Wolf Creek

Dir: Greg Mclean, Australia, 2005

A review by James Rose, York College, UK

By looking at a range of critically popular horror films it becomes apparent that the landscapes within these narratives are specifically chosen in order to perform both an aesthetic and functional role: each environment is simultaneously depicted as being beautiful and chaotic, as both passive and aggressive. These visual qualities place a greater emphasis on their role as an isolating setting and, by doing so, become a quietly antagonistic character in themselves. This can be seen most explicitly within *Jaws* (Stephen Spielberg, 1975), in which Police Chief Martin Brody must overcome his fear of the sea in order to not only kill the Great White Shark that threatens Amity Island but also to regain control over who he is. For Brody, the ocean becomes the site for this rite of passage, a testing ground of his civilised nature against the primitive space of the shark. By creating this conflict, parallels can be made between characters and the landscape, and so enforce the tensions within the narrative.

Within horror films, the threat often inhabits the depicted landscape and so must be equated with it, making them as hostile and as primitive as the space itself. Conversely, the protagonist enters into the landscape, either to live there (and so making them the outsider) or as part of trip in which they want to experience the romantic notion of the wilderness. These defining traits are evident in a range of contemporary horror films -- *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper,1974), *Jaws*, *John Carpenter's The Thing* (John Carpenter, 1982), *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick & Eduardo Sánchez, 1999) and *Wolf Creek* (Greg McLean, 2005) -- and in each, the protagonists successfully survive the crisis of the film: Sally must escape from Leatherface and the rest of his demented family, MacReady and Childs must freeze to death in order to contain The Thing, Heather and Mike must succumb to the presence within the Burkittsville wood in order to understand what it actual is, and in *Wolf Creek*, Liz, Kirsty and Ben must survive their ordeal with bushman Mick Taylor.

In many respects this connection between landscape and character correlates with interpretations of the Western. There, the landscape is almost always the Frontier, a wild and hostile space waiting to be discovered, explored, charted and civilised by society. This, obviously, means that the narrative threat is more often than not the Native American Indian. These people are truly of the land, living within and harvesting in harmony and without destruction to the landscape. Yet their cinematic depiction was one as wild and as hostile as the landscape in which they lived. They were a threat but one that was easily terminated with a bullet. Within horror films, the threat is not so easily destroyed, and for those films that specifically use the landscape as a signifier, the threat often survives, disappearing back into the landscape from where it came. The notion of the Frontier also remains intact - regardless of geographical location - and each landscape remains unaltered by the narrative, continuing to exist as a space which refuses the progress of civilization. The landscape retains its sense of purity, its beauty and its hostile qualities. It is for these reasons that they provide such convincing locations: they can not be changed, remaining forever fixed in a hostile state, regardless of who ventures over their boundary.

Taken on its own, *Wolf Creek* can be interpreted as a hybrid of two genres, the American horror film (or perhaps more precisely the serial killer subgenre) and Australian landscape cinema. This sense of duality provides a means of interpreting the narrative content as it takes both genres' modes of representing the landscape and converts it to satisfy its narrative and visual agenda. By doing this, the film makes a parallel between the formal use of landscape in these genres, both of which use the landscape as a formidable element. In films such as Nicholas Roeg's *Walkabout* (1971), and Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), for example, the sublime sense of otherness that permeates through the mythic of the outback has its parallel in films such as *Jaws*. Both interpret nature as something to be feared, as a Frontier space that is well beyond man's understanding as much as beyond his civilizing grasp. This idea of nature is given a physical form and exerts itself, to varying violent degrees, upon the narratives protagonists: the terror of nature manifest itself as the Great White Shark in *Jaws* and within the eerie, supernatural site of Hanging Rock.

The first image of *Wolf Creek* is of the landscape: waves unfolding onto the shore at Broome, Western Australia: the sun is rising and casts the sea into liquid silver and gold, each metal rolling into the other as it moves towards the dull copper shore. It is a romantic image, an ideal as much as it is idyllic. This is the sea we imagine, the sea that we dream of. It is, to debase it, a postcard sent home to the family. But, for all of this, the sea represents the duality of most horror film landscapes: simultaneously beautiful in its splendor and as equally terrifying in its hostility. As Jonathan Lemkin describes it in his essay "Archetypal Landscape and Jaws," the sea is "a place of the unknown: the life that lies beneath its surface, however dreadful, is greater than is visible" and that it "is a place beyond the rule of man, whose influence stops at the shoreline" (Lemkin, 1996: 279). This single image acts as a precursor to what is to come within the narrative, introducing to the audience the other beautifully quiet antagonist of the film, the wilderness.

After a night of partying, Liz wakes up on the beach and looks out at the sea, watching the waves roll upon the shore. She gets up, takes off her top and runs into the sea. The waves wash over her, momentarily covering her as they rush towards the shore. The sea, the waves dwarf her, absorbing her into its continuous flow. This sense of scale, this disappearing into the landscape, becomes a recurrent motif within the film, particularly when the three protagonists are driving through the outback towards Wolf Creek. Its constant repetition reminds both the protagonists and the viewer of the duality of the sea, of the outback, of the wilderness: its beauty is its horror.

Hung over, Liz, Kirsty and Ben quietly pack their belongings into their car and begin their journey through the Australian outback and on to that other wilderness, the Great Barrier Reef. Their journey is explicitly about the landscape for their planned route incorporates as many tourist sites as possible: Magnetic Island, Mission Beach, Cairns and their final destination, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. As the three travel towards their first destination, Halls Creek, a montage of images details their journey: close up images of the three talking, singing and sleeping are cut against images of the passing landscape - vast tracts of sun-baked soil and intensely deep blue skies.

What little there is of buildings at Emu Creek epitomizes the failed attempts to civilize the outback. There is the garage, weather beaten and sun-baked, its corrugated roof rusting and pock marked with holes. Rubbish has been piled up in corners, scrap metal dumped and left to rust. The windows are covered in a thick layer of dust. The constant drone of flies. There seems to be a few houses, each in a similar stage of dilapidation. Liz goes off to the toilets

whilst Ben starts to fill the tank. Kirsty lights a cigarette, looks around and goes over to a collapsing fence. Looking over she sees the vast expanse of the outback stretch out into the distance. Dumped in front of it, behind the fence, is an array of household rubbish. Scattered amongst it are unwanted tables and chairs, a filing cabinet, broken fridges and freezers lined up like some sort of shining white barricade between civilization and the wilderness. Kirsty exhales cigarette smoke and walks away.

Walking up and into the Wolf Creek crater is like walking into the sea, like stepping into a no-mans land where there is only wilderness. The crater is empty, timeless, mythic, and astral in its proportion and in its origin. Here nature clearly holds sway, a presence as an unknown force that drifts lazily in the cool winds that blow across the outback, one that gathers in the storm clouds as it begins to rain. As the three travellers approach the crater the blue skies fade to grey and that drizzle begins. It is not meant to rain on the trip of a lifetime. It is meant to be -- or least imagined to be -- as bright and hot and as idyllic as the sea unfolding onto Broome beach.

On Ben's map the crater looked somewhat insignificant, appearing only as a symbol within the surrounding landscape. In reality it is an awesome sight: a massive indentation that lends an intensity of scale to the endless, empty landscape that surrounds it. Seen briefly from Liz's point of view, the boundaries of the crater stretch far beyond her field of vision. All she can manage to say is "Wow… that's impressive." The three begin to scramble around the crater's rim and, for the only time in the entire film, the image cuts from a realism orientated hand-held camera work to a fixed aerial perspective: looking down upon Wolf Creek, the image places emphasis on the scale of both the crater and the landscape, the road leading up to it drowning in all of that vast emptiness. The crater suddenly appears as an immense anomaly in the ruptured continuum of the outback, a dislocated moment that is not of any time or era. It is simply there, aberrant and unique.

From the first moments Liz, Ben and Kirsty have meet Mick Taylor, they realise he is a man who likes to laugh. As Mick tries to repair their car, the four talk, there is conversation punctuated with Mick's laugh -- a repetitive snigger that is has a slightly mocking and cruel edge to it. Mick's sense of humour and his willingness to both mock himself induces a sense of security with this man. As Liz says, "He's funny… he's like some sort of Crocodile Dundee!"

Once he has drugged, bound and separated his victims, Mick stops laughing. The hunt is, for now, over and the long, drawn out torture of his three victims can begin. His torture of Kristy is humiliating and degrading, prolonging an inevitable rape, dismemberment and murder. In the face of such serious brutality, one should not laugh. But, should the opportunity arise for one more joke, then it must be cracked. And it is that one final joke that simultaneously quotes cinema and consolidates Mick's relationship to the landscape.

Just as Liz finally gets one of the stolen cars started, Mick appears and plunges his hunting knife into her back. The blade breaks her ribs and probably punctures her lungs. Mick knows this because he knows how to kill animals and that's what tourists are to Mick, animals. He's done this a lot of times before and knows where to insert the blade to incapacitate instead of kill. He pulls out the knife and gives Liz a chance to escape. She manages to get out of the car and to crawl towards the door until Mick stops her. In her final defensive act, Liz takes out her Swiss Army knife, haphazardly waving it before Mick. Now, that is funny. The knife seems so small and so blunt in the current situation. Mick smiles and then laughs as he wipes

Liz's blood off his knife. He looks up at the garage ceiling and muses: "It's like your little mate said before, that's not a knife, this is a knife!" and then he brings down his blade, its nickel sharp edge cutting three of Liz's fingers clean off.

Connected through this quote as much by fore name, Mick Taylor is obviously a horrifyingly feral version of Mick 'Crocodile' Dundee -- of Peter Fairman's *Crocodile Dundee* (1986). Within their respective narratives, both Taylor and Dundee are aberrant white males whose professional and social lives rely on the outback. Both demonstrate a white male superiority over the landscape and nature. Dundee's exaggerated struggle with a crocodile and his efficient killing of one when it attacks journalist Sue Charlton is no different to Taylor's past as a Head Shooter - coupled with his explicit descriptions of hunting techniques. But whereas Dundee is a pseudo-bushman who tells the time not by looking at the height and position of the sun but by a quick glance at his digital wrist watch, Taylor is a genuine manifestation of the bushman: rugged, tattooed and with slicked back hair. Taylor appears as a stereotyped representation, and somewhere in his damaged psyche, he knows this. By playing out this role in front of the tourists, he is able deceive them into accepting his offers of help and consequential hospitality. He is like Dundee in that Dundee exaggerates his own experience with the crocodile in order to dupe the tourists into going out on one of his *Never Never Safari* tours. For Taylor it is all an act that will lead to betrayal, an act that, deep down, is just as funny as a girl trying to attack him with a Swiss Army Knife.

When Kirsty wakes up, Liz has not returned from her second foray into Mick's camp. She maybe dead or she maybe being tortured, Kirsty isn't sure. Instead of going to help, she decides to follow the last instructions given to her by Liz: to run away. Getting slowly to her feet, a battered and bloody Kirsty runs out into the landscape in the hope of finding a road. As the sun rises, Kirsty stumbles off the dry soil and onto warm tarmac. She is safe. Unable to run any further, she collapses to her knees. Breathing heavily, Kirsty looks around at the empty landscape and then down at her hands. Her bloody fingers are spread across the tarmac near the thickly painted white line that defines the edge of the road. On one side of this line is the outback, on its other side, the road. With its smooth and even surface, the road's perfectly straight white line defines the oppositions of the narrative: urban versus nature, civilized versus primitive, and tourists versus Mick Taylor. Yet, regardless of the roads sense of permanence, its dramatic function changes as the film progresses.

At the start of the film, the (open) road offers the three travellers a means of fulfilling a romantic notion for its route is one of freedom, of solitude and of an escape into nature. By following its clearly defined course they can not only reach that other great wilderness, the Great Barrier Reef, but they can also witness other dramatic spectacles of nature along its solitary path. There is, ultimately, no need for a map because the road is the only black and white presence within the landscape -- everything else is sun burnt into crisp strata of copper, silver and gold. As a result, the road is easy to follow, and it is also easy driving. As long as they keep on or close to its route, the road represents, in every sense, a site of safety. Now, near the end of film, as Kirsty studies her battered and bloody hands, the road is no longer a route to be followed but a path to potential freedom, one that will take her back to the safety of the modern. All she has to do is sit and wait and hope a car or truck will soon pass.

Within films of *Wolf Creek's* type, the image of the Final Girl -- battered, bruised and bloody -- running down an empty road is becoming almost an archetypal image. Usually occurring near the end of the narrative (and when the audience believes the antagonist is dead or, at the very least, incapacitated), this image signifies the return to safety for the narratives one

remaining survivor. In *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* -- a film to which *Wolf Creek's* heritage belongs - the female survivor manages to escape from her captors out onto the road and into the back of truck. It is the same in Marcus Nispel's 2003 remake of *Chainsaw Massacre* - and a similar ending occurs in Rob Zombie's *House of a 1000 Corpses* (2003). But whereas in Hopper and Nispel's films the girl manages to escape, the final girl of Zombie's film is not so lucky. She is driven back to the horrors she has only just escaped from. For Kirsty a car does finally appear but it is only the briefest of salvation for Mick soon appears, executing both her and the anonymous driver of the vehicle.

The film's final image is ambiguous. The sun is setting and the sky is once again filled with strata of gold. Mick Taylor walks into the frame, a silhouette against the sky, his trusted hunting rifle at his side, the bolt nearly worn down after all that murder. As he walks towards the horizon line he simply disappears. Taken literally, it implies that Mick Taylor has simply vanished or was never caught and died an anonymous death. The latter is a disturbing end for it implies that Mick continued to hunt the tourists that scrambles up to the top of Wolf Creek, accounting for some of those who go missing and are never found. But, putting such a realistic interpretation onto this image denies the sustained presence of the landscape within the film. Considering this, it is possible that Mick's disappearance -- or absorption -- into the landscape implies a mythic resonance. He is no longer just an inhabitant; he is now part of the habitation, part of its memory and part of its myth. As long as the tourists keep traveling to see those natural wonders, he will remain.

Wolf Creek's concluding image makes explicit the strong connection between McLean's film and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*: as Sally is driven to safety in the back of a truck, Leatherface, the films chainsaw wielding antagonist, remains behind, screaming as he spins his chainsaw wildly in the air. As he does, the sun slowly sets just as it does in *Wolf Creek*, the brilliant gold light bleaching out the image as Leatherface too dissolves back into the landscape.

Even with this connection aside, it is not difficult to make further parallels between *Wolf Creek* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. The consistency between the films indicates a heritage more than an extension or reinterpretation of Hopper's film. Both films are set up as a 'true' story, as a means of amplifying the dreadful events that unfold and within reason both films share a similar narrative - a group of innocent young people travelling through the wilderness stumble upon an aberrant white male who proceeds to graphically slaughter them. The only real difference here is the choice of weapon, for both antagonists revel in not just the deception of trust but also the brutality of the torture they inflict upon the females of the group. The landscape is also used in a similar manner, functioning as a means of isolating the narratives protagonists and conceptually used to construct notions of opposition, of the relic and of the past.

In his essay *The Idea of Apocalypse in The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, Christopher Sharrett considers the function of the landscape as a primitive space, stating that "the film is about a world dissolving into primordial chaos, set in an archetypal wasteland where the sustaining forces of civilization are not operative" (Sharrett, 1996: 259), and in relation to the ending, that "there is no comfortable sense of closure to *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* [, …] Hopper prefers to create crisis, to present the world returning to chaos" (Sharrett, 1996: 259). Within both films, the landscape represents Sharrett's 'primordial chaos' and, because of this, its sense of timelessness is exaggerated for all of the attempts at civilization have failed. Within *Wolf Creek* this is given visual form in the ramshackle garage on the edge of the outback at

Emu Creek, the consistently empty road, and the abandoned mine in which Mick Taylor has made his home - the attempts at civilizing this environment (or contaminating it with progress) become relics as they are rendered useless by the sheer force of the landscape. It is a space, as Sharrett describes, where the world has returned to chaos. This is in some ways ironic as for Mick Taylor nothing has changed as he simply continues to hunt the vermin that frequent Wolf Creek. Like Leatherface and his family, Mick's homicidal activity is merely an extension of his relationship to the landscape: "I'm doing people a favour'" he says when Kristy asks him why he kills kangaroos. And perhaps he is. By killing the tourists that frequent Wolf Creek he is keeping this uncontaminated environment free of corruption and maintaining the delicate balance that each wilderness has. And, perhaps, that is why, in the end, Mick Taylor dissolves into the landscape: he is the balancing hand of the past, the sustained moment, the physical embodiment of chaos.

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North County

Dir: Niki Caro, US, 2005

A review by Sabine Hikel, York University, Canada

It was with eager anticipation that I went to a screening of *North Country* (2005). I was ready for a film about strong women standing up for justice and women's rights. This was going to be, I thought, Hollywood's approximation of a feminist film. After all, it had all of the right elements: a tough woman, a battle against sexual harassment, and a victorious class-action lawsuit, making said woman triumphant. But for all of the film's achievements -solid performances by the entire cast, the gritty depiction of life for women on the vanguard of women's labour rights - the way in which *North Country* is assembled reveals that its gestures towards feminism are strictly superficial. Hollywood, once again, has let me down.

Josey Aimes (played by Charlize Theron, a role for which she received an Academy Award nomination) is introduced at the opening of the movie as a mother of two in the midst of leaving her abusive husband. Forced to move in with her parents because her job at the local beauty salon doesn't afford Josey the opportunity to get her own place, she jumps from the frying pan to the fire. She must suffer the indignity of living with her father, Hank (Richard Jenkins), an angry, distant man, and her mother, Alice (Sissy Spacek), who is largely ineffectual in mediating the tension between her husband and her daughter. As it turns out, this family dynamic exemplifies the gendered balance of fear and disappointment that Josie struggles with throughout the film.

The sexist, working-class, hardscrabble context Josie is forced to live in is established early on. Josey's only female ally in the film, Glory (played by Frances McDormand, nominated for an Oscar for best supporting actress), works at the mine in their Minnesota town, and Josey gets a job there too. Although working there should be her path to independence, it only pushes Josey deeper into conflict - the mine is dear old dad's territory. The shame and paternalism imposed on Josey by her father is replicated by the mine; she is hired only because the mining company has been forced by federal legislation to hire women workers. Moreover, the sexual harassment faced by Josey and her new female co-workers begins immediately in the form of threats, jeers and a dildo hidden in one woman's lunchbox. Josey is particularly rattled by coming face-to-face with Bobby (Jeremy Renner), a man from her past who frightens her, though the audience does not initially know why.

As the scale and the nature of the women's harassment begins to intensify, their response to it is to become more and more passive, mirroring the family dynamic Josey has long lived with. Although she can afford to buy a house for her and her two sons, the move is counterbalanced by being dragged further into a hellish workplace: the harassment escalates from nasty pranks to intimidation to physical force. The audience witnesses repulsive scenes of denigration against the women workers (feces smeared in the women's locker room; a woman's sweater with a tidy puddle of ejaculated deposited on it; an overflowing porta-potty is deliberately pushed over while a woman is locked inside). For the audience, these horrifying images stimulate a deep identification with Josey's urge to fight back against this injustice.

This, of course, is the very first requirement of a feminist film: deliver a female protagonist that the audience identifies with and who, despite some moral pitfalls, is someone we just want to see win, win, win. But despite having offered such a protagonist, the first suggestion that *North Country* may not exactly be a feminist film after all arrives exactly when Josey begins to gear up for the fight. Josey's female co-workers, frightened by the harassment, refuse to join Josey in standing up for their rights. But instead of demonstrating that their silence is a typical reaction, and one which makes attempts at workplace sexual harassment the most effective, the women themselves are understood to be passive weaklings and even dupes. The women's fears of losing their jobs or opening themselves to the possibility of more harassment is not depicted as understandable or as an effect of what has happened to them. The movie about sexual harassment, then, perpetuates one of the many myths about the reality of sexual harassment.

Even Josey's friend Glory is yet another woman who fails to come through for Josey. As the only female member of the union executive, Glory attempts to address Josey's issues through the union. But her appeals are eroded by the fact that her health is deteriorating due to Lou Gehrig's disease. The subtext is clear: women - passive, silent - cannot be counted on. The male-dominated union, of course, is no help either. Naïve to management-worker relationships, Josey takes her complaints regarding the harassment to her supervisor, with no effect, and then the head of the company, who threatens her with dismissal if she doesn't keep quiet.

A key turning point in the film comes when Josey quits her job at the mine and seeks legal help from lawyer Bill White (Woody Harrelson), who advises her that the only way to go about seeking any recourse is through a sexual harassment class-action lawsuit against the mine, something which was unprecedented in 1984. But once again let down by the other women characters in the film: a class-action lawsuit would require at least two other women willing to put forth their claims in court. Although her friend Glory is willing to take the risk, no other women (all of them chumps, no doubt) step up to the plate.

Inexplicably, however, the film and the court case forge onward, despite the lack of complainants. It is the court scenes that dominate the final quarter of the film; it is also in this last segment of the movie that *North Country* most paradoxically fails to live up to its feminist credentials. Typical of real-life situations where a woman challenges paternal authority, Josey's sexuality is brought into question in court when the defense lawyer representing the mining company points out that Josey does not know -- apparently - the father of her eldest child. The claim that Josey is a slut is echoed by Bobby, her former co-worker and creepy man from her past, who claims that, back in high school, Josey had slept with one of her teachers. But when Bill examines Bobby on the stand, however, Bobby becomes agitated and blurts out the truth: the high school teacher, in fact, raped Josey, as she had testified herself. This pivotal scene establishes Josey's credibility; she is not, as it turns out, just a whore who deserves to be sexually harassed in her workplace.

What is so problematic about this revelation is that the audience does not learn the truth about Josey's life - or the paternity of her child - from Josey herself. Rather, Josey's truth is spoken by a man who has heretofore been her nemesis throughout the film. The veracity of her truth claims are not only in question in the courtroom, then, but in the context of the film itself. The audience cannot believe Josey until Bobby verifies the truth on her behalf. What makes this turn of events all the more disturbing is that the viewing audience does not actually hear Josie's side of the story at all. We do not hear about her rape experience in her own words.

Rather than Josey telling the courtroom (and therefore the audience) what happened to her, the camera cuts away to a flashback scene that depicts the rape. When we move back to the present moment, all we see is Josie sitting mute in the witness box and the shocked and horrified faces of those present in the courtroom. This has the result of effectively silencing Josie again.

When Josey's truth (and her supposedly questionable sexuality) is mediated again by a male character, it occurs shortly after Sammy, Josey's eldest son, learns he is the product of the rape. We see Sammy at Glory's home, which she shares with her boyfriend Kyle. While the relationship between Kyle and Sammy is never fully explained or fleshed out, presumably the audience is to gather that Sammy is looking for a father figure and some kind of solace from this terrible truth he has learned. In an exchange between the two characters, Sammy verbally trashes his mom, telling Kyle that everyone is right to call her a whore. Even for Josey's son, her rape has brought her sexuality and morality under scrutiny; in order for her integrity to be restored, and for Josey to return to the maternal side of the eternal mother/whore divide, her son must seek the truth from another man - one who, as it turns out, has very little relationship to Josey at all. No matter, though. Understanding that Sammy is upset, Kyle consoles him by pointing out what a good mom Josie has been to Sammy. This seems to work. By the end of the scene, Sammy may return to his mother, no longer seeing her as a whore - but not because of any of Josie's own words or actions. It had to come about through Josey's truth being mediated yet again by another man.

Any pretence at *North Country* having an even remotely feminist thread is destroyed in the film's final court scene. Once her credibility has been established by her own sexual harasser (!), Josie's prospects in the case seem to have brightened. But, she is reminded, in order to get anywhere with the class-action suit, there must be at least two other women willing to step forward and testify. The audience, of course, expects one of the other female workers to come forth and describe what life was like working in the mine. Logically, that person would be Josey's friend Glory. However, throughout the film we see Glory's condition rapidly deteriorating due to Lou Gehrig's disease. Although she is in the courtroom, in a wheelchair and accompanied by Kyle, it is revealed that Glory's condition has deteriorated to the point that she is unable to speak. In other words, it is at this moment that the movie itself demanded to hear the voice of a woman speak her truth, yet in a third twist of the subversion of the women's voices, a man steps into the breach instead: Kyle reads out to the court a statement that Glory had written beforehand. Thus, in a third instance in this film, a man speaks on behalf of a silenced woman as a way of verifying and regulating her truth.

The film's resolution swiftly follows, but even up until the last moment, the silence of the women involved (Josey, Alice, Glory, and all of the others) is deafening. Josey's other female co-workers stand up in a symbolic act that reads as "me too," but again, the women themselves who were sexually harassed do not speak -- they simply stand. This makes what should be the moment of triumph ultimately a moment of complete disappointment. The women are not brought to their feet by the voices of Josey or Glory or any other women. They are persuaded to action by the words of the men who are present in the court: Bobby, Bill and Kyle. There is only one female voice that is actively heard in the classroom: the lawyer representing the mine. There is no shot at feminist redemption here, though. The female lawyer comes across not only as a sellout to her sex but as a patsy, as she knows all too well that Pearson, the mine owner, is sexist.

The resounding muteness of all the key female players throughout *North County* suggests that a film which honestly depicts strong women who battle the forces that tolerate and promote injustice may still be too explosive for Hollywood to handle. Perhaps this conclusion shouldn't be surprising. For example, Theron's other Oscar nod came from her depiction of Aileen Wuornos in *Monster* (2003), a movie which also tells the true story of a woman who fought back against a lifetime of injustice. In that case, it is poignant that Hollywood only told Wuronos's story after she herself had been sentenced, contained and killed by the state.

While *North Country* tells an important quasi-true story, it fails to grant space to the female protagonist to tell that truth herself. It seems as though that old chestnut, the subject/object divide, has not changed much since Contance Penley, drawing on Laura Mulvey, wrote nearly twenty years ago that a "active/passive division of labor controls the narrative structure because it is the man who makes the story happen at every textual level" (Penley, 1990: 42). For a film which promises to be about women speaking truth to power, it is highly ironic that all of the female characters are silenced. Instead of women being the agents of change, the male characters are given the responsibility and therefore the credit for bringing forth justice. If "feminist" means women speaking up and having their voices heard, this movie fails miserably in its feminist aims.

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Lost in Translation

Dir: Sofia Coppola, US, 2003

A review by Dave Hastings, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK

There are certain situations that follow us in life, which we are forced to endure, whether we like them or not, but these emotional and social experiences -- including self-doubt, loneliness and love - are ultimately what make us human. Such a breadth of themes though, makes it virtually impossible to capture them all or record them if you will, as if for future reference. It is rare then, to experience a film that is not only crafted with precise decision, passion and beauty, but which also seems to have in essence miraculously contained the very core of those hard-to-communicate themes that can have the most emotional effect on us all.

Lost In Translation (2003) follows the story of Bob Harris (Bill Murray), an actor in Japan doing a promotional shoot advertising a brand of whisky, and not really enjoying it. He's alone and in a city that seems to resemble something more like another planet, since the culture and language are completely different and new to him. Into this atmosphere comes the young and innocent Charlotte (Scarlett Johansson), who is accompanying her busy photographer of a husband (Giovanni Ribisi), whom is out all day and night working. She too feels the isolation of this new vibrant world, and by chance encounter, she comes into contact with Bob.

As the two form a close bond and friendship, they embark on beautiful set of adventures, as if viewing the world for the first time in their own little way, without anyone else invading this specially formed relationship. As they learn, so do we; as they discover new emotions and experiences, so do we, and as they overcome their feelings of loneliness, so also do we. What helps make *Lost In Translation* work, is how skillfully the film draws its audience into engaging with its universal themes of isolation, friendship, atonement and even the art of laughter, and unravels them on the screen with great glee and joy under Sofia Coppola's visually beautiful direction.

Coppola here continues her interest in transition and change in people's lives, which was first evident in her previous effort, *The Virgin Suicides* (1999) where teenage angst and disorientation were the norm to becoming young adults, and which has continued in her present works such as *Marie Antoinette* (2006). That foundation is followed here, through Charlotte's character, trying to make sense of her life, while the loneliness and abstract nature of her environment only hinder this progression. Bob is also the focus of the same principles, but having already matured to adulthood; he is now at that pivotal point where he is re-assessing the choices and aspirations he once held close to him (or as Charlotte remarks entertainingly, "You're probably just having a mid-life crisis. Did you buy a Porsche yet?") Coppola clearly relishes the opportunity to work within these templates, playing on the universal appeal of these experiences and feelings in an effort to draw in the audience, allowing us to become almost like a third, unseen character in the story.

She excels in her direction. Nearly every inch of frame displays and contributes the storyline further. There are dozens of lavish, often brightly lit colours flashing across busy city streets, whereby the viewer is often lead to feel out of touch, misplaced and engulfed. Then we have near deserted early morning 'lost' highways, haunting views of isolated misty skylines, and cityscape horizons. From above, even Tokyo at night, with its little glittering red, white and blue lights blinking from the skyscrapers, looks absent minded. We are treated to characters looking out over the city early morning, characters curled up and observing in deep thought. The relationship between Bob and Charlotte is also realised more through the ongoing similarity of their own personal stories. At the same time, the closer their friendship becomes, the closer they become physically in frame. At times, the camera in addition, whirls around the city, and around streets, as if a small child, learning their environment for the first time in amazement and awe, just like Bob and Charlotte are doing. It is through these wonderful visual displays of direction, and the clear passion and depth behind these decisions that *Lost In Translation* also exceeds magnificently as entertainment.

Pushing the film further in merit is also the performances of the two main stars -- both extracted by Coppola to perfection. Scarlett Johanssen is an amazingly credible and very talented rising young star of today, with a warm and natural beauty which the camera absorbs so well. She displays Charlotte with an innocence that never borders on self-pitying or attention-seeking. Instead she provides us with a deeply anxious, lonely and believable young woman, who while newly married to her husband, and going through what should ideally be the happiest time of her life, instead tries to find some meaning to her existence, often in the solitude of some of Japan's oldest historical monuments, and self-help CDs. Her survival stems from the belief that she will find a path to choose eventually, but doubts her own potential in the process, a potential which is re-awakened by her time with Bob, whom she shares a close bond with, and is inspired by, which Johanssen conveys so well. Her own innocence and natural splendor bring to the film one of the most perfect, realistic portrayals of being young, lost and confused this reviewer has ever seen on the screen, and the camera captures her marvelously. It is no surprise that this performance earned her the best actress award at the 2003 BAFTA ceremony.

While Charlotte embodies the youthful transitional theme Coppola loves to work with, in Bob we find her expanding that to middle-age and its consequences, where life's earlier dreams and desires have been ultimately washed away, slowly stripping the original excitement and numbing them down in the process. But the beauty here is that instead of wallowing in a state of depression, Bob is written as more frustrated, and is balanced more so in a perfectly somber and subtle way by Bill Murray. In anyone else's hands, the character just wouldn't have worked, but Murray's genius lies in his ability to act both formal and comedic at the same time. For example, in one scene, we can see the utter hopelessness in Bob's face at his wife having sent him carpet samples for his consideration. Yet at the same time, you simply cannot help but laugh and find his disillusioned reactions humorous. All this without Murray even uttering a word.

And this is where most of the comedic side of *Translation* comes from. It isn't gross out moments like the ingredients of an *American Pie* (1999) movie, it isn't even the spiritual and outrageous humor that possesses (pardon the pun), Murray's other works like *Ghostbusters* (1984) or *Groundhog Day* (1993) - where some say Murray was at his peak. In *Translation*, the joy is delivered by the more everyday, level-headed touches of wit, evident in Bob's comments, like when asked what he's doing by Charlotte in a bar, he replies, "I'm trying to organize a prison break. We have to first get out of this bar, then the hotel, then the city, and

then the country. Are you in or you out?", or when looking back on a restaurant trip he remarks it was, "So bad. What kind of restaurant makes you cook your own food?" This kind of subtle comedy can make us laugh just as much as anything in the most outrageous films, and here Murray performs it flawlessly.

While critics of Murray have leapt on his seeming inability to play anything but the same moody character, exemplified here by his casting in *Translation*, it is important to highlight that there is so much more to him as an actor. In fact, he can touch on many different kinds of comedy, as mentioned above, which is where more prolific comedians fail - insisting instead on rehashing the same old stand up abilities. On closer inspection, the character of Bob displays a wider range of Murray's talents, and a development of his abilities, seen clearly by the film's similarities to his even more subtle post-*Translation* performance in Jim Jarmusch's *Broken Flowers* (2005). Interestingly, it is also of reference to note that whatever the critics of his performance pronounce, they often neglect to mention that this role earned Murray his first ever Oscar nomination as well as netting him a Golden Globe, and a BAFTA for best actor.

While Murray's character Bob has everything - a family and a career as a actor - he can't help but feel he could do so much more, and the confines and cultural barriers of Tokyo hinder and also impact on these feelings, an area the film also relies on for its humour, giving us ultimately magical moments. One scene involves the cultural misunderstandings between Bob and a local prostitute ("What? Lip them?"), and later, with a patient at the hospital, both of which are truly moving, stand out moments (listen for the ladies in the background laughing). Like Charlotte though, he to finds a soul mate in this alien environment, who rekindles his hope not only in himself but life in whatever circumstance. The theme of friendship allowing enlightenment and reflection is thus, another theme that runs strongly throughout the text, enhanced by the terrific on-screen chemistry between the two stars. The script allows the witty conversing between the characters to occur in a way that never seems wrong or out of context, making the bond's presented all the more meaningful.

Perhaps the greatest aspect of the film is the closing act of the narrative. In a very moving and enchanting sequence, we are offered one of those true moments that reinstalls faith that cinema is an involving, emotional medium, still able to deliver instances of beauty. Bob and Charlotte share a tender last moment together, in which he whispers something to her which is not clear to us, the audience. Although the exact words are missing, it is a truly effectual scene, and resonates deeply in the subconscious. As you realize that both these characters have found a greater sense of themselves, you realize they have found that which they were longing for: inspiration and the loss of the loneliness that was keeping them back, through a discovered and treasured friendship. The scene allows you to conclude the film how you wish. Did Bob tell her he loves her sprit and to stay true to her aspirations? Or did he tell her where she could find him again in the future? We never know! Despite this confusion, Coppola's direction shows how the characters have evolved: they now stand out together boldly, the busy public environment thriving around them, in contrast to the mysterious landscapes seen early on. You -- the audience - are asked to put into the scene what you, and only you, wish to have happen. As this occurs, an almost mournful, and yet uplifting part of the song *Just Like Honey* echoes in the background - a perfect companion whatever the audience's reading of the scene. As a fan of films that exhibit ambiguous and vague conclusions, this is a wonderfully fulfilling moment, which evokes the film's tagline, as well as the sentiment that everyone wants to be found. Through this film, we experience the joys of doing so.

Flushed Away

Dir: David Bowers and Sam Fell, USA, 2006

A review by Alice Mills, University of Ballarat, Australia

David Bowers and Sam Fell's *Flushed Away* (2006) is the first animated film from the Aardman studio, famous for its idiosyncratically charming plasticine-model films about Wallace and Gromit. The film's title, *Flushed Away*, hints that it is likely to base its humour on pee and poo jokes, possibly in response to the popularity of such children's books as Andy Griffiths's *The Day My Bum Went Psycho* and *Zombie Bums from Uranus* with their effortless flow of anal innuendo. While *Flushed Away* is mainly set in the sewers below London and the main character, Roddy the talking mouse (Hugh Jackman) is flushed down the toilet twice, it exhibits surprisingly little in the way of scatological humour. A sewer-rat usurps Roddy's place as pet in his London house, sending him down the sewer pipes where he finds a miniature London constructed from rubbish. There he foils the evil Toad's plot to kill all rodents and repopulate the underground city with his offspring. As an inept and accident-prone hero, Roddy wins the love of Captain Rita Rat (Kate Winslet) and ends in rapturous partnership with her as husband and crew. Though including some of the whimsical absurdity masquerading as common sense that abounds in the Wallace and Gromit films, *Flushed Away* presents itself as a talking animal hero-quest film blending manically comic violence in the style of American cartoons and cuteness and sentimentality in the style of Disney animated films.

The film's use of American cartoon conventions sometimes clashes with the slower-paced Wallace and Gromit-like comic effects, especially the artefacts fashioned from human rubbish in the rodent city below London. Such creations require time for the viewer to appreciate their absurd ingenuity, but the viewer of *Flushed Away* is rarely given enough leisure to take in all the components of a ship's rubbish-engine or rubbish-weapons before the cartoon-style frenetic violence begins again. More damagingly, the film breaks its own laws. Part of the humour of these comic inventions lies in their ingenious use of what would be available in rubbish in the sewers; however the lair of the arch-villain Toad (voiced with relish by Ian McKellen) just happens to contain a cylinder of liquid nitrogen which enables Roddy and his love interest, Rita Rat, to freeze the Toad's comic henchmen (Andy Serkis and Bill Nighy). Liquid nitrogen again saves Roddy and Rita during the film's climactic battle with Toad and his henchfrogs. American wisecracks ("Freeze!") make a poor trade for British folly triumphant. Where all objects are permissible, there is no particular comic charm in making do with what is available.

As with the film's humour, boundary issues compromise its hero-quest story. The plot is premised on the existence of a miniature London in the sewers of the upper-world, human-scale London. This city is inhabited by rodents, leeches and the villainous Toad. As in Virgil's *Aeniad*, the way down to this underworld is easy to take: here it involves being flushed down the toilet. At the start of the film, Sid the sewer rat (Shane Richie) emerges explosively, coated in green slime, from the kitchen drainpipe of Roddy's Kensington house, quite unable to explain how he made the journey across what is supposed to be an impassable

barrier. According to the under-city's inhabitants, as in the *Aeniad* and almost all other hero-quests, return is impossible. Yet Roddy and Rita easily float up into the skies above upper-world London. This easy, almost unimpeded journey comes as an anticlimax, a wasted opportunity for further adventure.

The first quest in which Roddy finds himself involved is to regain Rita's precious ruby, seized by the Toad's henchrats. Here the film mildly parodies such predecessors as *Romancing the Stone* (1984) and draws on an ancient motif of the hero-quest, the gaining of a lost treasure; freshness is brought to the formula when Roddy proves that the huge jewel is a glass fake by smashing it. In recompense, he offers Rita the treasures of the Kensington human family's jewellery box, but when he gives her a huge emerald and an even bigger ruby from this box and proves that they are genuine with the smash-test, the viewer may well wonder if these items, kept loose in an unlocked jewellery box, are plastic trinkets, unbreakable but by no means authentic precious stones. This is one of the film's cleverest jokes, spilling over to subvert all other films about "precious jewels," but the joke may easily be lost in the narrative's hurtling pace.

As with other talking animal, animated quest films, Roddy's adventures draw on the hero-quest pattern as described by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Like the archetypal hero, Roddy the timid household pet is a reluctant hero, forced into adventure by a usurper. He crosses a threshold of adventure in moving from his familiar home via the sewer-pipes to the city and waterways below, a not-so-heroic descent to the underworld; here he becomes embroiled in the struggle for possession of the ruby and then uncovers and averts Toad's plans to exterminate all rodents in the under-city by flushing them away. In the course of his adventures, Roddy learns resilience and gains resourcefulness, and he falls in love with Rita. His return home, as in Campbell's model, proves awkward, for he has changed and realises (almost too late) that he belongs below. The film ends, as far as Roddy is involved, with a coy version of the hero-quest's sacred marriage, as he sails off joyously with his beloved Rita. So far, so familiar as a talking animal hero-quest, full of jokes and adventures and finally collapsing into Disney style cuteness and sentimentality.

The familiar pattern is undermined from the moment Rodney makes the transit below, comically flushed by the usurping sewer rat down the toilet. When he reaches the underworld, there is almost nothing of the distinction Campbell draws between the ordinary everyday world and the other world of myth, magic and wonder. Under-London has its own Tower Bridge and Big Ben, miniature versions of the human London's icons, and its population is besotted by the upper world's World Cup. The under-city is much cleaner than the city above; its inhabitants are champion recyclers of rubbish. Despite its location in the sewers, there is little of the disgusting about its streets and waterways. In shape the waterway leeches are reminiscent of turds but they function not as objects of disgust but as a Motown chorus singing an ironic commentary on Roddy's misadventures. The significant difference between the two worlds is thus not a matter of moving from the ordinary and everyday to the monstrous and marvellous, the realm of gods and demons. Rather, it is one of conviviality and love. At the start of the film the streets of upper London are void of people, and Roddy's existence as a pet mouse is a lonely one. Below, the streets are crammed with cheerful rodents including a benign policeman and Roddy finds a place in an enormous, loving rat family with Rita as his partner.

With so much conviviality and love, *Flushed Away* is at serious risk of becoming over-sentimental. Fortunately, one thing that toughens this theme is Grandma Rat's vigorous

pursuit of Roddy as sex object, parodying the understated romance between Roddy and Rita, in which much use is made of Aardman-style hesitant grin and pleading eyes. Roddy's longing to become part of Rita's loving family is undercut when he is ludicrously mistaken for a peeping tom -- his wistfulness confused with lechery. The idealisation of the huge, happy rat family is further undercut by an earlier episode in the film, in which the villainous Toad reveals his own enormous family of tadpoles whom he cherishes and with whom he plans to repopulate the under-city, once he has exterminated all the rodents. If the film is setting up family love as an ideal for the happy ending, Toad's paternal love can hardly be faulted. Contrariwise, if Toad's progeny is seen as a monstrous brood threatening the rodent population as a verminous threat to the legitimate Londoners below, then it is hard not to consider the huge brood of rat children as equally verminous, threatening the well-being of the human inhabitants of the London above the sewers. Just for a moment, the rattiness of the rats prevails over their humanness. Similarly, when Roddy returns to his Kensington house and talks of dealing with an "infestation" (that is, the sewer rat), the fantasy film convention of treating furry talking animals as cute humans in fur can be seen to falter, an effect complicated by the fact that this is Roddy the mouse talking of another talking animal as vermin.

Like the cute furry animal-as-human convention, the hero-quest stutters to a halt during the film's closing upper-London sequences. Roddy returns like an Odysseus ready to cleanse his home of a boorish usurper; but Sid the sewer-rat proves the feeblest of opponents, pleading to be allowed to stay. There appears to be no need, then, of Roddy's newly acquired heroic skills in the upper-world existence of the pet mouse. The human family then return from holiday and the little girl, Tabitha, fails to recognise that bloated, messy Sid is not slim, dapper Roddy. This failure suggests that Roddy and his adventures may only exist in the imagination of Sid the rat, for well-groomed Roddy only emerges at the start of the film once his humans have left. If Roddy the loveable talking mouse is only a figment of Sid's imagination, then the "real" pet is abjectly messy, greedy, idle and disgusting - in short, vermin. This is a surprisingly tough conclusion for what has been shaping up as a sweetly sentimental film.

The final, very nasty joke in this film occurs at the very end. While Roddy appears destined for life happy ever after with Rita in the sewers, the object of disgust in the upper world seems destined for either a quick death or a life of terror. Tabitha (an ominous name for the owner of a pet rodent, with its overtones of "tabby" as a cat's name) proudly introduces Sid/Roddy to his new "friend," the cat in her arms. Suddenly the perpetual threats to Roddy's life in the under-city, by freezing, drowning, stabbing, fall and electrocution, seem trifling in comparison to the imminent danger of being eaten by a cat. The film's hero-quest now converts into the wish-fulfilment story of a pet rat at the mercy of his human owner and her new tabby. The threat is intensified by the film's back story in which the Toad started his childhood existence as Prince Charles's favourite pet, only to be flushed down the toilet when the prince is given a new and more desirable pet in the form of a rat. It is also foreshadowed by Roddy/Sid's exclamation when he first ventures from his cage, once the humans have left: "when the cat's away, the mice will play." This comes over as a casual cliché at the start of the film but, in retrospect, it prefigures the brutal ending to any rodent fun once the cat returns. In hindsight, Roddy's adventures may not seem very amusing at all.

Such a change from fantasy threat (where the viewer knows perfectly well that Roddy will survive any punishment, however life-threatening) to the real threat offered by the cat to rodent makes a strength out of what might have previously been considered an ill-judged set of similarities between Roddy's upper world pranks at the start of the film and his adventures

in the world below. Above, he enjoys recklessly driving a toy sports car with dolls as his passengers, heedless of their misadventures as he hurtles, veers and brings the car to sudden stops, or cheerfully dismembers a doll passenger to hit himself on the back while choking on popcorn. He is hardly taken aback when he notices that he has decapitated the doll onlookers at his game of golf. These dolls are make-believe company for Roddy as he pretends to be James Bond or a champion golfer, but it is hard for the viewer to differentiate their fates from Roddy's own injuries below, hurtling about and tossed to and fro in a boat. Such violence proves as insignificant as that inflicted upon the dolls. Nor is the dolls' fate, casually ejected from the car, hurtled against furniture and walls, readily distinguishable from that of Rita's rat siblings, who emerge hurtling from a cupboard and smash themselves or are smashed against a wall. Where characters are guaranteed a cartoon-style immortality, Roddy's comic heroics below are as superficial as his James Bond antics above with the dolls.

Much hangs on this reading of the film's parallels and its alarming final scene. Without them, *Flushed Away* can be dismissed as a coyly 'Disneyfied' Wallace and Gromit adventure, its toilet humour disappointingly restrained, its jokes piled up to compensate for its inner hollowness. In post-modern fashion, the film plunders high and low culture for its jokes (a cockroach reads Kafka in French and a pavement artist is called Rodint). It also draws on British nationalistic chauvinism with its jokes about Toad's obsession with royal kitsch and his henchfrogs' preference for stylishness and fashion over efficiency as thugs (Le Frog is voiced by Jean Reno with panache). But in the end all this cleverness is silenced by the cat's first meow. The values of the hero-quest are comprehensively betrayed: the jewels are probably plastic, the human family betray their pet, Tabitha as Roddy's loving female companion and carer becomes Tabby the predator and Roddy becomes the nasty, disgusting Sid. In the end, the world down the toilet may be idealised but there is nothing sanitised about life as a pet rodent in the world above.

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Alpha Dog

Dir: Nick Cassavetes, US, 2006

A review by Devorah Macdonald, Vancouver University, Canada

"Man perfected by society is the best of all animals; he is the most terrible of all when he lives without law, and without justice" (Aristotle, 2007).

Written and directed by Nick Cassavetes - *John Q* (2002) and *The Notebook* (2004) - who is also known for shared writing credits on the screenplay of the movie *Blow* (2001), *Alpha Dog* is based on a true story in which a series of events amongst a team of misguided youths ran inexorably out of control. Not unlike the overall theme of *Blow*, Cassavetes developed this tale as a cautionary one, while at the same time allowing the audience to draw their own conclusions about the individuals involved and the morality at play. By the films end, it is not a hard stretch to find fault with all of the characters, both collectively and individually. From the self-indulgent adults in this film, to their party-loving offspring, there are few redeeming qualities in either group.

On August 6th 2000, fifteen-year-old Nick Markowitz was seen just after noon, strolling down a road in West Hills, California. The previous night he had a run-in with his parents when they discovered drug paraphernalia bulging from his jean pocket. He bolted. His parents, upon hearing his return in the middle of the night, resolved to hold off any discussion until the following morning. They would never see him again.

The film kicks-in with a brief monologue by Sonny Truelove (Bruce Willis) speaking to someone off-camera (in effect, the audience) in a split screen that immediately captivates and brings to mind the innovative style of Cassavetes' father John; the American film director who is regarded as a pioneer of cinema verité and whose 1959 debut film *Shadows* is considered by film scholars to be the birth of American independent film (Sargent, 2000). The Library of Congress has selected *Shadows* (1959) as being "culturally significant" (National Film Preservation Act 2005), through its inclusion and preservation in the National Film Registry.

"You wanna know what this is all about?" asks Sonny, "You can say this is about drugs or guns or bad decisions, whatever you like. But this whole thing is about parenting. And taking care of your children." Right from the get-go, Cassavetes gives the audience a heads-up on what his story is all about: parenting and taking care of your children. As this story evolves there appears a significant dearth of both of these skills in the adults who inhabit this idyllic, upscale California community.

As events unfold in the film, a group of apparently voiceless teenagers, Tiko, (Fernando Vargas) Frankie, (Justin Timberlake), and Elvis, (Shawn Hatosy) have fallen under the spell of their drug-dealing money-flush friend, Johnny Truelove (Emile Hirsch). So much so, that not one of them sounds the alarm after helping Truelove cross the proverbial line by

kidnapping the brother of a client, and holding him over the course of the next three days as ransom for a bad drug debt. True's Crew does his bidding in exchange for a free ride at his southern California den of inequity; a classic three level stucco home complete with pool, drugs, fast cars and loose women as well as the requisite flat screen television and an endless supply of spirits. The real Truelove, Jesse James Hollywood, was a notorious mid-level California drug dealer who, at nineteen, bought a similar home in the affluent and close-knit community called West Hills just west of Los Angeles. By twenty, he had become one of the youngest men ever to be on the FBI's most wanted list.

The film's story focuses on how he coerced his minions to abduct, hold captive and later kill the younger half-brother of his former childhood friend and fellow drug dealer Benjamin Markowitz; ultimately leaving them to take the fall for the resulting tragedy.

Cassavetes punctuates his version of the story with a flawless and exciting soundtrack, specifically designed to enhance its visual impact. Blasting behind the hyped-up energy of the characters, the story entrances the viewer as if one were watching it play out from a window as close as next door, a la Gladys Kravitz (the character from 1964 TV series *Bewitched*). The music complements the in-your-face visuals and we are spying on the drama as it unfolds. From the opening refrains of *Somewhere Over The Rainbow* poignantly sung by Eva Cassidy (behind visuals of home movies of various young boys and girls) - to the pure street beats of Tupac Shakur, the soundtrack has everything in between, including: David Bowie, Paul Bushnell, Citizen Cope, Lazarus, Mic Holden, Lowd, Tech N9ne, Miredys Piguero & Paul Graham and original work by Aaron Zigman and Nick Cassavetes. This exciting compilation is sure to make the soundtrack a music- industry winner.

The story flows effortlessly into its own abyss and Cassavetes should be lauded for the conciseness and tightness of every frame. This tale has all the elements of a Greek tragedy. As described in Roger Dunkle's *Introduction to Greek Tragedy from The Classical Origins of Western Culture*, the word "tragedy" refers primarily to tragic drama: a literary composition written to be performed by actors in which a central character called a tragic protagonist or hero suffers some serious misfortune, which is not accidental and therefore meaningless, but is significant in that the misfortune is logically connected with the hero's actions (Dunkle, 1986). In this case, the hero's misfortune is connected to the actions of others. This story has more than one central character. The hero is young Zack Mazursky, the antagonists; his brother Ben and Ben's nemesis, drug-dealer Johnny Truelove. The remaining characters get caught up in the amoral trajectory of the plot. In *Alpha Dog*, human foibles muddle circumstances along a path of no control and to the point of no return. The ultimate result is tragedy. The fact that the tragedy is brought upon one brother from another, lends to it a classic element.

Minutes into the film Johnny is arranging a large drug buy through his father Sonny, a quietly shifty figure who hangs with an older, wizened crony, Cosmo Gadabeeti, (Harry Dean Stanton) the man who ultimately handles the mess Truelove makes of his life by making it go away - for a while. The film suggests that Jesse James Hollywood's father John was involved in a criminal network and allowed Jesse to tap into it. Whatever the truth, Bruce Willis portrays John with a cool distance that offers a workable explanation for the arrogance that his son owns so completely. Emile Hirsch, who was phenomenal in his portrayal of Jay Adams in *Lords of Dogtown* (2005), is equally stellar in his role as Johnny Truelove. His research on Adams has stood him in good stead for this role. Adams had numerous run-ins with the law and has spent time in prison for assault and drug crimes as well as being a

member of the Venice Suicidals street gang. This was good material for Hirsch to absorb prior to being cast as Jesse James Hollywood. Ben Foster plays big brother and oh-so loose cannon, Ben Mazursky. The performance is a brilliant one, as tightly controlled as Mazursky is tightly wound. It is a riveting portrayal of a meth freak gone mad. He leaves you breathless by dint of his rapid switching from calm to convulsive in a heartbeat; sometimes the same heartbeat. Younger brother Zack, (the name of real-life victim Nick Markowitz's dog) is played with ethereal presence by Anton Yelchin -- previously seen in TV series *Taken, Jack* and the movie *Hearts in Atlantis* (2001) -- in a performance that radiates goodness and all things innocent. It is a perfect contrast to the rough and tumble teenage mayhem that surrounds him - teens with too much time on their hands and too much dope in their heads. The girls (who appear in various stages of wantonness), upon discovering that he is being held for ransom, give him the moniker Stolen Boy. Cassavetes portrays these young nubile California girls as lustful and playful, without a lick of moral or common sense. Good time girls bent on having a good time period. Full stop. Notably, the "Stolen Boy" is the actual alias given to Nick Markowitz by the real kids who met the kidnapped victim over the course of his confinement. The appellation they chose is analogous with their simple-mindedness. The name alone speaks volumes about this group of hard-partying youth, a name as cute as they are presented in the film, and equally simple.

The part of Jesse James Hollywood's main man and trusted soldier, Jesse Rugge, known in the movie as Frankie Ballenbacher, is played with a curious sensitivity by Justin Timberlake. Loose and light-hearted was the overall persona presented effortlessly by Timberlake. It was incongruous with the key part that Rugge played in the three days that culminated in the death of a fifteen-year-old. One can only assume that the research Timberlake did on his character led him to believe that Rugge had simply gotten in over his head and, in order to save face, went along with the caper to the point where he couldn't extract himself. Quite simply, there are no winners in this story.

Cassavetes lays the groundwork for an eye-opening look at how a group of fun-loving kids left on their own and to their own devices, can easily go astray. As the real story goes, Nick was taken to various houses in Santa Barbara (Palm Springs is substituted for Santa Barbara in the movie) over the course of three days and often ended up at Rugge's family home. In the film version of events, Frankie's father Jeurgen, (Chris Kinkade) plays the role of father with little evidence of actually knowing how to be one. When Frankie shows up at home with the kidnap victim, the boys are put to work grooming his father's pot plants as a means of paying for the privilege of staying in his house. As long as his son doesn't interrupt his assignations with buxom beauties at night, and tops his buds by day, Frankie is welcome to stay as long as he wants. Friend included.

As noted in *LA Times*, Rugge's real life father, Baron Rugge is quoted as saying, "I thought Nick was up here visiting." And that, "when I saw him, I saw him just to say 'Hi,' and 'Yeah, you can stay here if you want" (Fausset, 2000). Rugge's son was twenty; Nick was just fifteen years old. The senior Rugge's lack of attention or concern for the comings and goings of his son and his son's friends is telling.

Cassavetes points a few fingers at parents who are too busy partying and hanging on to their own misspent youths to be of much use in child-rearing. One gets the impression that the parents in the film are so keenly clinging to their own past youthfulness that they have absolutely no sense of propriety or anything resembling the more commonly accepted standards of parental behaviour. It is little wonder that their offspring seem oblivious to the

very real danger that is unfolding for young Zack. The settings are lush with an affluent lifestyle and beautiful people of all ages, but, like an *O.C.* gone completely over the top; all inhabitants of this pastoral environment seem incognizant to the affect that their moral values and choices might have upon each other.

The exception to this is Zack's mom Olivia Mazursky. Sharon Stone plays real-life mother to Nick and step-mother to Ben, Susan Markowitz, a woman concerned; yet helpless to control her children. From the first introduction of her character, we witness a mother fighting to stop her youngest son from going sideways. It is a thankless task and one that - despite her best efforts, only results in further alienation. By the end of the film, Stones heart-felt portrayal of a mother's grief was so intimate that her pain brought tears to my eyes. Maybe it's because I'm a mother. I applaud her ability to get inside Markowitz's skin and allow her normally-gorgeous self to be seen as a middle age overweight basket-case with such flawless conviction. The in-your-face camera-work in Stone's final scene is reminiscent of director John Cassavetes' work with his wife, actress Gena Rowlands, - and every bit as arresting.

In the film, the name of Nick's mother Susan is poignantly also the name the writer gave to the only sane one in this bunch of party animals. Susan (Dominique Swain) rebuked the kidnapping to friend Sabrina Pope (Charity Shea), "This kid has been kidnapped!" "Really? Oh my God, that's so cool!" says Sabrina. Susan reproaches this blasé comment with, "No it's not, this shirt is cool! Bob Marley is cool! This is not cool!" I laughed, though it really wasn't funny. It was a perfect Paris Hilton moment in a film filled with Paris Hilton wannabes. Susan's voice (though meek) is the only voice of reason raised amongst this group of stoners oblivious to the trajectory of their lark.

All ended tragically when Elvis Schmidt, (Shawn Hatosy) in the role of convicted murderer Ryan Hoyt, fires a semi-automatic weapon into Zack at the edge of a pre-dug grave in the Los Padres National Forest. Alongside Hoyt were Jesse Rugge and seventeen-year-old Graham Pressley. Pressley had dug the grave earlier in the day at a popular spot called Lizard's Mouth. Four days later hikers noticed a stench as well as some clothing poking out of the earth beside a trail. Police were called and the body of Nick Markowitz was identified. It took more than a week before one of the witnesses to the "stolen boy," notified the authorities through an attorney who, in turn, contacted the police.

In real life, many of those involved were brought to justice. Hoyt, (who carried out the murder in exchange for a thousand dollar drug debt to Hollywood) was convicted of shooting Nick in the head and torso nine times with a TEC-9 semi-automatic. In November 2001, he was found guilty of first-degree murder. He sits on Death Row at San Quentin, waiting to die by lethal injection. Jesse Rugge was sentenced to life in prison with the possibility of parole in seven years. Graham Pressley was sentenced to a California Youth Authority facility until his twenty-fifth birthday. One other participant, William Skidmore, received a nine year sentence in a state prison. In a separate incident, Ben Markowitz would soon be convicted of armed robbery and sentenced to three years in a state prison. Jesse James Hollywood fled to Brazil, and would remain at large for four and a half years. He was returned to Los Angeles on March 10th 2005, by the FBI and then immediately escorted to the Santa Barbara County Jail where he pleaded not guilty to murder, kidnapping and criminal conspiracy -- crimes that could carry the death penalty. He currently awaits trial.

Not all of those involved, however, were dealt with by the courts. In the movie, as in the court transcripts on the case, one long heady roving party continued over the course of the

kidnapping and more than two-dozen witnesses evidenced the hostage at various party locales. Not one sounded an alarm or involved a person of authority in order to put an end to the victim's plight. A similar movie, *River's Edge* (1986), was a story based on a true event whereby a teenage Marcy Conrad was murdered by her boyfriend Anthony Jacques Broussard and left on the edge of a river in Milpitas California (King, 1981: 11). Her body was viewed by many of the town's youth, and then treated with complete disinterest. No one bothered to turn in the murderer. In *Alpha Dog*, amongst the collective group of youth who were aware (though on the periphery) of the kidnapping, no one pays enough attention to what they were witnessing to imagine it as anything but a bit of fun. One is left wondering how a life could be held with such little value. Like the disenfranchised youth of Milpitas, the majority of the players flitting around the flame of this tragedy have received punishment meted out only by their own conscience.

One hopes that it screams long and loud.

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Blood Diamond

Dir: Edward Zwick, US, 2006

A review by Rebecca Beirne, University of Western Sydney, Australia

On the surface level, Edward Zwick's *Blood Diamond* (2006) is an adventure genre film, mixed with a pseudo-liberal 'message' film. But on a deeper level, it functions in much the same manner as earlier, colonialist texts such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in its depiction of Africa. *Blood Diamond* contains all the key generic characteristics of a Hollywood feature film. Set in Sierra Leone during the 1999 civil war, the film raises the issues of diamond smuggling and child soldiers through the stories of Soloman Vandy (Djimon Hounsou), whose village is attacked by rebel soldiers at the outset, and Danny Archer (Leonardo DiCaprio), a mercenary and diamond smuggler. During an attempt to save his family, Vandy is captured by the rebels and taken as a slave to work in the diamond fields. During his labours, Vandy finds a particularly large stone, risks his life to take it out of the fields and buries it nearby shortly before being captured and imprisoned by government troops. Archer, likewise in prison for diamond smuggling, hears the incensed ranting and threats of rebel guard Captain Poison (David Harewood) about the stone. He arranges for Vandy's release from prison, and proceeds to threaten, manipulate and eventually bribe Vandy (with the lure of finding his family) to take him to the diamond.

Through his positioning as the sympathetic family man and victim of circumstance, Vandy is cast as the moral centre of the film, and indeed, his attempts to reclaim his son from rebel brainwashing form the film's most poignant moments. However, the true narrative of the film revolves around the noir-ish hero of white 'Rhodesian' Danny Archer, whose morally compromised nature is explained away by a painful childhood (and redeemed through his 'ultimate sacrifice'), and his sympathetic love interest, journalist Maddy Bowen (Jennifer Connelly).

While the film functions well as an adventure/thriller, it is, however, clearly also a liberal 'message' film -- as is made abundantly clear by the exhortation at the end of the film that it is "up to the consumer to insist a diamond is conflict free." *Blood Diamond* also includes extended conversations between Archer and Bowen where the motives of these two different types of white characters are questioned, and their exploitative roles in Africa discussed. Whether this be Archer's overt smuggling and gun-running to both sides of the conflict, or Maddy's journalistic exploitation of war and human suffering in the name of a story, such critique stays firmly in the hands of the white characters. Bowen critiques Archer, who critiques her in turn. Vandy, who occupies one of only two main speaking roles allocated to African characters (the other being his somewhat psychotic R.U.F nemesis), is not given much of an opportunity to critique the actions of those around him.

The end of the film shows Vandy, clad in a very expensive looking suit, being introduced by an ambassador (the tellingly cast Stephen Collins, most famous for playing a kindly pastor in television series *7th Heaven*), who states, "The third world is not a world apart, and the

witness you hear today speaks on its behalf. Let us hear that voice. Let us learn from it, and let us ignore it no more. Ladies and gentlemen: Mr. Soloman Vandy." The film then ends without allowing Vandy to make any sort of a statement -- in this, as in other parts of the film, we do not hear his voice, his perspective. One could argue that this is as an acknowledgement on the part of the filmmakers that they do not, indeed, have an authentically African or third-world voice in this film, and implore its audience to listen to other messages from Africa. However, the lack of knowingness displayed by the rest of the film would seem to negate such a reading, and regardless, where is one to find such a voice within our overwhelmingly white, overwhelmingly economically privileged western popular culture?

The exposé of the diamond trade that *Blood Diamond* presents does have an explicitly political purpose, but it doesn't ask its audience to undertake too much questioning of their own actions or those of their governments. The message not to buy diamonds from conflict zones seen at the end of the film allows the audience to feel good, to feel that they have 'helped' Africa by refusing to buy these products. When Archer questions whether Bowen is "exploiting [Vandy's] grief," Bowen describes her writing as "like one of those infomercials, little black babies with swollen bellies and flies in their eyes…I'm sick of writing about victims but its all I can fucking do…Because I need facts…People back home wouldn't buy a ring if they knew it cost someone else their hands." This speech positions the film *Blood Diamond* as offering just those facts that will be able to change the situation via boycott activism, eliding the very real problems created by colonialism. It is indeed the case that *Blood Diamond* itself functions in much the same way as a World Vision commercial does. *Blood Diamond* presents its audience with a vision of a world of suffering, complete with a happy ending, and an epilogue that offers its audience an opportunity to make some small gesture to help which will salve their consciences and allow them to think upon the subject, and world's inequities, no longer. While ascribing to these conventions of the genre was no doubt necessary in order to gain funding and audiences for this project, the effect remains the same. The audience's journey from recognition to 'action' is narratively encouraged by the redemption of the two white heroes (both played by well-known American actors) through their assistance in reuniting Vandy with his family and exposing the trade in 'blood diamonds.'

The film fails to acknowledge the role that colonialism, and the destruction of social structures and the pillaging of resources it undertakes, has played in creating this climate of unrest, violence and poverty. Indeed, it takes this lack of acknowledgement a step further, and through its Eurocentric (and at times explicitly colonialist) narrative, images and dialogue, it renders a portrait of Africa little different from earlier western depictions. A telling example of this can be seen in the repetition of the phrase "T.I.A.," which, as Philip French notes in *The Observer,* "means 'This Is Africa,' said with a resigned shrug, excusing everything, explaining nothing" (French, 2007). Utilised when negative, chaotic or incomprehensible things happen, this usage resonates strongly with the positioning of Africa in the west's racist cultural imagination as a place of chaos and irrationality, implying that there is something uniquely problematic and irredeemable about the place.

Drawing no doubt on Soloman Vandy's name, French has cast an allusion of the film as a kind of *King Soloman's Mines*, but it is another British novel of the period that this filmic text draws on and mirrors -- Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* -- and, despite the significant temporal discrepancy between the release dates of these two texts, *Blood Diamond* displays many of the racist flaws that Nigerian novelist and critic Chinua Achebe noted in its

predecessor in his essay "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" (first published 1977). For example, with its prototypically affirmative Hollywood structure, and focus on an individual who escapes to a world of peace and designer suits, it sets up a dichotomy between Africa and 'civilized' London in much the same way as Joseph Conrad's "*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as 'the other world,' the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant beastiality" (Achebe, 1977).

Visually too, Africa is portrayed in this film as the chaotic, fevered *Heart of Darkness* of Joseph Conrad's imaginings. No attempt is made to explain the internal political struggles of Sierra Leone, which are instead depicted as a "mindless frenzy" (Achebe, 1977), a meaningless mass of violence and bloodshed. Archer asserts that "People here [in Africa] kill each other as a way of life. It's always been like that," and while Bowen counters that "not all Africans kill each other as a way of life," much of this film precisely depicts Africans killing one another, rendering it more in keeping with Archer's view than Bowen's. Soloman Vandy himself is one of the few black men in this film who escape being generally visually depicted as violent and animalistic, though this too unravels into "triumphant beastiality." Although he is in many ways the moral centre of the film, Vandy lacks power and often subjectivity, and is shuttled from white character to white character who offer to help him. He is "just another black man in Africa" as Archer puts it. Vandy is set up as a counterpoint to the brutal Captain Poison, and it is telling that while Poison rhetoricises about their nation, and hates the white man, Vandy, the 'good black man' sends his son to school to learn English, hoping that one day he will become a doctor. The African nationalist is thus the demonised one, while the positive African character is a colonial mimic man, seeking for his child to learn the language of the colonisers in order to attain social advancement.

Vandy's determined placidity is broken in the latter half of the film with a scene in which he confronts his tormentor, Captain Poison, and the two fight in hand-to-hand combat. Vandy's outburst of rage is well-justified, but the manner in which this is presented is significant. The breaking of his composure forms a dramatic peak of the film, and the two wrestle in the mud, screaming, and with the psychotic expressions on their faces framed in close ups. Vandy in the end bludgeons Poison to death with a shovel. Although this is the only man Vandy kills, unlike Archer who shoots a great number of people throughout the course of the film, the distancing effected by the use of a gun, rather than the force necessitated by the use of a shovel, further renders this scene as visually animalistic, as it had from its opening close up on Vandy's face, teeth bared, eyes red, displaying all the markers of 'savagery' that one can see in Conrad's depictions of Africans.

Other examples of the colonialist mentality of the film can be seen in the dialogue during discussions of Africa. After having told Bowen of the gruesome deaths of his parents at the hands of what we assume to be Robert Mugabe's men, Danny Archer refers to Africa as a "godforsaken continent," proclaiming that "Sometimes I wonder if God will ever forgive us for what we have done to each other. Then I look around and I realise: God left this place a long time ago." This statement, which featured prominently in the trailer for the film, certainly conveys the desolation and hopelessness of the situation, but it also hearkens back to the representation of Africa as the 'heathen' place it was considered in the colonialist, missionary imagination, and could further be read to imply that this 'God' who was indeed present and is now gone, was associated with white control and 'civilization.' This vision of Africa as a hellish heart of darkness is explicitly stated by Captain Poison when he says to Vandy "you think I am a devil, but only because I have lived in hell. I want *to get out*. You

will help me, or your family will die!" These sorts of colonialist messages are further implicated by the presentation of Danny Archer as the 'true' African who can never leave the continent. Early in the film, Archer is told by another white man that "this red earth, it's in our skin…This is home. You'll never leave Africa." And indeed, while Soloman Vandy and his family happily escape to England, and Poison is willing to kill in order to "get out," Archer cannot leave, affirming that "I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be," as he lies dying. As the music rises and we see a shot of his blood dribbling into the soil, he rubs it between his hands - the 'authentic' African who cannot exist outside Africa.

The most disturbing, explicitly colonialist and racist message of the film, however, is placed in the mouth of the African protagonist Soloman Vandy. He says to Archer "I understand why people want diamonds, but how can my own people do this to each other? I know good people who say there is something wrong with us, besides our black skin, that we were better off when the white men ruled." It is this statement that echoes across the film, acting as a justification of and incitement to colonialism, disavowing the role colonialism has played in creating Africa's problems, and proclaiming that Africans are childlike or savage beings that need white masters to rule over them in order to stop them from killing one another: a chilling message from a contemporary Hollywood feature film, and a reflection of how much western societies' attitudes have cycled back to the colonialist mentalities of time past.

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