lester effects the resolution to Carolyn's dissatisfaction with him as husband. One may read Fitts as a narrative agent carrying out Jane's repeated expression that her father is so "lame" that he should be "put out of his misery" and Carolyn's vigilantly asserted threat to Lester when he drops out of the economic rat race that "You will not get away with this. You can be sure of that".

At the end of the film, Fitts and Carolyn, the negative, dominant spouses remain in charge of their families. Is this an element of the narrative's social satire? If so, it is deeply embedded in the film's system of ambiguous meanings since another resolution (that Lester is our hero, and Fitts is as a psychological wreck) also appears to take place at the film's end. Both Fitts and Carolyn are devastated by their losses of Ricky and Lester. Fitts's reaching out to Lester may well suggest the pain of losing Ricky. So also, Carolyn is last seen on her knees in Lester's closet, keening; her face is buried in his clothes. Mendes balances Col. Fitts and Carolyn's downward narrative trajectories with a contrasting variety of stylistic features that

signify Lester as triumphant in his search for meaning in his life. Fitts and Carolyn, in their parallel familial behaviors, function as homophobic, homoerotic, and misogynistic subsidiary characters who motivate both Lester and Ricky's intimate, non-sexual relationship and Ricky and Jane's sexual relationship.

Lester is the film's only voiceover narrator; at three points in the story, he directly asserts to the audience that this is "[his]" story. To examine Lester's POV in the film is to make apparent Mendes's beautifully crafted creation. Lester's voiceover character speaks to us from an unidentified, preternatural temporal and spatial locus somehow still within the film's text, judging by the three recurring overhead camera shots of the entire Burnham neighborhood, street, and house. His character's persona as a dead, benign, and only credible eyewitness narrator of the strand of events during the last year of his life privileges his point of view. The technique references William Holden's voiceover from the dead in *Sunset Boulevard*, one of four films that Mendes acknowledges studying before shooting *American Beauty* in his commentary. In addition to Lester's voiceovers, the quantitative as well as qualitative on-screen time of his character (in actions crucial to the narrative's resolution) indicates his as the film's privileged perspective. Seeing Lester's subjective perspective consistently coheres with the film's objective action, the audience understands him as the most comprehensive intratextual viewer of the action.

Lester introduces himself as the captive of social and economic constraints, a George Romero zombie. He is imprisoned visually by window panes in Carolyn's house, by columns of numbers on his computer screen at work, as well as an ant hill-like office with rows of identical cubicles lit by oppressive rows of Foucauldian fluorescent lights. [3] The enlightened dead Lester avers that he was "dead already" from these entrapments a full year before his biological death. As narrator, Lester introduces himself masturbating in the shower as the "high point" of his day. He then drops open his briefcase as he runs the gauntlet in front of Carolyn's surveilling gaze and feels already "sedated" as he sleeps curled up in the back seat of Carolyn's Mercedes on the way to work. He feels he has "lost something" that he can't yet identify. This three part introductory sequence concisely establishes Lester's dilemma as we watch him slumped in the back of the SUV, eyes shut to the beautiful day outside the automobile window. At the same time his voiceover promises a narrative trajectory that will bring about his recovery, as he declares "it's never too late to get [that unidentified lost] it back [emphasis in screenplay]," a clear counter to his unprepossessing initial appearance.

Mendes and cinematographer Hall's commentary on the storyboards (that the director brought to the filming) describes how their photography of Lester's generically named workplace, *Media Monthly Magazine*, emphasizes his loss of individuality. The first sign of Lester recovering his lost "it" is in his two encounters with "Brad," the corporate clone brought in to decide who is "expendable" from Lester's branch office. Lester initiates an aggressive offense to Brad's clear threat of Lester's layoff. In his second meeting with Brad, Lester confronts Brad with his knowledge of his boss' use of "the company MasterCard to pay for that hooker." Mendes edits these sequences to convey the rapidity of Lester's counterattack. In the final showdown with Brad, Lester successfully uses the incriminating evidence about his boss' corporate venery to extort "one year's salary with benefits" from the company. Mendes shoots this sequence of Lester's exuberantly larcenous and unexpectedly successful gambit to nail the company instead of their firing him with a consistent focus on Lester. The sequence concludes with Spacey's triumphant fist in the air as he marches happily away from Lester's self-described, former position as a "whore for the advertising industry."

In the car on the way home from his workplace triumph, Spacey sings along vigorously to the early seventies *Guess Who* classic by Burton Cummings, "American Woman." The verse that Mendes shoots Spacey singing clearly references Lester's next goal after he has just freed himself from his job as prison site: his recovery of his masculinity from Carolyn's condescension toward him:

American woman, stay away from me; American woman, mother, let me be;
Don't come knocking around my door; I don't want to see your face no more; I
got better things to do than sit around and get old with you.

Hungry from smoking marijuana, Lester pulls into Mr. Smiley's Burgers and, in another gesture toward freedom, takes a job as a fry cook - a job that gives him the least amount of responsibility possible in the society against which he is rebelling. As a plot device, this job accomplishes several goals beyond demonstrating Lester's tuning in, turning on, and dropping out mentality. To him, it evokes his lost youth. Earlier in the film when Lester is buying pot from Ricky, he nostalgically describes the summer he was seventeen in which he did nothing but "flip[] burgers...party and get laid" as "great." Finally, his job creates an opportunity for Lester to discover his wife's adultery with Kane when they stop in for burgers one afternoon "after the [sexual] workout [they] had [that] morning."

American Beauty's classically symmetrical narrative sequences show Carolyn and Lester several times first at work and then back at home. While Carolyn eagerly pursues economic success and recognition in her job (as when she slaps herself when crying in the sale home), Lester's initial underdog status, coupled with his need to re-establish his identity outside of the job he perceives as meaningless, makes him appear sympathetic to the viewer in comparison to Carolyn. Mendes's use of the film's diegetic codes, character development, symbolism, photography, point of view shots, voiceovers, lighting, editing, and sound make it difficult not to blame Carolyn for Lester's sense of lost identity and his perception of himself as victim in the economic rat race. Since Lester has successfully, from his perspective, overcome his employer as a threat, only Carolyn is left as his chief antagonist: she intends to use him as an economic tool to realize her class ambitions. Lester is, then, something of a darkly comic Mr. Craig (from Dorothy Arzner's 1936 film, *Craig's Wife*) rebelling against his similarly self-absorbed, cold wife.

Ball's screenplay and Mendes's direction create Lester Burnham as a remarkable chameleon. Beginning as a dead spirit, then recounting his doomed status as "colossal loser" in the eyes of his wife and daughter, he subsequently devotes himself to the narcissistic goal of reshaping himself to "look good naked" after he deludes himself into believing that this transformation may enable him to win the attention of Jane's best friend, Angela Hayes. Through control of POV sequences, intense stylization in the four fantasy sequences, and Lester's intermittent efforts to communicate with his wife and daughter, Mendes brilliantly develops Lester as the film's hero. He becomes warmer, wittier, and more relaxed, culminating in his great insight seconds before he is murdered. It is, for instance, Lester's privilege to point out to Carolyn that she treats Jane "like...an employee." So also, in contrast to the angry scene between Carolyn and Jane revealing Carolyn's resentment toward Jane's economically privileged childhood, Lester regresses to an adolescent-like state psychologically and spatially. In contrast to Carolyn's hostility toward her daughter, Lester's isolation from his wife and peers creates, from economic and psychological perspectives, his bonhomie toward the teenagers with whom he is surrounded and with whom he prefers to associate. Spatially, the garage

becomes a room of his own just as Jane's vivid orange bedroom is her own creation. These are the only two areas of the house that do not fit into Carolyn's muted color scheme.

Within the film's overall narrative framework, Mendes contextualizes Lester's sexual fantasies about Angela are with rhetorically charged negative and positive elements. Comprising the two negative poles are Carolyn's (f)rigidity at home, burlesqued adultery, and materialism that are echoed by Col. Fitts's exponential increase in controlling behavior. Two parallel positive elements include, first, Mendes's presentation of Lester's stand against Carolyn's materialism. Lester tells Carolyn that life has become the commodities she possesses, and "honey, that's just nuts." Second, and parallel to Lester's transformation into the film's truth teller, is Ricky's role as a younger, surrogate Lester who recognizes and pronounces his father as a "sad old man."

Mendes deliberately only reinforces Lester and Ricky's perspectives by the film's diegetic code and a doubling motif in their dialogue. Similar to Lester's multiple access to the viewer's sympathy through his three voiceovers are Ricky's intuition of "this incredibly benevolent force that wanted [him] to know there was no reason to be afraid. Ever" coupled with his doubled POV element: the telephoto lens of his camcorder. Thus, both Lester and Ricky's perspectives are reinforced by a doubled access to point of view, and only these two possess deeper understanding of the 'real' nature of the world within the text. Both become the individuals gifted with insight into the highly problematic natures of their troubled families. These techniques, coupled with the negative elements attributed to Carolyn and Col. Fitts, work effectively to move us toward sympathy and identification with Lester and Ricky.

The CGI Rose Sequence

The breathtaking beauty of the Lester's sexual fantasies contrasts with the negatively caricatured representation of Carolyn's adultery. The spectacular quality of the film's CGI fantasies neutralizes a potentially unsympathetic audience response toward Lester's sexual pursuit of his teenage daughter's best friend. The four fantasy sequences function as powerful rhetorical coding of Lester as hero, a romantic visionary who has been singled out for the gift of these heavenly and heavily eroticized fantasies of Angel(a). These sequences expertly combine surreal beauty with male fantasies about the objectified, very young female body. Two examples illustrate the fantasies' rhetorically-charged, psychological effect upon audiences. The second fantasy sequence in which Lester imagines Angela on his bedroom ceiling, lying naked on a bed of roses while rose petals magically fall down upon his smiling face, ironically echoes Marilyn Monroe's famous 1949 nude pose on a similar red background. [4] Similarly, in the bathtub fantasy, Angela voices the ideal fantasy woman's response to a man: "I've been waiting for you....I was hoping you'd give me a bath....I'm very, very dirty." While speaking, Angela throws her head back, closing her eyes, as Lester's hand (prolonged through six, highly stylized cuts) moves ever so slowly toward the rose-petalled water where Angela's legs gradually widen in anticipation. Mendes's vision and Hall's art, fortified by the vast resources of Spielberg's DreamWorks, create *American Beauty's* astonishingly high production values. Lester and the audience are the sole possessors of these deliriously beautiful male sexual visions. While Ball and Mendes gently satirize Lester's adolescent regression, the lavish aesthetic values of his visions persuade us that Lester is still the film's hero. Lester finally achieves enlightenment that his life as it was before his final year - without longing for sex with an underage teenager - was well worth living. The fantasies, then, function as temporary "palace[s] of excess" that assist in bringing him to Blake's "palace of wisdom."

These positive elements facilitate the audience's identification with Lester on his journey of self-transformation. We remain sympathetic toward him in the sequence of near sexual consummation with Angela. Here, style is pivotal as psychological rhetoric; Mendes photographs Lester's first kiss and undressing of Angela with romantic delicacy: slowly, gently, in a beautifully shadowed room. This scene contrasts with film's broadly caricatured representation of Carolyn's adultery. Further, the dialogue in Lester's scene with Angela diffuses moral responsibility away from Lester. Just as he unbuttons Angela's shirt, exposing her very young looking body, she tells him "This is my first time....I still want to do it. I just thought I should tell you...in case you wondered why I wasn't better." Angela, consistent with her self-esteem based upon men's desire for her, nervously informs Lester of her virginity because she fears it will betray her effort to be desirable. At an unconscious level, however, her confession puts this father on notice that he is about to advance sexually upon an under-age teen. When Lester is almost physically on top of her, he realizes that Angela is telling the truth. He stops, lowering his head and his body - not onto the girl but over her, which blocks the camera's view of her exposed breasts and face. As photographed, this is a protective gesture, suddenly directed against the audience's now unauthorized voyeuristic gaze. When he raises his head into the reverse camera POV shot of him in full facial close up, Spacey as Lester has returned to sanity. He has become a father again who comfortingly covers the naked teen and reassures her that everything is all right. A pivotal sequence of dialogue occurs here. Angela says she "feels so stupid," and she says she's "sorry." He, in turn, reassures her that "It's ok. Everything's ok" - a response that clearly does not acknowledge that he is supposed to be the responsible moral agent in this situation. She apologizes, he accepts, and never addresses himself as the guilty figure. The situation is resolved while maintaining audience sympathy with Lester.

Lester's Final Moves

In the movie's final sequence, Carolyn, twenty-five years older than Angela and still dependent on society's recognition of her as sexualized commodity, is one of the auditors of the single bullet that kills Lester. On the drive home, she has been listening to her "me-centered living" motivational tapes that teach her how to "escape the cycle of victimhood." Because Carolyn's perspective own point of view is never presented, we never know what she intended to do with the gun. In addition to Carolyn's undisclosed behavior regarding her gun, Jane has, throughout the film, described her father as needing to be put "out of his misery." Jane's verbal play with Ricky in which she asks jokingly asks him to kill her father is shown twice: first, as the film's opening sequence and, second, in its chronological position in the narrative just before Lester is shot, thus reinforcing the audience's thought that they might kill Lester. As described in the film's commentary, the original ending of the screenplay in fact depicted Jane and Ricky as convicted of her father's murder. This was changed for a conclusion singling out Fitts as the bad guy. In this changed ending, we see who is Lester's killer but are never given any information about the real world consequences of his murder.

As the story narrator, Lester speaks to us from an invisible, spiritual, spatial and temporal position. In so doing, Ball's screenplay creates conventions that privilege Lester with this more than mortal, perhaps not omniscient, but certainly enlightened first person perspective. From the frame story, Lester narrates an internal temporal narrative leading up to his death that encourages us to identify with him as an underdog. Mendes's sympathetic underdog then accomplishes the quintessential American goal: he re-invents himself, along the way winning personal satisfaction and wisdom. The film's second act functions pivotally to reinforce

Lester's position as protagonist by showing him to us as the visionary exclusively gifted with the gorgeous fantasies of Angela's desire for him.

The doubled relationship between Lester and his younger, idealized self, Ricky, that recurs throughout the film is reinforced most forcefully one last time at the film's end. Lester, in his final voiceover, tells us that he "could be pretty pissed off at what happened to [him] but it's hard to stay mad when there's so much beauty in the world. Sometimes [he feels] like [he's] seeing it all at once, and it's too much....[He's] seeing it [the beauty] at once. And it's too much, [his] heart fills up like a balloon that's about to burst." Here, Lester echoes very closely - in many cases, repeating the same words that Ricky speaks when he shows Jane "the most beautiful thing [he's] ever seen": the plastic bag dancing in the wind that he captured on videotape. In Ricky's confession, he admits that "Sometimes there's so much beauty in the world I feel like I can't take it...and my heart is going to cave in." When he shows this tape to Jane, he becomes so moved by his articulation of the world's beauty as well as vulnerably open to the experience of everyday beauty that he wins Jane's heart in that moment. She takes his hand and kisses his cheek chastely. So also, Lester, after his death, initially feels this same ingenuous wonder but, in post-mortem enlightenment, understands how to respond to the vertiginous experience of overwhelming beauty:

"[I]t's hard to stay mad, when there's so much beauty in the world. Sometimes I feel like I'm seeing it all at once and it's too much, my heart fills up like a balloon, that's about to burst....and then I remember to relax, and stop trying to hold on to it, and then it flows through me like rain and I can't feel anything but gratitude for every single moment of my stupid little life."

Lester, then, completes Ricky's intuited but not yet understood transcendentalist epiphany with the closing moments of Lester's Emersonian comprehension that "Life is a mixture of power and form...and we must learn to skate on the surface." Lester's post-mortem wisdom is simple: "And then I remember to relax, and stop trying to hold on to it, and then it flows through me like rain and I can't feel anything but gratitude." His closing words remain ambiguous. He asserts that the audience has "no idea what I'm talking about, I'm sure," a somewhat condescending estimation of the audience's ability to grasp what we have just witnessed. His last two lines are, however, somewhat more encouraging about our comprehension: "But don't worry...You will someday." Two readings of this line are, first, that we will understand the meaning of our "stupid little lives" after we die as he has done or, more psychologically and rhetorically satisfying, that we understand through witnessing his story.

In its complex structure and tone, *American Beauty* suggests a hybrid narrative combining elements of comedy, romance, fantasy, and tragedy. Despite its protagonist's death, most viewers (and video stores) categorize the film as a comedy, but the film demonstrates comedy's wide tonal range from romantic to satiric to darkly ironic. Lester's Angela-ic visions are to him romance fantasies in which a man, if not young at least young in heart again, pursues his loved one. However, these romance fantasies are embedded in the film's overall narration, whose tone is that of ironic comedy whose conventions include repetition, obsession, and the protagonist's movement from illusion to reality. Lester embodies the comic American hero rebelling against society and temporarily triumphing, as when he thumbs his nose at his bosses by extorting a year's salary from them. This rebellion is accompanied by Lester's nostalgia-tinged memories of his teenage years and the early years

of his marriage - "[Carolyn] wasn't always this way. She used to be happy. We used to be happy." However, the emotional barriers between the couple are represented as impassable.

Lester's death, with his final recognition before and since, is a narrative strategy through which the protagonist restores hope at the end of this deeply ironic comedy. The enlightened voiceover Lester of the frame story opens, interrupts, and closes that story with a more optimistic interpretation of the dark satire within the internal drama. Concluding the frame story, Lester argues that "his whole stupid little life" was "great" after all. However, given the film's resolution, Lester is placed in the position of realizing that he could have enjoyed life without actually having to prove that insight experientially, over time. Finally, like all deeply ironic comedies, this film is also a hair's breath away from a tragedy in two ways: Lester almost has sex with his teenage daughter's best friend. Second, the audience loses its comic protagonist/hero to death only to regain Lester as a romantic hero. According to Mendes in his commentary, Lester is a "little man who grows big." At the end of the movie, Lester functions as a spiritual guide to this life - as well as a goodwill messenger from the afterlife - by taking us through his descent into upper middle class suburban America as Purgatorio.

In dying, Lester maintains the ubiquitous adolescent status of the isolated American male. His rebellion from Carolyn's domestic imprisonment is a solitary journey, accompanied only at moments by his male alter ego, Ricky, when they share insights into the world's follies. Lester articulates his final transformation into a mature family man only moments before he is shot while staring at an old family picture. Ultimately, the presence of three elements and one excluded element results in Lester's heroic position at the end of the film: first, Lester's and Ricky's privileged, reinforced narrative points of view; second, the undeniable beauty of Lester's erotic visions shared only with the voyeuristic audience; third, the particular behaviors caricatured in Carolyn's character; and finally, Carolyn's lack of any subjective point of view. To measure *American Beauty*'s rhetorically-charged, psychological effects, one has to ask what the ending of the film suggests specifically about Lester and Carolyn as well as to consider what gendered ideas viewers may take away from the film's ending. At the moment of his death, Lester remembers Janey fondly only as a little girl and recalls Carolyn as a young wife. His final reverie argues that women are more valuable as nostalgically-remembered fetishes - untouchable and unknowable in the real world as Angela, Jane, and the younger, more carefree Carolyn are to Lester.

American Beauty is a film of marked sophistication in style and content. Mendes's voluptuous cinematography and cunning editing make us unwilling to turn away, overcoming any discomfort we might experience when identifying with Lester's voyeurism toward Angela. This essay explores how elements of Mendes's film technique - narrative structure, depictions of point of view, dialogue, acting, set design, costume, photography, editing, and sound track - function together to sustain our sympathy with Lester during his journey as well as examining how these same cinematic elements shape our responses to Carolyn and Colonel Fitts. Such study articulates Mendes's expert employment of technique to create an overall psychological rhetoric in *American Beauty* that enthusiastically embraces Lester Burnham and Ricky Fitts as American heroes. Mendes's superb use of set design and narrative structure create vividly depicted, inescapably crafted environments that seamlessly articulate what will be the protagonist's outcome and why. The suburb as psychological prison is relentlessly presented as that which Lester Burnham must escape, even after he concludes that his "stupid little life" isn't so bad after all. Mendes's second and third films continue to demonstrate the director's ability to use set design, environment, and narrative as causally pivotal in his protagonists' outcomes. In *Road to Perdition*, the constant rain/water motif forms an elegiac

background to Tom Hank's reluctant role first as paid assassin, then avenger. In *Jarhead*, the palpable heat of Jake Gyllenhaal's soldier's Iraqi hell instructs us from the outset that this world scorches everyone who inhabits it. Thus, Mendes, a very complex director with a very bright future, has already created an auteurist fingerprint: his use of set design and narrative design to absorb the viewer in his protagonists' worlds to such a degree that we understand and accept the narratives' outcomes as the inevitable determinist consequence of how these worlds look and sound. His visual production designs and use of narrative control create inescapable environments; they explain who the protagonists are and point, from the opening frames, to their cinematic fates.

Notes

[1] For reviews see *Film Review Annual*, 2000.

[2] The complex consequences of control of point of view are discussed in Bordwell, Branigan, Browne, Wood, and Nair.

[3] Mendes, in his commentary on the storyboards for *American Beauty*, notes that the office scene in Lester's workplace echoes the vast, anonymous, hive-like office space in which Jack Lemmon works in *The Apartment* (1960).

[4] The turned torso position as well as arm position of Angela's body echo the famous 1949 calendar pose in which Marilyn Monroe is also nude on a red background. This homage to Monroe's very full, adult woman's body with that of a very young looking teenager comments ironically upon Lester's overall regression into adolescence during his midlife crisis.

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Marie Antionette

Dir: Sophia Coppola , USA, 2006

A review by Ian Scott Todd, Ohio University, USA

Much has been made of the booring with which Sofia Coppola's latest film, *Marie Antionette*, was met when it premiered at Cannes this summer, presumably for its more or less sympathetic portrayal of the French queen who reigned from 1774 to 1791. The film is admittedly problematic if one expects a rabble-rousing condemnation of Marie Antoinette and her ill-fated rule. As tempting as it may seem to do so, Coppola resists mocking or humiliating her subject, and tactfully fades out her film before the legendary beheading. Coppola intends to humanize Marie Antoinette, not to criticize her, and she constructs the film as a series of carefully observed, exquisitely composed tableaux. Taken together, they suggest a life of indolent luxury, claustrophobic boredom, and fleeting sensual pleasure, all set within an insular world that, in the film's final moments, lies literally and figuratively shattered.

In each of her three films to date (the others being *The Virgin Suicides* [2000] and *Lost in Translation* [2003]), Coppola demonstrates her remarkable ability to create mood and atmosphere out of visual details rather than words; she understands the subtle ways in which a look, a dress, or a pose can convey a kind of visual information that entire pages of spoken dialogue cannot. In *Marie Antoinette*, she succeeds in recreating eighteenth-century Versailles out of episodic sequences that blur and flow hypnotically into one another. Coppola builds a montage around a royal shopping spree, piling on images of shoes and pastries to the tune of "I Want Candy"; later, her camera idles languorously over Marie at her country cottage, where she attempts to escape the pressures of the French court by surrounding herself with flowers and farm animals.

When one learns about this incident in history class, it sounds pathetic and childish, and perhaps it is, but under Coppola's direction it becomes surprisingly touching - a last-ditch effort to retreat into a pastoral dream of innocence. In her canny refusal to editorialize, Coppola allows us to re-examine our conception of a woman long thought to be a monster; Coppola merely presents a series of observations, and we are left to pass or reserve judgment.

Out of these and other sequences, Coppola captures the decadence and emptiness of Marie's reign, during which the spoils of palace life offer only temporary relief from loneliness and teen angst (she is fifteen when the film opens). Like Coppola's previous work, *Marie Antoinette* is very much about the confusion and restless boredom of young womanhood, here compounded by the pressures of monarchy. Coppola's camera weaves its way dreamily through bedchambers and ballrooms as Marie gossips and daydreams, and tries desperately to conceive a child with her dim-witted, sexually inexperienced husband, Louis XVI ("the Dauphin," played by Jason Schwartzman).

In the scenes devoted to Marie's persistent attempts to provide her husband with heirs, as in the rest of the film, Coppola demonstrates her skill of narrative economy. A doctor has been

called in to investigate the Dauphine's childlessness. He asks the Dauphin what he eats each morning for breakfast; the Dauphin replies dumbly "hot chocolate." Coppola pans to the chaste marriage bed, which dominates the room like a gilded, barren throne. Contained within a single shot and employing about four lines of dialogue, this brief sequence conveys through suggestion the absurdity and profound emotional isolation of the royal marriage. Much later in the film, Coppola handles the death of Marie's fourth child with similar deftness. We see a hanging portrait of the queen in which she is flanked by two young children and an infant; the portrait is removed from the wall; when it has been re-hung, the infant has been painted out of the family scene. Only then does Coppola supply a few discreet shots of the child's tiny coffin lifted into a funeral carriage as Marie looks on. A lesser filmmaker would belabor this plot turn with lumbering obviousness; Coppola transforms it into a miniature aria.

Coppola also builds mood and tone through her unconventional blend of classical and contemporary music, which succeeds here, despite the negative publicity it has generated. Many critics and audience members have protested that her use of 1980s punk rock does not belong in a film set in France of the 1780s, or that doing so has somehow cheapened its subject matter. These complaints suggest that critics and audience members are perhaps not as open to unconventional reinterpretations of historical material as they could be. To claim that the story of Marie Antoinette should remain locked in the framework of some dreary, conventional biopic - and consequently that the songs of New Order, The Cure, and The Radio Department remain accompaniment for Brat Pack movies and music videos - implies a depressingly outdated notion of what films should look (and sound) like. Literature (and much independent film) has long experimented with marrying high culture and pop culture; it's about time that mainstream films catch up, and us along with them. What's more, Coppola's comparison of the lavish masquerade balls of the French court to the decadence and excess of the American '80s seems particularly inspired given the uncannily similar aesthetic trends they shared: garish clothes, gaudy accessories, and epic hair, to name only three.

The movie's other contributors must also be congratulated on their painstaking attention to costumes and art direction; the former were designed by Milena Canonero and the latter by Anne Seibel, with set decoration by Veronique Melery. Whatever one's thoughts on Coppola's approach to the material or on the acting ability of Kirsten Dunst (this reviewer found her performance fine and understated), the film looks stunning, anchored by Lance Acord's pristine cinematography. Acord renders the palace's interiors alternately sharp and soft: one moment Versailles looks fire-lit and glowing, like a portrait by Greuze come to life, the next everything turns steely blue and frozen, a dollhouse glazed in ice. As in *Lost in Translation*, which Acord also shot, he succeeds in creating images of porcelain delicacy. Here, Coppola seems to have been more than a little inspired by the stateliness and visual splendor of Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* (1975), another magnificent film that dramatizes aristocratic decay, with its lords and ladies dwarfed by their own furniture.

Psychologically, the film isn't very deep: it tells us that Marie Antoinette was a scared, lonely young woman caught in a loveless, unsatisfying marriage; that she was thrown into a world of social and political complexity that she did not fully understand; that she self-medicated with parties and food and giggling with her girlfriends, before the walls of the palace came crashing down on her. But psychological complexity does not seem to be what Coppola is after here. She prefers instead to immerse us in another world, and she does so with expert precision and a true artist's attention to fine detail.

Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith

Dir: George Lucas, USA, 2005

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

For thirty-one years George Lucas has dedicated his increasingly insurmountable resources to advancing spectacular cinematic visual and aural effects. In 2001, BAFTA honoured the director with the Stanley Kubrick award for excellence in film, whilst in June of 2005, the AFI threw its 33rd Annual Lifetime Achievement Award ceremony in Lucas's name, complete with singing William Shatner and sweetly self-deprecating Carrie Fisher. Last year, the White House honoured postproduction company ILM for its achievements in visual special effects, sound technology, non-linear electronic editing systems technology and digital image capture, with owner Lucas taking home the National Medal of Technology.

As these awards suggest, George Lucas's influence spans the modern era of the blockbuster and covers numerous aspects of picture making, aesthetic and industrial: from his role as a young director (*American Graffiti* drew together the fresh creative talent of actors Richard Dreyfuss and Harrison Ford, and future-director Ron Howard) to that of formidable 1980s producer, responsible for mass market franchise the *Indiana Jones* series, *Willow*, *Body Heat*, and Kurosawa's *Kagemusha*. Lucas's career began with a "surprise gamble," emerging at the dawn an era defined by Thomas Schatz as "post-1975 New Hollywood" (Schatz, 2003: 17). Indeed, with *Star Wars* still a going concern at the box-office in 1978, Michael Eisner noted how in this modern era of "real gambling," "there is no way you can work out on paper what a cultural phenomenon should be. The only rule is that there are no rules" (Cook, 2000: 52). Today, Lucas's is an aggressive pioneer of the future e-Hollywood. His state-of-the-art postproduction tools housed in his Lucasfilm headquarters at Skywalker Ranch has served an extensive array of his own and non-Lucasfilm pictures ranging from *The Godfather Part III* to *JFK*, and from his grand position atop effects house ILM he has contributed to everything from *E.T.*, and *Back to the Future* to *The Abyss*, and *Terminator 2*. Lucas's understanding and exploitation of the production, marketing and merchandising of the cross-generational blockbuster is second only to his passionate interest in developing digital production methods and effects technology.

Within a single decade Lucas has produced a digital *Star Wars* trilogy (1999-2005) which, certainly from the perspective of his unique fan base, can be said to bear few technical drawbacks. As traditional matinee genres go, *The Phantom Menace* and *Attack of the Clones* (episodes one and two of six, released in 1999 and 2002 respectively) are dimly impressive works: a grandiloquent space soap-opera for (mostly) boys with sophisticated big-budget special effects, repeating panoramic landscapes, and automatic protagonists whose assured, multiple heroic duties and gymnastics are significant pleasures by design. Some seven years on, the 'prequels' or 'backstory' films are still roundly regarded as aberrations: great and wonderful, and entirely frustrating, defects in the *Star Wars* mirror. For some audiences the new films provide perhaps the definitive twist on the all-too familiar *Star Wars*-justified nostalgia trip; for others, they masquerade as idealised nostalgia, reaching for but never

satisfactorily attaining the lost treasures of John Williams's glorified score over scenes of mighty swashbuckling heroism or one-on-one conflict.

What lies beneath the digital trilogy, which has garnered almost \$2 billion in global box-office to date, is the essential fallacy perpetuated by its cult fans, its co-operative cast members and of course its creators, that the films should remain immune from serious criticism because they are so knowing about their role as escapist/fantasy. As Lucas repeatedly dictates to journalists, *Star Wars* is (somewhat retroactively) a "serial for children." But as anyone who isn't a child (and has been effectively ordered into cinemas by the likes of Rick McCallum to be a part of this nationwide, cultural event) will realise, such comments are an affront. The careful exploitation of these films as pointed out by Peter Krämer (*It's Aimed at Kids -- the kid in everybody: George Lucas, Star Wars and Children's Entertainment*) and Matt Hills (*Star Wars in Fandom, Film Theory and the Museum*) to draw in both adults and children, demonstrates that the *Star Wars* saga has been defined, constructed, and maintained through the decades by its creators as a crossgenerational cultural phenomenon as much as it may have practically become one through its audience. The incredible commercial success of *The Phantom Menace* which Fox spent \$50 million to promote in the States, reinforced the distributor's decision to spend just as heavily again on publicising *The Attack of the Clones* for moviegoing and non-moviegoing audiences, yet its sizeable box-office drop-off gave Lucas by all accounts a moment of pause. Its stammering, homogenised content and style came under severe criticism again from fans who admired – sometimes, critically -- the original *Star Wars* trilogy (1977-1983) for its energy and delightful enthusiasm, and wished that Lucas would finally direct his attentions to their concerns for the 'glorious' finale.

Lucasfilm and Fox particularly as the film's distributor have had to contend with other kinds of pressures with *Revenge of the Sith*. The public and national media's fascination with a perceived box-office slump several months before its release, prompted Lucas to idly complain about the gamble he was taking in a market that offered no guarantee of stability. Indeed, with no readily identifiable marquee draws such as a Tom Cruise, or even Harrison Ford, the film underwent a necessary and not so subtle process of differentiation in an effort to repeat the massive impact *The Phantom Menace* enjoyed in 1999 (which opened to a record \$28.5 million in its first day). Similar in kind to that of the *Batman* cycle, which Warner carefully and successfully refashioned for a 2005 audience with Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins*, the potentially grim advertising campaign for *Sith* mainly shifted its emphasis onto the return of the original trilogy's dark knight, Darth Vader. But in addition, its makers were also keen to raise awareness that: 1) this new film contained a commercially viable political anti-war message. "When I wrote [Episode III] Iraq didn't exist," Lucas said at the Cannes premiere, "we were funding Saddam Hussein and giving him weapons of mass destruction ... but the parallels between what we did in Vietnam and what we are doing in Iraq are unbelievable" (Higgins, 2005); 2) the *Star Wars* universe would now communicate a hitherto previously unrepresentable scarring of the human body. "Limbs and heads are hacked off," writes Jamie Wilson before the film's release, "women and children mercilessly slain, while one character catches fire, screaming as the flesh peels off his body" (Wilson, 2005); and 3) that this would be the last *Star Wars* film to be directed by Lucas himself.

For his part, Lucas ambitiously placed a laughable emphasis on the film's similarity with James Cameron's *Titanic* (1998), a film which achieved a much higher share of the market in 1997 than he had achieved with any one of his original or digital trilogy entries. At industry conference ShoWest, he marketed the film to exhibitors as "a *Titanic* in Space ... a real

tearjerker" (Lucas, 2005) - which was presumably said *after* the exclusive presentation of the first rip-roaring six minutes in which heroes Obi-Wan and Anakin dash like lunatics through a crowd-pleasing space battle. His marketers made appeals through the film's trailers to that unknowable but gargantuan audience share who went to see *Titanic* and valued its attributes, promising more of the same in the *Star Wars* universe; this approach dovetailed with an aggressive TV spot advertising campaign, specifically targeting adults (Burger King for instance ran eight commercials for its adult promotion), thus revising Lucasfilm's initial policy of "not overcommercialising the characters" by licensing them to a diverse range of promotional partners (Schiller, 2005).

In the context of plotline, genre, and stars, *Sith* has a heavy emotional core. Its story could effectively be reduced to a single advertising image: that of the original trilogy's super-villain who was featured in four of nine official posters, including a commemorative Father's Day poster with the tagline "Who's Your Daddy?" (See *Revenge*, 2005) The promise of a romance and the dramatic emphasis on the corruption of that romance broadened the demographic further to reach non-*Star Wars*-going girls in their teens, and women in the higher twenty-five-minus and twenty-five plus demographic groups.

Lucas has thus demonstrated a hard-nosed desire to reconcile his latest *Star Wars* entry with those ticket-buying audience members who turned their backs on his over-excited universe after 1999 (if not significantly before with the advent of his Special Editions). Grossing \$16.9 million from midnight showings alone on its opening morning, *Sith's* commercial performance alleviated some of the tension surrounding fears about shrinking audiences in the 2005 summer season. It also indicated that the commercial glamour and widespread anticipation of yet another new *Star Wars* movie was dependable enough to translate into strong box office and attendance figures. When it finished the day with \$50,013,859, it had broken the single day record for box office earnings held by *Shrek 2* (2004), and the record for best opening day, by *Spider-Man 2* (2004).

The end result ranks as the best of the three digital backstory films, though this hardly means the closeted Lucas has any more of a clue when it comes to the taste preferences of the all-ages audience he and his marketing team at Fox reach for. Filmed entirely on digital cameras with a commercial stylishness that shows, as one might expect, significant steps have been taken forward since the production of *Attack of the Clones*. Lucas's cluttered, hefty romp is full of the usual zero-jeopardy escape sequences and rip-roaring duels, enough certainly to keep its seven-year old demographic busy playacting the execution of Christopher Lee's Count Dooku on the staircase at home or the Obi-Wan-General Grievous stand-off around the pond in the garden.

Over the course of its opening, high-standard space battle (filmed with a compliment of knowing winks and nods and sharp banter that confirms the more level-headed involvement of playwright Tom Stoppard), we observe the marauding epic battle over Coruscant, a dazzling dogfight, the rescuing of a Chancellor, more *Phantom Menace*-inflected tussles with droid forces, some hooky elevator business, a spaceship crash-landing, and an innocuous decapitation. But while chirpy quips about Jedi stupidity and happy landings divert attentions away from the cold-blooded killing of Dooku, its insertion relatively early on in proceedings confirms nonetheless that Lucas has dabbled with some alluring tonal changes: a regression to so-called 'dark' material evoking the impressive triumph of the state power over the individual in *The Empire Strikes Back*, rather than the straightforward infantilism of the irrelevantly titled *The Phantom Menace*. For devotees, there is the maturation of an

undeniably violent and destructive foe who will come to challenge the universe's overblown number of boringly competent Jedi; and in addition, some captivating pointed visual references to the original trilogy. Fans will be pleased to see echoes of *A New Hope*, *Empire* and *Return of the Jedi* in the film's pompous costuming, eccentric mise-en-scène and glossy landscapes.

Given this, however, it's still difficult to read *Sith* as anything more than a perfunctory reread of *The Phantom Menace*, with its space-flights through and around combusting computer-generated battle-cruisers, its kung-fu athleticism, rampant quasi-racial typing, excessive amounts of superfluous droids easily swept aside, and -- in its misguided attempt to lend some ancient-historical significance to its multiple, intersecting plot strands -- some unpalatable references to, of all things, *The Godfather* series (1971-1990). Like *Empire's* simultaneous final conflicts all collected within Cloud City, or *Return of the Jedi's* triple action-narrative spread across the planet Endor, the Death Star, and the lethal connecting space between, *Sith* adheres to formula with little invention. Lucas grants us only abbreviated snatches of Anakin's epic duel with Obi-Wan and Yoda's gravity-defying and frankly worthless mess-around in the Senate building with Palpatine. As evidenced in *The Phantom Menace*, Lucas's reliance on cutting to-and-fro between interconnected battles as a suspense-building strategy is generally haphazard, his shambolic attempts to evoke the classier pleasures of Irvin Kershner's *Empire* exposing again the weaknesses of a filmmaker whose Hollywood-building skills are perhaps better suited to inventing and adding new windows to a blockbuster's revenue stream than actual filmmaking. Like the numerous undifferentiated lightsabre duels which take place between its central characters, the film is all dazzling light and bluster, but with no forward momentum.

As the final instalment in Lucas's existing digital trilogy, which frees him to produce a 3D animated Clone Wars television series with his new Singapore Animation facility and live-action series which promises to pick up the thread between Episodes 3 and 4, *Revenge of the Sith* feels like an attempt to add and emulate a *Return of the King*-style melancholic pay-off to his comic-strip serial. His natural end-point is the reintroduction of Vader, the legendary antagonist of the original trilogy whose visage emblazoned on a whole line of T-shirts, posters, books and records, holds a strongly affectionate place in the hearts and minds of the trilogy's now adult spectators. Hoping these older viewers will take more kindly to a heavy dose of pathos regarding the inevitable corruption of young Anakin, the actual transformation of the Republic into the Galactic Empire becomes essentially a side-issue to *Star Wars* stalwart Ian McDiarmid's manipulations on the home front. Lucas supplies for the younger heads of his audience a routine portrait of a weak-minded, downtrodden male, ostensibly still only a teenager, whose particularly tough maturation into the adult world of compromise and negotiation serves only to intensify his seriously problematic narcissism. Life is indeed complicated for the poor boy: his beautiful union with Natalie Portman's harmless good wife Padmé Amidala is wrought with anxiety over their doomed future; his position on the Jedi council isn't eminent enough by far; and he is the Chosen One of an ancient Jedi prophecy which some are beginning to think may have been interpreted incorrectly. Moreover, in Lucas's trifling Oedipal order, nothing can quite veer the traumatised Anakin away from a predictably masculine, psychologically regressive course of action in which the son avenges the death of his defenceless mother and takes on the galaxy's overwhelmingly predominantly male Jedi single-handedly -- a trifling development which must have Robin Wood, critic of "the Lucas-Spielberg syndrome" (Wood, 1986: 163), hurling bricks at the screen.

As played by Hayden Christensen, Skywalker is a tyrannical cartoon animal, the very antirational archetype Lucas is most enchanted by, and yet the least effective creation in a saga already overflowing with lovelorn, soft-centred creations. You forgive him his former scenes with Ian McDiarmid's Senator Palpatine in which he is largely bereft of spirit, animation or real enunciation, or with Portman when the pair tackle the inequities of life in relationship-drama mode, because he later endears his arch-villain with a piercing, atavistic magnetism. Whether marching at the forefront of an army of Clone troopers, or directing his flat stare into camera before exiting a roomful of slain Trade Federation leaders, the film bristles with negative 'cool' energy, no doubt inspiring duplicate gestures and poses from kids in playgrounds up and down the country.

It may be of surprise to some that *Revenge of the Sith* strays beyond the PG-Certificate boundary characteristic of the series so far, into territory which even Lucas has qualified is way too dark for the usual five or six year-olds his films address. The ratings increase issued by the MPAA in accordance with the film's content of "sci-fi violence and some intense images" was broadly understood to be yet another concession the director had made to audiences. This tonal shift in address which could itself be attributed to the 'bigger' recent successes of Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* movies and Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* films, all of which received the traditionally off-putting for marketers PG-13 certificate. Indeed, the writer-director has been commended in some fan circles for stretching the film to incorporate "edgier," potentially objectionable subject matter, but it was perhaps better appreciated by Burger King, Pepsi-Cola, Kellogg and Masterfoods, all-family marketers whose successful promotional partnerships with the film were perceived to engage with a higher percentage of young frequent moviegoers.

Though *Revenge of the Sith* undeniably takes risks, the likes of which its childish forebears would sprint away from in blind flat-footed panic, it inevitably does so tiptoeing with caution. Lucas's formal treatment of the execution of a group of children for instance is traditionally done and typically mawkish and the falsely sentimental chronicling of the rebellion against the humane, lightsabre-wielding Jedi is blasted up to eleven by John Williams's overreaching score. One need only compare the 'don't look' approach employed here to Spielberg's graphic depiction some thirty years *earlier* of child death in the PG rated *Jaws* to see just *how* careful Lucas is being. By the time Christensen is hobbled on a bank beside an encroaching stream of molten lava and constituted in a brutal religious rite as a member of the Dark side, the potentially alarming severity of the act is nonetheless incoherent, lost as it is in the elastic artifice of a series which repeatedly stresses the subversive and *superheroic* (rather than penetrable) qualities of the durable and athletic comic-book cartoon body. At times, Lucas's propensity for having his spiritualist knights hack off the limbs of their adversaries in combat borders on the weirdly perverse.

But setting such oddities aside, it is precisely the malleability of athletic protagonists Anakin and Obi-Wan, Dooku, and of the series itself (constantly undermining dramatic narrative consequence in favour of world-saving, cyclical heroics and euphoria), which prevents us from caring when Lucas tries to genuinely play it straight. The various lightsabre duels themselves, similarly, fail to entrap the viewer in the sort of hushed, guilty awe one invariably encounters when witnessing the kinetic swordplay featured in better modern day Japanese films like Kitamura Ryuhei's thoroughly potty and enjoyable *Versus* (2000) or *Azumi* (2004). Despite the believable acrobatics and dark promise of Ray Park's wonderful fighting prowess in *The Phantom Menace*, there is precious little here to excite, charm or inspire.

Lacking, then, the wit and the precision of even the original *Star Wars Episode I: A New Hope* (early and promising Artoo-D2-shaped escapades quickly vanish under the weight of the Anakin narrative), the commercial glamour in, of, and behind *Revenge of the Sith* serves only to confuse further a saga which feels, as it now stands, stitched together at the seams. While the emphasis of most media and fan speculation has been on the likelihood of George Lucas returning to shoot Episodes VII -- IX in the near future, his stronger obligation should perhaps be to reshoot Episodes IV, V, and VI again entirely in this new digital aesthetic. Only then will the original trilogy be released mercifully from the nightmare of having to endure further appended 'special edition' material in the context of Lucas's insufferable scheme to perfect the digital verisimilitude of his *Star Wars* sextet.

Logically, Lucas wants *Revenge of the Sith* to be the tragic centrepiece of a six-part dynasty concerning Vader, but even with such ambition, "an infant footstep" (Wood, 1986: 163) is still only necessary in today's marketplace. The artistic and commercial desire to produce a third computer-generated spectacular masquerading as fable, has resulted, not surprisingly, in a monolithically-empty, and soulless work. Reassuring, and disposable, *Revenge of the Sith* articulates how New Hollywood's narrow focus on psychologically regressive, dramatically repetitive, standardised 'blockbuster' fare remains constant -- and irritatingly so for fans of Lucas, one of the original Hollywood brats.

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Sympathy For The Devil

Dir: Jean-Luc Godard, France, 1968

A review by Stephen Glynn, Open University, UK

The release in June 2006 of the DVD of *Sympathy For the Devil* a.k.a. *One Plus One* (1968) has brought one of Jean-Luc Godard's least discussed but most contentiously titled works back into the public consciousness. Reviews have recently appeared in both the cinema (MacNab, 2006: 100) and music press (Cameron, 2006: 130) while a free copy of the film was included in the *Sunday Times*, accompanied by a two-page article (Appleyard, 2006). The original, uncertain critical reaction from 1968 has endured, with Cameron's review sub-headed "What Can It All Mean?" and the associated crossword (sic) quoting Mick Jagger: "We never did find out what the film was about." "What Should It Be Called?" might seem an equally justifiable question, since one recent academic article refers to the film throughout as Godard's *One Plus One* (Hayes, 2005). Drawing on the film's alternating scenes of the Rolling Stones working in the studio with a series of fictional vignettes centred on Black Power revolutionaries and the figure of Eve Democracy, the DVD packaging notes that "it can be viewed as two movies in one," but, like all recent reviews, it emphasizes the film's primary attraction in seeing the band "work up a country blues ballad into the maniacal samba-driven anthem of renown" (Cameron, 2006: 130). Yet Godard had sought a contrary emphasis, using the Stones to bring leftist politics to a mainstream audience. Why such continued confusion over nomenclature as well as intention for Godard's one foray into British genre film-making?

A brief contextualisation should help. This entry to the London pop scene was not entirely a surprise move for the *enfant terrible* of French cinema, since Godard had shown an interest in musicals from as early as *Une Femme Est Une Femme / A Woman Is A Woman* (1961) where characters briefly and incongruously dance as in a Stanley Dolen film. Here Godard is not so much criticising traditional genre cinema as registering its passing: 'the musical is dead' he said bluntly in interview. "You have to do something different: my film says this too. It is nostalgia for the musical" (Milne, 1986: 182). By 1968 the director was himself ready to do something different: a final-phase demolition job on the musical, with the Rolling Stones as the agents of his destruction. Cupid Productions, co-founded by the actor Iain Quarrier for this very venture, put up £180,000. A pittance compared to most full-length features, it nonetheless constituted a larger budget than usual for Godard, and the chance to work, or so he thought, *carte blanche* with attractive and absolute beginners. However, the project, known during filming as *One Plus One*, was beset by difficulties: the Olympic Studios, London, where Godard recorded the Rolling Stones in session, caught fire; his dockyard footage of the Black Panthers had to be reshot due to sound difficulties; Godard also dashed off in the middle of filming to shoot scenes of student protest back in Paris. None of these problems, however, matched the events preceding the film's premiere at London's National Film Theatre on 29 November 1968 - events that gained far greater press coverage than the film itself.

At his press conference, Godard denounced Cupid Productions for ruining his film by changing its end without his permission. "They want to make *One plus One* equal two. I don't" (Thump, 1968). In Quarrier's own, separate conference, he stated that the film had been given "a miniscule gloss so that the ten million teen boppers who were going to see the film in America would understand it better" (Anon, 1968). He explained that his company had 'merely' included a complete version of the Rolling Stones' song *Sympathy For the Devil* at the end of the film. To accompany the song a series of treated 'artistic' images of Eve, similar to the 'Lucy In The Sky' section from *Yellow Submarine* (1968) were also added. Prior to the premiere, Godard came on to the NFT stage to ask the audience not to watch his film, to demand their entrance money back and contribute it to the Defence Fund for Black Panther founder Eldridge Cleaver - his proposal was defeated on a show of hands. There followed a full five-minute argument between director and audience, Godard only leaving the stage after landing a punch on the jaw of producer Quarrier. Simultaneously, outside the theatre a group of young filmmakers were preparing to show Godard's own version (his own print) free to all comers. Godard argued briefly with this audience too, before disappearing over the bridge, vowing never to return to England, never to make another commercial film, and only to shoot on 16mm for people to see in the streets.

Looking back to that night by London's South Bank, does Godard deserve our sympathy? The new DVD features the "Original Theatre Release" and the "Original Jean-Luc Godard's Director's Cut" *in that order*. The former is cited as the 'official' title, a point emphasised by the *Sunday Times*'s free copy bearing only the Quarrier title (and a cover page to its *Culture Supplement* adorned with a picture of Jagger, colour-treated just like the contested final images added by Quarrier). In view of this coverage, it is timely to revisit the argument and decide which version deserves precedence. This will be done textually, a close visual analysis of the film at a thematic, narrative and stylistic level giving due weight to both claimants.

The case against Quarrier's alternative ending rests primarily on the manner in which it undermines Godard's implied message equating the fragmentary nature of the recording session with the disparate characteristics of revolution. In *One Plus One*, Godard attempts to anarchise the pop musical genre, to deconstruct it much as *Weekend* (1967) had, in all senses, 'done for' the road movie. Godard's historical contextualisation of the musical was not in itself an innovation. *Tonite Let's All Make Love in London* (1967) intercut footage of second world war fighter planes in The Animals' 'When We Were Young' while LWT's television history of popular music *All My Loving* (1968) cut performance footage of Jimi Hendrix with newsreels of the Vietnam war. Godard's *title* is significant though, since the precise arithmetical arrangement of the different sequences equates (and negates) man's current socio-cultural position with any idealistic programme of reform. This gives all human activity, be it the monosyllabic judgements of Eve, the elaborate creation of the Stones, the desired societal reconstruction of the Black militants - and the artistic self-destruction of Godard - a sense of equal futility. Thus Godard's soundtrack constantly impedes communication: a passing aircraft and a ship's horn drown out the readings of the Black militants; actors read their texts unrehearsed and thus struggle to enunciate clearly; while Quarrier - himself far from word-perfect - reads from *Mein Kampf*, the sound from the Stones' rehearsal or the narrator's next page overrides the visible discourse. Included in this aural fragmentation are the Stones' own efforts, which constantly grind to a halt. More sound is needed on the cans, an amp has to be changed, the rhythm section is too fuzzy, a line is ineffectually sung. Past ideas are revisited: producer Jimmy Miller tells Jagger that "the first verse should be close to how you were playing it the other night." Similarly, the black power fighters pass their guns along the line, but then pass them back again, so that, for all their

slogans, they end up back where they started. Godard's camera movements duplicate this circularity: every visit to the recording studio, the two visits to the junk yard and Eve's interview follow either a 360 degree turn or a full circular track of the locale. This dynamically contrapuntal camerawork, together with the film's emphasis on visual compartmentalism undercuts any sense of advance or resolution. This inconclusiveness is replicated at a structural level as -- crucially - the recording sessions do not end with the completed version of 'Sympathy for the Devil': instead the fourth sequence takes us back to the start of the creative process, the group strumming towards the next song, Richard keen that it should build like "Jumping Jack Flash."

Godard's strong objections to Quarrier's late addition indicate that, rather than creating a dynamic relationship between the different halves of the film, he sought to keep them discrete. Godard does not want us to aestheticise his film: hence the insistence on alienation devices, to prove that what is alive is not what is on the screen, but with the audience. Thus, alongside the familiar intertitles, beginning with the disruptive "The Stones Rolling," and the visible signs of filmmaking - a boom hanging over Jagger, a clapperboard for Eve - Godard denies his actors any semblance of spontaneous speech. Each section is deliberately lifeless, notably second-hand. The black militants read from pre-existing texts, while Frankie Dymon has the phrases of one of his speeches fed to him by a prompter: the interviewer puts words into the mouth of Eve Democracy about art, drugs, sex, war and technology; the bookseller becomes a mouthpiece for paragraphs from Hitler. Even the Stones, shown in rehearsal rather than performance, with single lines repeated numerous times, seem largely to be quoting rather than creating.

Richard Roud, taking his cue from the title "Hi Fiction Science," sees such delivery as akin to Hal's slow, patronising voice in *2001 A Space Odyssey* (1968), and Godard as an astronaut of inner space, "the inner space of a stream of consciousness lacking faith either in emotional drive or in objective correlatives" (Roud, 1968: 182). Godard's objection to Quarrier's pop music ending is not only that it attempts to provide an objective correlative to the Stones' song via the treated images of Eve, but also that it signals the final victory of commerce, making the film another in the long line of 'exploitation' pop movies. *One Plus One* catches Godard at - indeed, catapults him into - a phase where, appalled by the consumer-relations of capitalist society, he would refuse to provide it with more product to consume. His later Sixties efforts reinforce his intention to leave his films unfinished, incomplete. In a review of the subsequent *British Sounds* (1969), Jan Dawson wrote how "the masterpiece that offers a total experience, or induces a state of spiritual well-being not grounded in political reality bears too close a resemblance to the attractively wrapped consumer product. It is stimulating in itself, rather than conducive to discussion or action" (Dawson, 1970: 91).

As Godard knew, the aesthetic object or work of art can all too easily be assimilated by the very society it is attacking. It can be isolated, defused and reabsorbed by that society primarily through a concentration on issues of form before content. Thus in Godard's film the concept of the spectator is replaced by that of the participant who, with no aesthetic features to seduce or mystify them, enters on equal terms with the director to a discussion -- the *essential* one plus one. The film is thus an analysis of the assumptions behind the mass media, rather than a product designed for them: as Dawson notes "the audience must exploit the film, and not the other way about" (Dawson, 1970: 91).

Godard himself said that "cinema is not one image after another, it is one image *plus* another out of which is formed a third, the latter being formed by the viewer the moment he or she

makes contact with the film" (Grant, 1980). Employing a strategy germane to countercinema (Wollen, 1985), *One Plus One* emphatically rejects a unitary point of view, instead forcing viewers to revise and question what they may think. *One Plus One* is reflecting on what art is for, and the sequences of the Stones in session emphasise the calculated, repetitive labour that its creation necessitates. This theatrical subject is particularly self-reflexive since "Godard readily included theatrical cinema in his expanding list of cultural products that were being deprived of their souls by commercialisation and commodification" (Sterritt 1999: 91). Godard's efforts to make an appealing piece of countercultural cinema may be *theoretically* sound (and very Sixties), yet as Ginette Vincendeau has noted, "Godard's films have been a site of contradictions," amongst which she categorises a politically motivated cinema that alienated audiences (Vincendeau, 1996: 84). Godard's first British venture was (initially) determinedly intended to reach a large audience through the drawing card of the Rolling Stones: it was envisaged as an attempt to exploit the commercial system, albeit to different ends. But as in *Tout Va Bien* (1972), where Godard tentatively tried again for accessibility through the use of stars Jane Fonda and Yves Montand, the surrounding alienation devices distanced the viewer from the subject matter, leaving them "demobilised by the spectacle rather than inspired by the struggle" (Forbes, 1992: 26).

Is Quarrier therefore helping the director to cut through his contradictions and to find his audience, as originally intended? The case for Quarrier's alternative ending begins with Godard's subsequent admission of a failure of intent: "*One Plus One* was my last bourgeois film. I was very arrogant to make that - just to take images thinking I knew what they meant" (Carroll, 1972: 62). Contemporary - and current - critics are perhaps right to be confused if the director himself claims he lost sight of the film's meaning. But did his images fit better with an ending added by others? For once, does a commercial imperative also create a better aesthetic product? Ambivalence characterises his film, resulting in readings that escaped his intentions: it is, after all, one *plus* one. Perhaps Jagger had more understanding than he gave himself credit for, since this duality is acknowledged in the final verse of the song *Sympathy For The Devil*: "Just as every cop is a criminal / and all the sinners saints, / as heads is tails." Judging by several of the film's quotations, which define culture and intellect as the real enemies of revolution, Godard is all too aware that the making of an intellectual fantasy to denounce things intellectual is itself a suspect undertaking. At the film's end, as the crane lifts the dead Eve into the sky, the narrator makes this explicit, his last speech becoming his first direct description of the action on screen: "nearby there were a lot of fools running around making noise. Who were they? Why were they there, to be clowning around like that? In my opinion they must have been making a film. Yes, it was all a waste of time."

Godard's work is noted for his predictions for the "end of cinema" while his films simultaneously betray "a romantic cinephilia" (Vincendeau, 1996: 84). This contradiction is also at the heart of *Sympathy For The Devil / One Plus One*. While Godard's dialogue may imply that there is nothing new to be said, his editing is innovative, his camera work aesthetically pleasing, his mise en scene evocative. Thus, the isolation of each group of characters, conceived as a methodology, becomes instead a metaphor, furnishing the film with a thematic unity its director would theoretically refuse. Instead of total narrative dislocation one discovers a marrying motif and technical delivery amidst Godard's deconstruction of the sounds and images he has filmed, linking the musical and the militant. Meaning is created by parallelism rather than by continuity; a sense of through-rhythm betrays an integration by an overall imagination that understands the relationship between the scenes. The Stones are as isolated in their separate recording booths as is Eve Democracy among the television predators or the lone slogan writer in the Hilton Hotel and

on the streets of London. The long tracking shots move deliberately among musicians and machinery in the recording studio just as it passes from wreck to wreck and past the militants in the black power junkyard. This may preclude audience involvement, but it creates an artistic synthesis. The black revolutionaries stumble with borrowed white language as the British musicians, behind earphones, stumble towards technical solutions to foreign rhythms. The same camera movements pick out the light filtering through the trees during Eve's interrogation and find the patterns created by the studio lighting in its lens. Crucially, on two occasions in the film the camera is directly addressed. In his interview, Frankie Dyman's militant declares that "we must be aware of the so called friend, who in the end is the enemy" and moves forward, looking into and pointing at the intellectual white man's camera - and audience. Earlier, Mick Jagger had tried out his French on Godard. "Ca va?" he asks to camera. The tone here is crucial for, as George Melly noted of the Rolling Stones, "sex aside, their songs attacked every 'decent' standard, even (or perhaps especially) those of the liberal intellectuals who wanted to understand" (Melly, 1972: 88). In rock and in revolution, those who sympathise with the devil are the most despised.

The film is not so much structured on deadening repetition but by investigating addition, by alteration: one plus one join together and become something else. The Stones build up their song over the day: not only are instruments added such as the maracas, or changed as with the piano, but the lyrics also shift. In an early version Jagger sings of how "the SS raved" (again linking with the bookstore content) before the line settles as "when the Blitzkreig raged." Elsewhere Jagger's delivery constantly shifts in emphasis, rushing a line, or stressing a different syllable. Out by the Thames, the black power revolutionaries pass back and forth not just rifles but slogans that change from "Dance down the Street!" to "Up against the wall!" and "Shoot them! Kill them!" The graffiti artist juxtaposes words to make new combinations: on a wall of the Thames Embankment she writes "Freudemocracy"; her body hides the extension of "Cinema" until she runs off, leaving (the sought for ideal?) "Cinemarxism." The inter-titles find new words in given combinations and again establish connections across fragments: 'LOVE' is picked out in black from the orange letters of 'Outside Black Novel' and in red from the black letters of 'All About Eve.' These can all be read as an underlying, irrepressible concern for putting things together, and the film as striving for some ultimate, overarching collectivism. As such, Quarrier's final addition as producer is merely a completion of the process.

In the final shot of the film, the camera swings round as Eve Democracy, finally shot by the Black Militants, is hoisted into the air on a camera crane. The same readings of political futility remain predominant. The camera crane that supports Eve - the only named character in the film - is also clearly named 'Sam Mighty.' With its final, cursory splashing on of fake blood, kills Eve Democracy and ends all hope of a fresh start. But still, visually, the image *pleases*. Julia Kristeva has noted how Godard's films combine "extravagant formalism" and "extraordinary poignant realism" so that they mark a "conjunction between the formal and the ideological" which is both "very poetic and very militant" (Kristeva, 1985). Heretical as it may be to continued exponents of the auteur tradition, producer Quarrier has an artistic (as well as a self-evident commercial) case to dwell on. The final frames of this truncated pop musical, its image-play with its depth and colour and the Stones playing over it, all centred on Godard's wife, are entirely coherent with Godard's film and his commitment to audio and visual experimentation.

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The Wild Blue Yonder

Dir: Werner Herzog, US, 2006

A review by Shannon Foskett, University of Chicago, US

The Wild Blue Yonder is a haunting, somber contribution to the small "genre" of hybrid sci-fi / essay documentaries dealing with extraterrestrial travel, such as John Akomfrah's *Last Angel of History* (1995) and Rian Brown's independent short *The Settler* (2001). Part environmental documentary, part "extraterrestrial travelogue," Herzog's science fiction fantasy weaves together historical footage borrowed from NASA with the underwater photography of Henry Kaiser to construct a cautionary message for planet Earth. The message is delivered by an alien from the Andromeda galaxy -- from a planet called the Wild Blue Yonder. As the implicit message of the film, it is simple: it is time to save our own planet from dying, because that is exactly what is happening; because there are no nearby oases in the universe we can run to; and because whatever sentient beings there may yet be out there will not be able to save us. Contrary to our utopian imaginings, the film suggests extraterrestrials are neither the technologically advanced nor more successful versions of humans that many wish to think they are.

In an opening sequence reminiscent of that used in Robert Zemeckis' *Contact* (1997), an audio montage beneath a black screen introduces the sober tenor of the narrative while a periodic breathing noise evokes the yawns of chaos that the ancient Greeks saw as the birth of being. From the black screen (the "void"), the film cuts to a blue-green panoramic of hundreds of wind turbines oscillating in the fields of a small mountain town. The title credit glides down from the top of the screen as the camera pans over to a man standing with his back to the viewer, his long unkempt hair tied back in a ponytail. "This is my story," he says, turning to face the camera now. "I come from the outer reaches of Andromeda... another galaxy. A blue one -- way, way, beyond your world." His voice resonates with angst and intensity. His eyes betray a displaced, detached emotional logic as they float away from the camera.

The alien tells us that the death of their sun caused an environmental catastrophe more severe than a mere ice age. The inhabitants left in spaceship fleets across the universe, looking for a new home. The journey was boring and took hundreds of years. Many of them got lost. A few found planet earth, but arrived "100 years too early." Trying to make a good impression, they planned a city they hoped would rival Washington, D.C., but it didn't last. No one settled there. Some of the aliens grew homesick, others tried to commit suicide. The more successful ones made smoother integrations. One used his aviation expertise to clinch a position as Chairman of the Strategic Planning Committee at the Pentagon. The alien speaking to us was accepted into the CIA, but found they were unwilling to acknowledge his expertise. He was never promoted, so he decided to tell everyone everything. The result: the awkward, unsettling effect of his ongoing direct address to the camera.

At this point, the film embarks upon another temporal shift. Where the viewer had previously been asked only to entertain the insertion of the "alien's" (we are never told the name of his

species) life experience into our own established planetary history, the viewer is now challenged to accept their consolidation as a matter of fact from a point of view over eight hundred years into the future. This is the time from which the alien addresses us, the viewers of the twenty-first century.

Fifty years following the Roswell incident, he tells us, the government took a second look at the evidence using advanced technology. They didn't know it then, but Roswell was a probe, sent out ahead of the armadas from the Blue Yonder. During their investigations, certain microbes managed to escape the hermetically sealed protections and followed the scientists out into the world. The failure to quarantine the spread catalyzed a fearful, fervent search for residential alternatives to Earth. After searching the solar system and finding nothing, the pioneering mission utilized a breakthrough experimental technology known as "chaotic transport" that would allow them to utilize recently discovered chaotic orbits in order to radically increase the speed of their travel. As it happens, they came upon -- unbeknownst to them -- the dying planet of the Wild Blue Yonder. The atmosphere was made of liquid helium, but relative to everything else they had encountered in the vast galactic void, it seemed feasible and colonization plans were made. When the mission returns to Earth, the astronauts have aged 15 years, but the planet has aged 820. We are told its inhabitants have long disappeared -- presumably from an unspecified social or environmental disaster. Images of lush cliffs and waterfalls reveal that the planet has subsequently had a chance to recuperate its natural health and beauty.

The film has the musical structure of a poetic refrain. Throughout the narrative, the alien repeats: "I could have told them. I know all about it." Of course, the alien *is* telling them -- us -- all about it, *now*. But his story is not simply constructed as a warning from the future about some eventual fate of the planet. Indeed, the Wild Blue Yonder is only a slightly displaced sign for Earth *today*. The film, which is broken into ten subsections, begins with "I. Requiem for a Dying Planet." The sorrowful score that performs this requiem-in-advance that lasts the duration of the film is the work of Dutch cellist Ernst Reijseger, whose composition for Herzog's *The White Diamond* (2004) accompanies it on his latest album, *Requiem for a Dying Planet*. The rich, full cries of the strings are accompanied by the voices of Sardinian vocal group Tenore e Cuncordu de Orosei and occasionally by Mola Sylla and Emmi Leisner singing Handel. A lengthy detour could be taken here on just how much this fictional documentary owes to its music. Indeed, this film is a solid counterexample to arguments that insist or depend upon the relative invisibility of film music. At least one third of *The Wild Blue Yonder* leads its viewers through the depths of sea and galaxy with neither narration nor physiognomy; with only beautifully haunting refrains.

One such section is called "The Mysteries of the Blue Yonder." Every variety of blue unfolds before the camera as it creeps along the ocean floors of Antarctica / The Blue Yonder. The periodic breathing sounds from the opening credit sequence return to adorn the virtual walls of this vacuous landscape. The alien shares his love of this place. "The other thing that makes my planet so beautiful," he says, "is its wildlife. The creatures would always speak to you. They'd try to make contact. And now they're sad. Because they're left alone." Shots of jellyfish-like creatures floating towards the camera are accompanied by the voice of Sylla, expressing their desire to communicate. In another shot, a human hand reaches out to poke at another floating creature as though it were playing with a toy. These repeated pokes are coded by Sylla's yelping sounds as overt acts of violence and ignorance. The jellyfish floats away once it realizes it hasn't made a friend. In his voice-over, the alien comments: "here I see that your astronauts either ignored them [...] or did not treat them with respect."

One of the more provoking comments the alien makes while milling through the ruins of his failed terrestrial city takes the form of an overt moral reprimand or an explanation of original human sin. According to the alien, the human race has made two irrevocable mistakes in the course of its evolution: the domestication of pigs and the development of mountaineering. The former led to the sedentary, urban, capitalist lifestyle that poses the large problems of today that will ultimately lead to our destruction; the latter "robbed the mountains of their dignity." At this point, almost halfway through the film, if nothing else has yet been cause to call this tale something "different," the film now reveals the transcendent theme coursing its way through the narrative.

The early French film theorists of the 1910's noted a unique property of the new medium -- its ability to represent the audience to itself, to impose some degree of self-consciousness. Contributing to the uncanny experience that *The Wild Blue Yonder* offers is its representation of the alien as "one of us" -- a disguised version of "the other within." Played as he is by Brad Durif, he looks, speaks and moves like a human. No doubt, part of his civilization's strategy for relocating to planet Earth was this inherent or learned visual characteristic that allowed their species to live on this planet undetected, despite being citizens of another galaxy.

The uncanny self-consciousness of the "other within," or the "other as us," is also evoked throughout by the film's formal strategies. Most sophisticated of the film's techniques is undoubtedly the reappropriation of historical footage in order to posit, through recontextualisation, the existence of radically alternate times and places. Or, in another version of this strategy, no pretense at another reality is made, but real situations are used to support the fictional narrative. As an example of the former strategy, NASA footage of the 1989 five-day voyage of the STS-34 Atlantis crew (Donald E. Williams, Michael J. McCulley, Franklin Chang-Diaz, Shannon Lucid and Ellen Baker) is married to a voice-over that identifies it as "the only surviving footage" of the mission to search for hospitable regions of the solar system. One gets the feeling that it is this crew for whom we are mourning. We note the sacrifices the crew must have made so that the rest of the human race could live: they survive on food from little plastic boxes; they combat muscle atrophy by strapping themselves down onto a mini exercise bicycle; they help each other to bed at night, to sleep in the same yellow and blue uniforms, strapped in to sleeping bags on the walls of the spacecraft. As an example of the second strategy, present-day interviews with Ellen Baker and Chang-Diaz are upheld as interviews from eight hundred years in the future when the mission finally returns, only a little older, while everyone else has disappeared.

A similar example involves two conversations with actual engineers -- Roger E. Diehl, Ted Sweetser and Martin Lo -- who do gravity-assist trajectory work at the Jet Propulsion Lab in Pasadena, California. In front of white-board and power-point presentation, they each discuss the work that actually occupies them - but the context of the discussion in each case has been transplanted into the story of the mission to the outer fringes. Martin Lo commands an entire subsection of the film wherein he covers "the mathematics of chaotic transport." Lo has discovered the mechanics of interplanetary superhighways -- gravitational tunnels that connect our solar system together. Instead of imagining planetary orbits as discrete trajectories, Lo tested the hypothesis that the orbits are integrated products of chaos in the shape of tubes, not lines -- and it worked. These tubes contain spaces he calls "offramps" for jumping onto the tube of the next planet. While this technique has of course not been used as shown in the film, it is left unclear to exactly what extent this theoretical science is factual.

At any rate, the film's alien was rather upset to discover that these human astronauts were able to figure out this special form of transport to reach "his" planet and was doubly angered that his own people didn't know about it. This revelation confirms the alien's earlier contention that his people were technological failures, and in doing so, the unconventional presentation of an extraterrestrial species as deficient to humans is enough to give the viewer yet another momentary pause for thought.

Strictly speaking, it should not be possible to speak of *The Wild Blue Yonder* as a whole. It is not. There are enough temporal and communicative aporias to challenge one's sense of logic and continuity. At points it looks like an embarrassing school project. Sometimes it is plainly dull. One even gets the sense that it is not necessary to finish watching it all, once the point of it has been realized, and that it might border on painful to do so.

A product of its complexity, *The Wild Blue Yonder* is somewhat more than a thought-provoking audio-visual experience. It is an ugly dream that seeps out of its fictional context -- frightening for seeming as real, sad and hopeless as it does. But the redeeming feature of this dream -- and this is an affect that arises well before the credits have yet to appear -- is the realization that one has woken up; indeed, that it is still possible to "wake up." If this is the only measure of the aesthetic value of a film, that it fulfills its vocation only insofar as it fulfills its social vocation, by affecting its audience in this way -- *The Wild Blue Yonder* implores us to hope for accolades yet to come that will confirm it is a great piece of art.