Shoot the Messenger

Dir: Ngozi Onwurah, UK, 2006

A review by Stephen Harper, University of Portsmouth, UK

The BBC drama *Shoot the Messenger* (BBC2, 30 August, 2006) is a provocative exploration of racial politics within London's African Caribbean community. Originally entitled *Fuck Black People!*, the film provoked strong criticism, not least from the pressure group Ligali. The drama was written by Sharon Foster, best known as the writer of *Babyfather*, who won the Dennis Potter Screenwriting Award for her screenplay. David Oyelowo plays Joe Pascale, a well-meaning middle class schoolteacher whose efforts to 'make a difference' in the education of failing black pupils in an inner-city school result in unemployment, schizophrenia and homelessness.

The tribulations of the idealistic teacher are hardly new in British television drama: Jimmy McGovern's 1995 series *Hearts and Minds* is one noteworthy example. But *Shoot the Messenger*'s central concern with race orients it specifically towards contemporary debates around multiculturalism and social exclusion such as that prompted by the Parekh Report (2000). The concern with black educational failure is key within these debates. A DfES report 'Getting it. Getting it right' (2007) noted that Black Caribbean students in Britain are excluded from school far more often than white pupils. Although BBC television drama has addressed these issues in recent years in productions such as Lennie James' *Storm Damage* (BBC2, 2000), *Shoot the Messenger* nonetheless carries a heavy representational burden. For several years the lack of racial diversity in BBC programmes has been criticised (Creeber, 2004) and concerns about the BBC's treatment of its visible minority staff abound (see, for example, "BBC still showing its 'hideously white' face," 2002).

Shoot the Messenger charts Joe's multiple misfortunes. A tough disciplinarian, Joe loses his job after being wrongly accused of physical abuse by a black pupil, Germal. He is subsequently vilified as a racist by prominent members of the black community. During a live radio debate, Joe is attacked by a black local councillor (Brian Bovell), who exploits the teacher's predicament for political capital, a scene which might be argued to cast black community leaders as ideologues who maliciously amplify racial tensions for their own aggrandisement. Joe, meanwhile, is constructed as a middle class martyr to political correctness.

After his dismissal, Joe is discovered by social services cowering on top of a wardrobe in his flat. He is promptly taken to hospital and diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. Seemingly with the aid of psychiatric medication, he recovers swiftly and leaves hospital, but begins to blame the black community for his troubles. 'Everything bad that has happened to me,' he reflects, 'has involved a black person.' He rails against black people's 'invented' names and their aspirationally 'white' fashions. He is even punched at a party for suggesting that black people are obsessed with slavery. For Joe, black problems are caused by black people and his critiques of the black community are dramatised through a number of stereotypical incidental

characters, including a violent gun criminal and a self-hating fundamentalist Christian matriarch who rescues Joe from the street after his discharge from hospital.

Some of Joe's diatribes contain a grain of truth. After all, circumscribing black identities within the history of transatlantic slavery, long after the historical events, is problematic. Yet Joe's critique fails to acknowledge the cultural legacy of slavery, as encapsulated in the notion of 'post traumatic slavery syndrome' elaborated in the work of Poussaint and Alexander (2001). Poussaint and Alexander point to the shameful paucity of research into the oppressive historical, economic and psychosocial factors that continue to impact upon postcolonial black identities and argue convincingly for the continuing influence of slavery on black 'under-performance,' criminality and suicide. Joe sidesteps these complexities, detaching his critique of African Caribbean social problems from the historical and cultural contexts which inform them. Although Joe is physically attacked for downplaying the impact of slavery, the drama's first person narration and Joe's frequent asides to the camera encourage the audience to sympathise with Joe's opinions.

After his rescue from the streets, Joe takes up employment at the Job Centre, where he encounters a parade of black stereotypes. In one scene, a sparsely dressed black teenager with a gold tooth and what the script ominously identifies as a 'fake Gucci bag' asks Joe whether the job she is applying for 'has maternity leave,' a question which scandalises Joe. In another encounter, Joe advises a confrontational young black thug to 'get a Thesaurus'. Finally, when former pupil Germal visits the Job Centre, Joe delights in assigning him a distinctly proletarian job as an unskilled sanitation worker in order to 'teach him a lesson.' Although Joe's anger at Germal is understandable, his reaction to him and other Job Centre clients is tinged with class contempt.

As the film progresses, Joe softens and he is moved to pity when Germal is admitted into psychiatric care. His change of heart is, however, qualified and ambiguous. In the film's final scene, Joe sits by the river and speaks to camera, revealing that he doesn't retract *all* of the views he has expressed. Yet Joe, like the film itself, refuses to specify which opinions he now upholds and which he rescinds. Ostensibly, this is an undogmatic ending, as the audience is invited to resolve for itself the debates raised by the drama; yet problematically, the film refuses clearly to disavow Joe's racial and class hatred.

Shoot the Messenger inevitably invites comparison with other black British television dramas and films, from Channel 4's adaptation of Caryl Phillips's *The Final Passage* (1996) to Lennie James's drama about a black teacher, *Storm Damage* (BBC2, 2000). Many of the film's themes -- such as Joe's critique of black fashions -- and characters -- such as the comically overbearing, conservative matriarch -- can be traced back even further to Horace Ové's seminal 1975 film *Pressure* (the first full-length black British feature film), in which a young English-born black boy, Tony, is 'radicalised' by his experiences of social oppression into the Black Power movement. Like *Pressure*, *Shoot the Messenger* is concerned with young black masculinity (the intersection of ethnicity and *femininity* is more substantially treated in British Asian filmmaking), explicitly foregrounds questions of racism and black identity, and offers a critique of African Caribbean racial politics. Yet the two texts diverge markedly in their ideological orientations towards the same problematic.

Pressure is shot in a realist, documentary style typical of the 1970s 'cinema of duty.' The film suggests the structural limitations on black achievement, as Tony is repeatedly refused employment despite impressive academic credentials. *Pressure* deals primarily with the

problems encountered by young working class black men and dramatises these in a sequence in which Tony encounters racial prejudice when he tries to date a white girl, then witnesses the arrest of a black man by the police. *Pressure* ends with a dream sequence in which the hero slaughters a pig in a stately home -- symbolising Tony's dawning realisation that racial oppression is linked to class domination. The film is not without its problems. Lola Young rightly argues that *Pressure* presents black women as "apolitical mothers inadequate to the task of raising a black man, or sexual predators" (Young, 1996: 140). Nonetheless, *Pressure* also mounts a class-based critique of racism in Britain.

Shoot the Messenger's cinematic style is more flamboyant and anti-realist. Joe frequently directs conspiratorial sidelong glances to camera, attempting to direct and pre-empt audience reaction. He often whispers to the audience: 'I know what you're thinking…' The formal eccentricity of the homodiegetic narration encourages us to interpret Joe's opinions as daringly incorrect. Yet Joe's views are hardly counter-hegemonic. In contrast to *Pressure*, *Shoot the Messenger* suggests that school qualifications are the key to social success for black people. The film's stereotypes of black fecklessness and criminality, meanwhile, echo familiar tabloid constructions of race. Finally, there is a telling contrast between the central night time sequence in *Pressure*, in which Tony witnesses and experiences racial prejudice and police oppression, and an analogous night time sequence in *Shoot the Messenger*, in which Joe observes only black criminality. *Shoot the Messenger* unfolds, in fact, within a liberal, Blairite discourse which positions the bourgeoisie as social victims and identifies the obstacle to racial equality within a politically backward black community which dwells on the past and stubbornly refuses to acknowledge either its 'own' responsibilities or the ideological rectitude of its middle-class saviours. This clearly resonates with the then Prime Minister Blair's emphasis on intra-ethnic 'responsibility,' expounded, for example, in his comments on black gun crime within the African Caribbean community ('Blair gun crime speech attacked', 2007).

Director Ngomi Onwurah (2006) has attempted to defend the film against criticisms of stereotyping. She points out that attacks on the drama's stereotyping are unfair, since a film like Nicole Kassell's *The Woodsman* (2004), which concerns child sexual abuse, is not criticised for associating whiteness with paedophilia. Yet this defence seems disingenuous, since *The Woodsman* does not construct its anti-hero as representative of all white people. *Shoot the Messenger*, on the other hand, mobilises a range of stereotypes in support of Joe's critique of the entire 'black community.' Another conceivable line of defence for supporters of *Shoot the Messenger* might be that Joe's observations cannot be racist since they are expressed by a black character (or, indeed, created by a black writer). Yet such arguments overlook the likely implications of racist views, which can be deleterious whatever the racial identity of their originators (Howitt and Owusu-Bempah, 2005: 62). In any case, neither of these defences addresses the central problem with the drama, which is its tendency to locate the cause of the social problems afflicting black communities within those same communities, which are seen to be lacking in the right kind of leadership.

Shoot the Messenger seems to be part of a wider trend of marginalising working class black identities and issues. Writing about the film in *The Observer*, Sarfraz Manzoor argues:

Despite the common criticism that TV perpetuates a stereotypical and negative view of black people, I feel it bends over backwards to portray them in a positive light. There are still too few of them, but whether on *Hustle*, *Waking the Dead*, *55 Degrees North* or *Doctors*, black characters on TV are rarely negative stereotypes. […] It is not black or Asian people who

have the greatest cause to complain about TV representation -- it is working-class whites (Manzoor, 2006).

Manzoor's general evaluation of recent trends in racial representation in British television drama seems accurate; popular television's dominant construction of white working class identity is undoubtedly vicious. Like *Shoot the Messenger*'s Joe, the black and Asian characters in the dramas Manzoor mentions are mostly 'respectable' middle class professionals. The problem with *Shoot the Messenger* is precisely its rejection of working class black identities in the name of black respectability.

Shoot the Messenger is certainly a bold and original piece of work. For one thing, it is notable for offering a rare screen depiction of black mental distress -- all the more remarkable given the high frequency of mental health problems among the African Caribbean population. In a meta-analysis of studies of compulsory detention rates in the UK under the Mental Health Act, for example, Glynn Harrison notes that "the evidence is now compelling that rates of compulsory detention in the UK are higher in those of African-Caribbean background and, to varying degrees, higher also in other ethnic minority groups" (Harrison, 2002: 198). Yet the film's treatment of mental health issues is rather cursory and Joe's rapid recovery from paranoid schizophrenia is unconvincing. More importantly, *Shoot the Messenger* obscures the reactionary implications of Joe's invective through the dark glass of his psychological disturbance. In his madness, Joe becomes a Holy Fool whose racial and class bigotry is excused as unpalatable but essential cultural insight.

The drama does occasionally gesture towards a radical critique of racial politics. Near the end of the film, for example, Joe glances into a shop in which black women are attended by Korean nail technicians, a scene which neatly de-essentialises racial oppression and potentially opens up the possibility of a class analysis of racial oppression. Moreover, the film implicitly critiques the essentialising of racial identity that is often promoted among liberal multiculturalists and unelected 'community leaders' who cynically promote themselves as spokespeople for an entire 'community,' tendencies which Etienne Balibar (1991) has discussed under the heading of 'meta-racism.' If the old type of racism was based on the idea that racial differences were biologically determined, 'meta-racism' makes these differences culturally and historically contingent, locking individuals and groups into their cultural genealogy. 'Meta-racism' is seen by Balibar as potentially even more dangerous than racism, because it employs racist categories while pretending to oppose racism. *Shoot the Messenger*'s critique of such essentialism is both brave and highly unusual -- it would, for example, hardly be thinkable in an American context.

Ultimately, however, *Shoot the Messenger* rejects a class analysis and understands racial politics through the Blairite discourses of individual responsibility and meritocracy. The film also echoes the neo-conservatism of recent books such as Juan Williams' *Enough* (2006), which excoriates 'blame culture' and posits education, self-discipline and strong leadership among ethnic minority groups as the solutions to racial problems. The BBC claims to have produced a controversial but timely critique of racial politics in the UK. But if the audience were distanced more definitively from Joe's point of view, and if the film took more account of the relationship between class and race, and if mental distress were not used to mystify the drama's ideological commitments, *Shoot the Messenger* would look more like a daring critique of current political orthodoxies and less like an endorsement of them.

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Shake Hands with the Devil: The Journey of Roméo Dallaire

Dir: Peter Raymont, Canada, 2004

A review by Debbie James Smith, Wayne State University, USA

Nerve wracking and emotionally tense, *Shake Hands with the Devil* (2004) documents a time and place of infinite inhumanity all but ignored by the mainstream media. Director Peter Raymont's documentary, resplendent with unforgettable images of horror and compassion, is a cinematic account that presses home the message that the Rwandan genocide was preventable. In communicating this point, he employs images that at times are so horrifying in their almost banal presentation they cease to suspend one's disbelief and yet are so carefully choreographed as to disallow the viewer's denial of their truthfulness. It is thus almost impossible to question aspects of this crime against humanity when the victims and perpetrators are presented "in the act" and thus undeniably evidenced.

Privileging the suffering of the Rwandan genocide victims for a Western audience, Raymont undertakes telling this story through the autobiographical account of Lt-General Roméo Dallaire, commander of the United Nations (U.N.) peacekeeping mission to Rwanda in 1994. Based on Dallaire's book of the same title, *Shake Hands with the Devil* tells of the personal and public repercussions of an international system of human rights that completely failed Rwanda in that year. It also asserts the complicity of the international community for failing to favor the Rwandans and suggests that, as a result, the world turned away when Hutu extremists began to slaughter moderate Hutus and Tutsis. The film follows Dallaire on a return trip to Rwanda ten years after the genocide where he visits his former post and recounts the historic events that lead up to the genocide as they were revealed to him and then recounts the genocide itself. Adding to this tragic story, this film also documents the precariousness of Dallaire's mental health as a result of his self-identified post-traumatic stress. The viewer is seemingly encouraged to watch for signs that he will succumb this time to his feelings of guilt; powerless as result of his inability to stop the genocide. His story takes us through the past to the present, where we visit some of the memorials established to those who were killed and have an opportunity to see Dallaire find some sense of resolution. The resultant film is aptly described on the back cover of the DVD as "part therapeutic personal exorcism and part passionate humanitarian indictment."

Divided between images of the present and the past, Raymont uses news and anthropological footage, and stills to anchor Dallaire's story along a linear path that provides a coherent sequence of events leading to the genocide. The archive footage that is used in this film, as well as a number of the other films telling the story of the Rwandan genocide, was captured by British news reporter, Nick Hughes. In addition to being used to benefit the retelling of the story of genocide in cinematic form, the footage exists as some of the only records of the actual killing that took place that summer and was later used as evidence against perpetrators

charged with crimes against humanity (Hughes, 2007: 234). That being said, this is not a film for the faint of heart.

As the film opens, we are introduced to Dallaire and his wife Elizabeth. They sit on a plane returning him to Kigali. It is ten years after he commanded the peacekeeping force that was to assist in facilitating peace talks between governing Hutus and the Tutsi rebels in the former Belgian colony of Rwanda. Dallaire tells his wife he wishes they could turn around as they continue flying over Africa towards the epicenter of the genocide. In the following scenes we are introduced to the impossible situation Dallaire was instructed to command over and which we know will eventually disintegrate into chaos. In this regard, the film is effective in framing the U.N. high command as irresponsible, and countries sending troops to support this mission as miserly, with the exception of the Belgians. There are also a number of scenes that portray a dichotomy within the U.N., showing the organization as well equipped and expert international peacekeepers. One sadly moving scene shows a raggedly dressed soldier who wears the blue helmet. In contrast, the Belgian U.N. peacekeeping force presents as young, well equipped and possessing a strange celebrity aura with their aviator sunglasses glittering in the sunlight and their blue U.N.-issue berets jauntily perched on their heads. As Rwanda's former colonizing power, these peacekeepers would withdraw after they were successfully targeted by the Hutu extremists, reducing the U.N. peacekeeping force to four-hundred soldiers.

As the story builds we are presented with three forms of mediated compassion: pity, sentiment and, images that are best described as monuments to sublime suffering (Höijer, 2004: 522). Raymont does not shield us from the worst of the archival footage taken during the genocide and does not shy away from using long clips representing what one assumes must be the worst carnage of that time; images of countless bodies lined up like cord wood along a road, bodies ignobly tossed in ditches, bodies bloated and bobbing against each other along a shore line. These images are some of the easiest to watch as we are soon to learn, the suffering only increases. In one scene a man lying in the grass moves his foot. Another scene focuses in on the face of an injured child who stares into the camera, too weak to move as flies cling to his face. The most surreal footage is taken from a distance and shows a woman on her knees amongst a collection of bodies. She gesticulates with her arms to the man standing over her. He strikes her repeatedly until she falls to the ground. These images do not defy imagination. Yet they are shocking and beyond normal experience as a result of the unwavering attention the cinematographer committed to these people's experience thus capturing their suffering in dreadful detail.

Leaving one nowhere to hide, this film demands acknowledgement of our present role as passive voyeurs and consumers of violent images. This is not a film that can be easily consumed and it defies being regurgitated for the purposes of fueling urbane conversation on the topic of humanitarianism. In my experience, to watch *Shake Hands with the Devil* is to acknowledge one's own culpability and learn a lesson in how paying lip service to human rights does not translate into positive action. In this regard, the film defies the traditional boundaries of the cinematic frame and invites interaction with the meaning of the text.

While I would like to be otherwise positioned, I was not one of those who fully understood or even took the time to understand what was happening the summer of 1994 in a distant African country. I, like so many others, was instead watching the police chase O.J. Simpson's white Ford Bronco down the highway and wondering about the cause of the demise of his wife, Nicole Brown Simpson. Upon reading the media coverage of Canada holding its first

war-crime trial that will decide the guilt or innocence of Desire Munyaneza, who is charged with crimes against humanity for his role in the 1994 massacre, I decided to explore how Raymont's documentary frames the "other" in distant places (Shufelt and Jimenez, 2007: A9). In this case, I vacillated between labeling this film as a form of public atonement or a cinematic response to what has been condemned as a facile commitment to human rights in the form of abstract universalism (Sawchuck, 2002). Either way, I wanted to examine Raymont's use of footage that captures not only the results of brutality but footage that captures images of brutality being enacted and which purports to tell the truth of the conflict between the Hutus and Tutsis. In this regard, I am disappointed that the film does not release the Tutsis from their role as victim and does not acknowledge the significant and ongoing brutality of the Rwandan Tutsis in neighboring Congo.

The legitimacy of documentary film as a tool of human rights proponents in Western culture is in large part the result of the filmmaker's ability to rationalize and shape a tragic event in dramatic terms for the consumption of the target (Western) audience. Critical mass achieved through distribution, accolades received in print media and awards received at film festivals further validate the filmmaker's vision as the singular truth of the event. The values (use and exchange) inherent to filmmaking render these accounts of events, on one hand, subject to question, and on the other, especially in cases of images of brutality of the level seen in *Shake Hands with the Devil*, beyond question. Despite the intention of the producer, some may argue that documentaries portraying violent examples of human rights abuses encourage a distorted view of the role of the U.N., the nature of human rights and further justify the imposition of Western cultural values upon non-Western societies as being morally imperative.

These critiques aside, Peter Raymont's documentary *Shake Hands with the Devil* is a direct condemnation of the international community's lack of consideration of the seriousness of situation in Rwanda. Without a doubt, the attention of the international community came too late to pressure the U.N. to intervene once there were clear indications that the events of 1994 were contravening human rights norms. In this regard, this film represents a memorial to the people who perished and those who tried but failed to save them. Perhaps more importantly, it is a film that breaks the comfortable emotional distance mediated images generally provide between us and the suffering of others. Dallaire's experience and his willingness to share it with such detail, while still mediated, represents an important form of communication compared to the general dearth of attention on human rights in post-colonial countries, especially if the nationals are not white. As such, perhaps we should then view *Shake Hands with the Devil* as an exercise in evoking action, with the objective being to encourage 'pre-emptive compassion' to prevent such atrocities from occurring in the future.

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Black Narcissus

Dir: Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, UK, 1947

A review by Peter Coyne

Black Narcissus (1947), the classic British film directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, from the popular novel by Rumer Godden, has become so revered over time - perhaps the ultimate storehouse of aesthetic pleasures provided by the directing team known as "The Archers" - that it appears to be above and beyond criticism. Its ability to conjure the fantastic world of Mopu in the Himalayas while filming entirely in a London studio and a British garden is rightly praised as a magical feat and a high artistic achievement, rewarded with Academy Awards for best cinematography and best art direction-set decoration in the color category for 1947 and examined in depth in a short documentary, *Painting with Light* (2000), created for the 2000 special edition DVD release from The Criterion Collection. The "look" of the film is matched by pitch-perfect performances from a formidable ensemble, led by Deborah Kerr and David Farrar. It is a film by a master director, Michael Powell, who was underrated or neglected during much of his own post-*Peeping Tom* (1960) lifetime, whose once flickering flame is now kept brilliantly alight by Martin Scorsese and Thelma Schoonmaker, among others.

What, then, is the point of complaining about issues of politics and race, or of attitudes of empire, in *Black Narcissus*? That was my reaction when I first read a protest about it on the Internet Movie Database message board for "Classic Film," in relation to its place on a "top 100 films of all time" list. The film is not about slavery, after all, which tends to taint the landmark films *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Gone with the Wind* (1939) set during the American Civil War in part because the evils of slavery are so great that any attempt to soft-pedal them has an odious quality to it.

The complaint about *Black Narcissus* lingered in my mind, however, and further discussion led me to read a couple of books by Edward Said, whose explorations of Orientalism, Orientalist notions, and the relationship between culture and imperialism continue to impact literary criticism and comparative cultural studies. Might not his ideas apply to films - and this one particular film - as well, supplying an informative context that has largely been ignored, at least by Western viewers?

That term "Western viewers" is already an inadvertent slip into Orientalist notions which presume that there is a clear line of demarcation between East and West, between a block of Occidentals thinking as one and a block of Orientals behaving as one, between ruling races and subject races, between people of advanced cultural achievement and people marked by primitive forms of expression. Said places the rise of modern Orientalism - a field of scholarly study (and an increasingly powerful political influence on and tool of the policy of empire) - from Napoleon's Egyptian expedition of 1798. It's a discipline that perpetuates the notion of an "inscrutable East," one of instinctual rather than rational beings, and the need for experts (self-perpetuating Orientalists) to scrutinize, understand, interpret, and translate the

hidden meaning of the Non-West Orient, and, in so doing, help to maintain the hegemony of empire by keeping those pesky subjects in check.

I'm oversimplifying a complex approach, and am of course a poor substitute for the late professor Said. Given his dazzling and persuasive application of ideas about culture and empire to such diverse literary works as Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, and Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, however, it seems a fruitful exercise to apply that approach, even if in a simplistic form, to a work as steeped in colonialism as *Black Narcissus*, in which a group of European nuns undertake the civilizing mission of establishing a school and dispensary in a remote Indian outpost made available to them by a native general.

Indeed, watching this favorite old Powell and Pressburger film again after reading Said's *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, even if one has seen it five or six times or more, becomes a whole new experience. The Orientalist exoticism of the locale is immediately emphasized in the visuals and the narrative. The Holy Man, also called the Sunnyasi in the book, serves as a strange human embodiment of the inscrutable East. The pie-in-the-sky civilizing mission of the nuns and their convent is set up against the economic mission of the realist/pragmatist British agent, Mr. Dean. The film may have an anti-missionary bias but, with Mr. Dean as the apparent directorial/authorial mouthpiece, the film seems anything but anti-empire.

Consider some of Dean's lines about the native inhabitants of Mopu, whom he describes in his initial narration as being like peasants everywhere: "Let it become a habit for them to come and they won't remember the time when they didn't... They're like children." Lest it's missed the first time, it gets repeated later: "You must remember, they're primitive people, and like children, unreasonable children." Or, when asked if the General is grieving for his dead son, "you can never tell with these people." And those childish natives can be dangerous, too: when the previous agent accidentally killed an infant hidden from view in a freakish riding mishap, agent Dean tells the nuns, scaring them about the potential fallout over a sick baby who had received castor oil from the dispensary and subsequently died, "they murdered him that night." That's a fine example of savage native justice as perceived by our experienced British agent.

Dean's concerns are not about the health, spiritual or physical, of the local people; his interest is in keeping that Darjeeling tea moving from field to factory to England. Consider his response to Sister Ruth, bloodied from having stopped the bleeding of a woman who had apparently cut an artery or vein, when she identifies the victim for him, whose name sounds like Samuel: "Oh, Samell. She's a good old soul - one of my best workers. I'm very much obliged to you." No rushing off to visit that good old soul, or to discuss issues of safety in the work place. "She's a good old lady, one of my best pluckers" is the line in the book (Godden, 1939: 51). Because he says nothing more, the implication is that they should just patch her up and send her back to the fields. Much obliged to you, indeed! (And, of course, she therefore remains invisible to the audience.)

As for the other natives, there is one very important one who is seen but not heard, except for her screams during a scene in which she is whipped: Kanchi, as played in brownface make-up by the lovely English rose, Jean Simmons. She is called upon to embody the sensualist Eastern female in her most ornamented and seductive guise, all without having a single line to utter - so much for the native tongue or the native voice! It's an effective ploy, and one that is more or less taken from the book, in which she speaks a single sentence: "'Lemini, you've a

great hole in your skirt, did you know?' asked Kanchi pertly" (Godden, 1939: 117). This is not to knock Jean Simmons, who does remarkably well by Kanchi. And yet - wouldn't it be a bit like casting Keira Knightley as the Indian girl in *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002), rather than Parminder Nagra in that role and Knightley more appropriately as the English girl?

"Kanchi is not the film's heroine, though, so why should it really matter?" one might ask. The same might be asked of the brownface casting of English actors Esmond Knight as The General and May Hallatt as Ayah (whose performance, calling to mind the idea of Bette Davis on acid, makes one sigh with relief that Ms. Davis herself did not get her wish to play Mother Goddam, the sinister character renamed Mother Gin Sling in the 1941 film version of *The Shanghai Gesture*). That question brings home the point, however, that this film set in the Himalayas is really about a white woman, Sister Clodagh. She is the character whose point of view is most often favored; she is the only figure seen in flashbacks, in which she's revealed to be a stunning beauty out of habit. Mopu exists, really, for Sister Clodagh's personal growth. Her effect on the natives is not important; what matters is the effect of the natives and their environment on her. So what if the attempt to establish a school and dispensary has failed; Sister Clodagh has become more human.

Given the timing of the film's release, the failure of the nuns might be seen as a metaphor for the failure of empire: the sun sets, at last, as those late frame raindrops fall. In that reading, the Young General played by Sabu may be seen to represent the future of the subcontinent. He is ultimately a figure of scorn not only for crazy Sister Ruth, but for the heroine, Sister Clodagh, as well. One of her last lines to Dean is, "I can't change in a minute, like the Young General." If The Young General does represent the future, as British rule ends and India is partitioned, it does not bode well: he is a fickle fellow, undisciplined in his educational ambitions and quick to surrender to the promise of sensual delights. The "subject race," in this film's view, does not look very capable of self-rule.

Mr. Dean, the "gone native" Britisher, may be an outcast of home country society, but he is ever indispensable and certain to land on his feet in any upheaval. Found at home when the bells ring a call for help with the latest disaster, he is seen lounging shirtless, surrounded by his staff of servants, pet monkey, exotic birds: ah, the spoils of Empire are sweet - for some, at least. Dean may be exploiting third world opportunities, but he's a likeable enough exploiter, or seems so through the eyes of the Archers and of Rumer Godden.

The background of empire is the context of this story, a context that is not really explored in the film's deluxe DVD release, or, more generally, in critical discussions of the film that I've read. Martin Scorsese, in a commentary shared with Michael Powell that was recorded in 1988, is more concerned with the Disney influence, quoting Powell as saying that "the only true authentic genius of filmmaking is Walt Disney." (Scorsese, on an extra included with the Criterion DVD release of 1951's *The River* - likewise based on a novel by Rumer Godden and set in India - dismisses criticism by saying, "colonialist eyes or not, it still has truth to what it is to be a human being.") While the references to Disney, as well as the pointing out of the expert painting, help to destroy the Himalayan illusion of reality in this very human story (the danger of commentary and over-analysis), they do point up the particular storybook quality of the work - the "once upon a time" quality of its strangeness - that is at the heart of its appeal.

Much of that strangeness, and that appeal, must be attributed to the presence of Sister Ruth. Though she rudely nicknames the Young General "Black Narcissus" with a racist nod to his over-fragrant cologne, she herself is almost instantly referred to as "the Snake-Faced Lemini"

by Ayah in the novel, and it's a name that sticks. She exists as a contrast to Sister Clodagh: they both see the natives as all looking alike initially (Sister Ruth gets to voice that sentiment in the film as well), though Clodagh grows to appreciate their individual differences. Clodagh's Irishness (the flashback scenes in Ireland were shot on location in County Galway) fits Said's thesis that the Irish are a white "subject race" of empire, an idea that feeds into his reading of *Kim*, with its Irish hero, and of Yeats in the context of empire and culture: Clodagh naturally sees behind the stereotypes of empire which Sister Ruth takes as gospel.

The film sets up Clodagh and Ruth as mirror images and opposites simultaneously: light and dark, nice and nasty. In a Disney "mirror, mirror on the wall" sense, Clodagh is the mirror and Ruth the mirror cracked. Playing on this almost Manichean dialectic, in which the eavesdropping Ruth becomes Clodagh's secret sharer, *Black Narcissus* transforms itself into an irreverent adult fairy tale about sexually repressed nuns, one of whom acts out the murderous impulses perceived by many a schoolboy or girl subjected to their rule in their youth, especially during adolescence. And that in turn makes the film a blessed relief from the sanctified portraits of nuns in Hollywood movies like *The Bells of St. Mary's* (1945) and *Come to the Stable* (1949).

As Michael Powell mentions in his commentary, much of the dialogue in the film was taken by Emeric Pressburger straight from the novel. One of the few major changes from book to movie is the transformation of Sister Ruth into her civilian self. In the book, she never abandons the habit or applies lipstick, and she meets Dean at his place of work rather than at his home. It's a wise dramatic change, and certainly must have pushed the buttons of those who believed at the time that nuns should be revered in all cinematic depictions of them.

The film feels like a very self-aware work - certainly its irreverence is deliberate, as noted, and Michael Powell, in his commentary on the film, takes particular delight in the song, "No, I Won't Be a Nun," sung by the drunken Mr. Dean as he exits the convent at one point. It may be aware as well of its attitude of empire, and perhaps the shot of Mr. Dean at home enjoying the spoils of empire contains an implicit criticism. That may be reading too much into it, however, and such criticism of empire or of colonial exploitation is certainly never made explicit. Indeed, it's much easier to view the film as an implicit endorsement of colonial perceptions and attitudes, albeit with an anti-missionary bias.

For all of its acknowledged strengths - and there is no denying that the film remains tremendously pleasing visually, and is best experienced on a movie screen - it is important, I think, to note the Orientalist bias/context in which it exists, and to understand its imperialist world view while also appreciating its artistic achievement within that larger context.

Its knowingness, its self-awareness, its sly humor do not transcend the fact that the work remains a very British view of a colonial subject, rooted in colonialism, perhaps most blatantly made plain by its brownface casting choices. For a real challenge to that view, perhaps what is needed is a companion novel and film that provides an opposing viewpoint, a reverse angle perspective, like *Wide Sargasso Sea* to *Jane Eyre*, or *Grendel* to *Beowulf*, or even (litigation and literary merit aside) *The Wind Done Gone* to *Gone with the Wind*. It could be written through the eyes of Kanchi, and be called *The Snake-Faced Sister*. Or, less originally, *White Narcissus*.

Meanwhile, *Black Narcissus* stands alone, an acknowledged classic: loved, available, and well placed at number 123 on the They Shoot Pictures Don't They list of top 1,000 films of

all time, and at number forty-four on the British Film Institute list of top 100 British films of the twentieth century. It is undoubtedly a classic, but - to my eyes, at least, belatedly opened by reading Edward Said - one that carries with it a pervasive, unapologetic context of colonialism that pierces to the dark heart of this self-perceived bull's-eye from the Archers.

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Iran: A Cinematographic Revolution

Dir: Nader Takmil Homayoun, France, 2006

A review by Sarah Boslaugh, Washington University in St. Louis, USA

Iranian films are regular prize-winners at prestigious festivals from Cannes to Berlin to Venice and have been praised by directors as varied as Werner Herzog, Akira Kurosawa, Jean-Luc Godard and Martin Scorsese. This poses a bit of a mystery to the average Western person, whose view of Iran may rest largely on unflattering images and soundbites from the popular media that portray it as a dangerous and somewhat primitive country whose inhabitants are prone to terrorism and which is easily confused with other countries in the Middle East. How can such a country regularly produce subtle, artistic films?

The first answer, of course, is that the image of Iran prevalent in the popular media is a caricature which bears little relationship to reality. Having accepted that premise, a different image must be formed, and an excellent source to begin with is the documentary *Iran: A Cinematographic Revolution* (2006), directed by Nader Takmil Homayoun. This film accomplishes three purposes: it presents a history of Iranian film, includes enough historical and political information to place the films in context, and demonstrates the breadth and depth of Iranian cinema through inclusion of clips from many films, both famous and obscure.

Iran: A Cinematographic Revolution traces the cinematic history of Iran back to the 1930s, where the creation of the Iranian film industry was facilitated by two historical events: the modernisation programs enacted by the Shah Reza Pahlavi and an influx of refugees fleeing the Russian Revolution who brought their filmmaking skills with them. In fact, an Armenian émigré, Ovanes Ohanian, directed the first Iranian feature-length film, the 1933 comedy *Hadji Agha, the Cinema Actor*. The central character is a pious man initially opposed to the cinema but who changes his mind after seeing his own image on screen. Ohanian's film was the first of many produced in Iran which center on the conflict between traditional religious or Iranian values and modern or Western values values.

As a product of this history, Homayoun demonstrates the way events fostered the development of two disparate styles of film-making in Iran of the 1940s through to the 1960s. After Reza Pahlavi abdicated in 1941, Western cultural influence increased in Iran, particularly for a small and economically privileged class, and this was reflected in commercial Iranian cinema. Many films were made imitating popular Hollywood styles, featuring characters who wore Western clothing, worked in modern office buildings and lived in modern Western-style homes. The clash of traditional and modern cultures supplied ample material for comedy, as demonstrated by a scene included from *Gharon's Treasure* (S. Yassami, 1965) which features a young Iranian man trying to eat in a Western-style restaurant but who can't figure out how to manage his knife and fork. Judging from the clips presented, these films were produced cheaply and with minimal regard for production values,

yet retain historical value because they offer a glimpse into one aspect of Iranian society of the time.

In contrast, Homayoun also presents a very different aspect of contemporary Iranian society, captured by what might be called the Iranian neorealists, who shot on location and were concerned with telling stories about the lives of ordinary people, often focusing on the grittier side of life; for this reason they were often subject to government censorship. A good example featured in this documentary is *South of the City* (F. Ghafari, 1958), the first Iranian feature film shot on location. Ghafari's film concerns life among the underclass of Teheran and was shot in the slums of that city, and suffered a fate common to many Iranian films: it was banned by the government because it revealed unflattering truths, in this case that poverty existed within Iran. A similar fate befell the director Kamran Shirdel, who was hired by the Shah to make a series of short films about the modernization of Iran. Instead of railroads and factories he filmed beggars on the street and men sleeping in tunnels, creating an unflattering portrait of modern Iran which resulted in government confiscation of his films.

One of the most fascinating segments of *Iran: A Cinematographic Revolution* examines the turbulent period of the 1970s, when soaring worldwide oil prices heightened class differences and increased the pace of modernization. As recalled by director Fereydoun Goleh, in the 1970s there were two Teherans: a bustling modern Teheran of bars and discos, and an older and poorer Teheran of class discrimination and social inequality. Another notable change in the 1970s was the greater freedom allowed to women (in some segments of the population) which was reflected in the greater variety of roles offered to actresses as well as the use of alluring female images in advertising. One result of this new freedom was the production of many Iranian low-quality exploitation films: like their Western counterparts, they featured scantily-clad women, cheap humor and gratuitous violence, and provided future leaders of the Iranian revolution with plenty of ammunition to argue that cinema was a corrupting influence.

At this point we learn that some directors chose instead to use this new freedom for artistic purposes: Goleh incorporated awareness of both class distinctions and sexual role confusion in his film *Under the Skin of the City* (1974). This film tells the story of a chance encounter between a female American tourist and a poor Iranian man who spend a day together and become sexually interested in each other without any possibility of fulfillment. The man's frustration is expressed in a fantasy sequence in which the woman appears naked and beckoning on a bed before him, and his confusion leads to an altercation which results in his being jailed.

In depicting this period of change, Homayoun's documentary shows how several other well-known Iranian filmmakers began working during this time - and developed a style of filmmaking now known to many as the Iranian New Wave. The first Iranian New Wave film was Massud Kimiai's *Gheyssar* (1969), which portrayed a young man pursuing a vendetta in a working-class neighborhood in Teheran. Other directors included in the New Wave include Abbas Kiarostami (often considered the greatest Iranian film director), Dariush Mehrjui (whose 1969 film *The Cow* may have saved Iranian filmmaking after the 1979 Revolution), Mohsen Makhmalbaf, and S. Shahid Saless.

Homayoun finds indications of the impending Iranian Revolution in *The Journey of the Stone* (Massud Kimiai, 1979): in this film, workmen revolt against oppression, citing the Koran as

justification and inspiration. Another film on this theme is Fereydoun Goleh's *Beehive* (1975), in which a young man reacts violently against the meaninglessness of his life and the contrast between his poverty and the Westernized upper-class society about him. Footage of his frenzied destruction of a nightclub is intercut with what appears to be newsreel footage of riots. This sequence demonstrates a weakness of the documentary: although the clip is fascinating, it was not clear if it is entirely Goleh's film or if the intercutting was added by Homayoun.

Many of the directors interviewed in *Iran: A Cinematographic Revolution* characterize the 1979 Revolution as both the end of Iranian cinema as it then existed, and the precipitating event which led to the revival of Iranian film and the particular characteristics of the national film industry today: At first, cinema was condemned as a symbol of Western decadence, and cinemas were destroyed in the same spirit as were bars and brothels. Fortunately for the industry the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who came to power after the Shah's abdication, declared that he was not against cinema *per se* but only against that which was ungodly. He further cited Mehrjui's *The Cow* (1969), which had recently been shown on Iranian television, as an example of an instructive and acceptable film.

Taking their cue from this declaration, the Iranian government set about the task of creating a film industry which would be consonant with their interpretation of traditional values. Part of this effort was establishment of the Young Iranian Film Institute, autonomous but financed by the state, to train Iranian filmmakers. According to Mohammad Meydarian, former Minister of State for Cinematographic Affairs interviewed in this film, the Institute trained over five-thousand apprentice filmmakers per year. Although this created an unprecedented pool of manpower for the Iranian film industry, it was also a mixed blessing because the Institute maintained control over the entire filmmaking process, from writing to production. The downside of centralized control, as film critic Akbar Nabavi points out in an interview, is that it has sometimes led to what he terms "pasteurized cinema" in which the director's individual vision is lost and the same themes and styles are repeated in many different films.

Homayoun also demonstrates the resilience of the Iranian filmmakers. In particular he shows how Iranian film production continued even during the economic deprivation and infrastructure destruction of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). Mohammed Beheshti, former Head of the Farabi Foundation (which finances and promotes Iranian film) recalls in an interview that shooting on *Grand Cinema* (H. Hedayat, 1989) had to be timed between missile attacks. Amid Naderi recalls that he used the war's destruction to his advantage by shooting his film, *Second Search* (1981), in the destroyed city of Abadan. Unfortunately, Naderi's efforts to portray the effects of war on ordinary citizens, which he says were inspired by Roberto Rossellini, contradicted official propaganda about the glories of war and *Second Search* was suppressed. *Bashu, the Little Stranger* (B. Beszai, 1989), which tells the story of a young war orphan crossing Iran as a stowaway, was also suppressed, although for only four years. Beszai recalls in an interview that to get the film released he had to answer 47 official objections by the censors, including the fact that the direction "flown" by cartoon airplanes in the title sequences suggested that Iran attacked Iraq rather than the other way around.

Using a range of sources, Homayoun provides convincing evidence that Iran's success at international film festivals has been no accident: the positive publicity following the screening of *Frosty Roads* (M. Jafari Jozani, 1985) at the Berlin Film Festival convinced the Iranian authorities that film could serve an ambassador for Iran, improving its image abroad. This realization was followed by a resolution to try to place an Iranian film in every major

festival, the fruits of which are clear to see from the proliferation of prize-winners. The amount of public resources dedicated to this goal, starting with the training of large numbers of students, recalls the athletic talent development system of the former East Germany, except in this case film prizes rather than Olympic medals are the goal.

Despite ample government support and many international successes, the interviews with contemporary filmmakers in *Iran: A Cinematographic Revolution* reveal Iran is not a paradise for cinema: those working in the industry must contend with censorship and other forms of official interference which Western filmmakers would find incomprehensible. However, the directors interviewed in this documentary take a remarkably matter-of-fact attitude toward official censorship, and are not shy about disclosing ways they have managed to work around it. For instance, Mohsen Makhmalbaf recounts making a film portraying the human cost of war, while leading government officials to believe he was making pro-war film. He continued the deception by supplying a shorted version of his film to the censors, while also creating a theatrical version including many scenes which he knew would have drawn the censor's ire. Similarly, the director Rakhshan Bani-Etemad recalls being given a list of required changes for one of her films: she told the censor to keep the list, because he would change jobs someday and would wait for that day in order to be able to make her film the way she wanted to.

With all of its political and historical insights together, *Iran: A Cinematographic Revolution* includes a wealth of information about Iranian film, and presents a tantalizing collection of materials demonstrating the variety and breadth of the country's cinematic history. Balanced against that, I have two main criticisms of this film. One is that is seems to have been created following the ODTAA (One Damn Thing After Another) school of composition, and the other is that insufficient information is provided about many of the materials included.

On the first point, Homayoun has amassed a collection of film clips, interviews and archival footage second to none. Unfortunately, these materials are frequently presented one after the other without the effort to relate them to each other or organize a coherent narrative. Confusion is increased because the documentary does not follow a strictly chronological approach, so it's easy to get lost. On the second point, film footage is not always identified, creating instances where the source of a particular clip is not clear, or even whether it came from a feature film or from newsreel footage. Even when the film itself is identified, more information would be useful, such as the names of actors and the filming location, particularly since many people viewing this documentary will not be experts on Iranian film.

Notwithstanding these objections, *Iran: A Cinematographic Revolution* provides an excellent introduction to Iranian cinema and the historical and political context from which it springs. And it's not just a documentary for cinephiles. Film can provide a window into a culture, and people living in the West need to form an understanding about Iran which is not based exclusively on information supplied by politicians or journalists. For this reason in particular, if *Iran: A Cinematographic Revolution* encourages more people to view and appreciate Iranian film, then it will be a positive influence on the world.

The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford

Dir: Andrew Dominik, USA/Canada, 2007

A review by Jo Eadie, The Open University in the East Midlands, UK

This is a cold film: cold in its wintry Missouri landscapes, cold in the bitter passions of its characters, cold in Nick Cave's lonely plangent music, and cold in its unforgiving gaze over people playing out a drama whose end we already know. But perhaps coldest of all in Brad Pitt's bitter, paranoid, exhausted portrayal of Jesse James himself. At one point he stands on the surface of a frozen lake shooting holes in the ice beneath his feet -- possibly hoping to die, possibly insanely confident in his own immortality, possibly merely bored stupid. Is it the endless ice of his own cold heart -- or of a world turned cold against him? We are left curiously detached in our inability to guess at his motives. It is a mark of the film's dispassionate narrative that its almost forensic inquiry into the material details of Jesse's last months is matched by a refusal to explain or analyse what any of them mean.

Andrew Dominik's film charts the period of Jesse's acquaintance with the man who will eventually kill him, and beyond that to the death of the assassin himself. It is set in the final days of his career as bank-robber and popular hero of the erstwhile confederate states, opening with his final hold-up and focusing not on robberies but on their aftermath: the domestic life to which he returns for relief after violence, the sadistic games he plays with his associates, and the destructive - and opportunistic - friendship he strikes up with Bob and Charley Ford (Casey Affleck and Sam Rockwell). This friendship will eventually buckle under the strain that Jesse subjects it to, leading the Fords to kill him in the hope of money and glory. While Fritz Lang's *The Return of Frank James* (1940) had Henry Fonda righteously hunting down his brother's murderers in the company of feisty sidekick Gene Tierney, Dominik charts their actual demise, a much more ambivalent affair in which they share public adulation re-enacting their deeds in a travelling theatre, before Charley shoots himself and Bob is left to live with his own guilt. Strikingly, Bob is shown not declining into agonies of remorse, but merely passing through his life as if stunned by the fact that his deed would amount in the long run to so little. Although -- in the film's only misjudged scene -- there is a brief attempt to show Ford eaten up with shame, when Nick Cave arrives to sing the tradition "Ballad of Jesse James," unaware that the real Bob Ford is in the room, for the most part it is an account of the banality which follows notoriety. The bored look that settles onto Affleck's face - and the matter-of-fact narration that accompanies it as he settles into the routine of a mining-town saloon owner - is testimony to the fact that his life trailed out, with his moment of (dis)honour leading nowhere. The final moments in which it does come back to haunt him, when one petty criminal takes it into his head to avenge Jesse for no particular reason, resonate because they mark the last drab indignity in the long series that constitute his post-shooting existence.

But at the same time that Pitt's Jesse is a tortured outsider, a ruthless murderer of his own friends, an old man hoping to die -- he is also that mesmerisingly beautiful boy who preened his way through *Thelma and Louise* (1991), *Interview with the Vampire* (1994), and *Fight Club* (1999). Watching, I was taken back to what first drew me to the western: that it is a genre of beautiful men. It is a genre that takes pleasure in putting men on display, showing their faces and bodies off to their best effect. When I think back to first becoming a western fan it was because of the young Henry Fonda's beaming blue eyes, the unfeasibly smooth jaws on Gregory Peck and Rock Hudson, John Wayne with that huge chest that you felt you could curl up against if the world became too much, Paul Newman and Robert Redford with their twinkly girlish faces, Clint Eastwood with that slightly wry sarcastic smile that just made you go a little bit weak at the knees.

At the risk of drifting into *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) territory, the film must evoke those memories for many of us, through its calculated rendering of Brad Pitt as the ideal fantasy of a pin-up hero. And it further evokes in its audience the memories of life as boyhood viewers of westerns through its central dynamic, which plays with certain stereotypical images of the fan and his hero: Casey Affleck as Bob Ford is the stooped, nervous, mumbling, tearful, fawning, slightly ugly, nerdy fan, full of delusions about how interesting he will be to his hero -- and Brad Pitt is the perfect, statuesque, remote, larger-than-life, living legend who despises him. The film works over in unbearable detail how uncomfortable that meeting with a childhood hero must be. In one excruciating scene Bob Ford's family make him tell Jesse James about all the memorabilia he used to collect when he was young (no doubt much as my father might have done in the unlikely eventuality that Clint Eastwood had ended up coming over for dinner!). And thus the journey that the film follows, of Jesse gradually losing interest in his admirer, reflects the awful fear that haunts so many fans: that an encyclopaedic knowledge of *Dr Who* or *Star Trek* or Nottingham Forest is ultimately never going to prove hugely endearing to your idols should you ever find yourself stuck in a lift with them.

Many commentators on the film have talked about it as a text concerned with contemporary celebrity culture, with Brad Pitt perfect as a celebrity playing a celebrity, but this overlooks that there is something more particular about this film for fans of the 'western': it raises the question of what it means to enjoy a film genre which has always been primarily about powerful men. Pitt's Jesse collects a circle of men all around him who admire him, and who he treats appallingly. Not merely the persecuted Bob Ford, but a whole series of acquaintances are reviled, interrogated, intimidated - and ultimately killed. So beyond the relationship between Jesse James and his assassin, hovers the question of how *all* men allow themselves to be treated by the alpha male in the pack. Like some hideously extended episode of *The Apprentice* or *Dragon's Den,* it becomes a film about bullying.

Indeed the western has always been haunted by the sense that its heroes' detached, toughness might topple over into cruelty and arrogance -- and at various points in their careers most of its key performers have traded on this doubleness: John Wayne almost parodying himself as the murderous racist Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers* (1956), Henry Fonda as the blue-eyed psychopath in *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968); Clint Eastwood as the vengeful ghost who destroys a town in *High Plains Drifter* (1973); and Yul Brynner's monstrous turn in *Westworld* (1973), the supreme embodiment of the implacable man of steel. So that in a sense *The Shooting of Jesse James* poses this question of the fans of the westerns itself: why have we idolised these cold, violent, arrogant, bullies -- and beyond that why do those kinds of men go on being idolised in the workplace, on the football field, in politics?

Central to the ways in which westerns have traditionally explored this male ruthlessness is through the iconography of their harsh pitiless landscapes. Whether plains, deserts or mountains, there is the sense that only men who are unyielding, singe-minded, unable to feel pain or doubt, could survive in the kinds of harsh territories that are spread out in front of us. And in this instance, to match the cold, ruthless, lifeless Jesse James are the extraordinary wide cold, ruthless, lifeless snowy panoramas of Missouri. Many reviewers have been keen to compare Dominic with Terrence Malik, with whom he recently worked on *The New World* (2005), and the landscapes of *Badlands* (1973) and *Days of Heaven* (1978). Malik's films are noticeable for their huge skylines -- big open spaces over the heads of his heroes, implying that they have dreams of somewhere bigger and better and freer to escape to. Certainly sky has always been central to the western -- it implies liberty, escape, big plans -- consider Howard Hawks's western called simply *The Big Sky* (1952), a title which evokes so much of the western's dreams. Indeed the trailers for *The Assassination of Jesse James* (2006) make repeated use of a shot of Jesse filmed against a blue open sky -- as the rebel who won't be fenced in. But in fact this is an atypical shot, and the film works with a very different aesthetics of landscape. Here the sky is always cloudy, overcast, dark -- with the camera almost always shooting slightly from above, looking down on characters in the landscape so as to show only the smallest line of horizon at the very top of the screen.

When the clouds do clear briefly it is only in to reveal the dark and terrifying void of the night sky, vast and pitiless over the head of a man who Jesse is about to kill on a whim. Instead of Malik's open skies of dream and possibility, Domink offers an oppressive weight pushing down on the landscape, leaving nobody with any dreams. There is a sense in which these characters have nowhere to go -- their ambitions are small and petty, and have brought them no great freedom. Jesse is becoming increasingly bitter and paranoid, Bob Ford's life after the shooting spirals into depression and sterility. It is a western at home with Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs Miller* (1971) or Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992), where the west is a place of cowards, cheats, business rivals, murderers, psychopaths and petty con-men. In terms of gender politics, it can only be salutary to see the aggressive posturing of the cold invulnerable western icon wind down into futility. At the same time, thinking about queer boys who might watch the western now, I can't help but wonder who there will be for us to have crushes on once the genre has come clean about the cold reptilian heart that lies freezing underneath the cowboy's leathery hide.