

The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian

Dir: Andrew Adamson, UK/USA, 2008.

A review by Alice Mills, University of Ballarat, Australia

Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001, 2002, 2003) seems to have had a malign influence on Andrew Adamson's film adaptations of C. S. Lewis's Narnia books for children. Adamson's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005) started promisingly with four children from this world exploring the wonders and horrors of life in Narnia, but slid towards *Lord of the Rings* territory with its inordinately huge and spectacular battle. Adamson's second Narnia film, *Prince Caspian* (2008), goes further in the same direction. Whereas Lewis's novel is largely taken up with the gradual joyful discovery of Narnian talking animals, mythological beings and Aslan by Prince Caspian and with the rediscovery of Narnia by the four Pevensie children, the film version sacrifices much of this joy and wonder in favour of battle sequences. As a consequence, Adamson's Narnia becomes less of a treasure house of marvellous inhabitants, and the remaining films in the series will have to work very hard to recreate the sense of another world - vulnerable, precious, more morally urgent than ours, which this film has squandered.

War in Adamson's film is very much a matter of human against human. The non-human Narnians band together to fight only when Caspian (played by the English actor, Ben Barnes, with a thick Italian accent) arrives to rally them against his uncle Miraz (played by a genuinely Italian actor, Sergio Castellitto) and the rest of the Telmarine invaders. Adamson brings in a lengthy addition to Lewis's plot when the Telmarines arrive to besiege the Narnian base, whereupon High King Peter (William Moseley) and Caspian lead their forces to attack the royal palace, hoping to find it poorly defended. Another war-oriented addition occurs at the start of the film, when the four Pevensie children are about to be pulled back into Narnia at Caspian's summons. Lewis recounts this scene briskly: the children wait for their train and are jerked back into Narnia. Adamson shows Peter fighting several schoolboy bullies and soldiers dispersing the crowd of eager schoolchild onlookers. As in the first film in the series, the Second World War backdrop to the children's Narnian adventures is emphasised here. The Italian accents given to the Telmarines thus align them with the forces of Mussolini. To English-speaking viewers acquainted with the history of the Second World War, such a tactic is likely to reinforce the sense that our side, being English, is therefore unquestionably in the right and their side, being Italian (or even just being foreign), is unquestionably in the wrong. Lewis, insofar as he represents the Telmarines as Englishmen in diction and ancestry, refuses this easy xenophobic justification for war.

Perhaps Adamson settled upon Italian accents for his Telmarines because the other ethnic clues given by Lewis were too problematic. The ancestors of these Telmarines, Lewis informs his readers late in the novel, were sailors shipwrecked on a South Sea island who took wives from the local population before finding an opening into Narnia. Rather than Italian, then, their descendants ought to be part-Polynesian; but post-colonial political unrest in Polynesia renders this ethnicity problematic for a story of invasion and murderous colonisation of an English-speaking country. Other aspects of the Telmarines, in Lewis's

words and Pauline Baynes's illustrations, derive from imperial Muslim history. Adamson chooses not to represent his Telmarines as Middle Eastern invaders of the Christian realm of Narnia, persecuting its original inhabitants to the point of genocide. Following the book here would have rendered the film in a contemporary context, crude anti-Muslim propaganda. Making the Telmarines Italians, harking back to hostilities of fifty years ago, is a far less explosive choice.

Nevertheless, setting the Narnian war so firmly in the context of the Second World War has some troublesome moral consequences. One of the lessons emphasised in the film is that those who fight on the side of Narnia should have waited in the faith that Aslan would come to their aid. Does this imply that, in the film's added episode where Peter fights the bullies, he should have held back, turned the other cheek and submitted to their demands for an apology (which would have been a lie)? Does it further imply that in the Second World War it would have been better for the English not to have declared war on Hitler? In Narnia, does it mean that for Caspian and Peter, taking up arms against murderous invaders is not a morally righteous act? Would the better response to genocide be that of the badger (too little is made of this computer-generated creature, voiced by Ken Stott) waiting patiently for Aslan while the slaughter goes on?

Set in screeching discord to this message of patience and faith is the film's glorification of battle, in particular the slaughter of enemies in battle. It offers two extended battle sequences, one of them Adamson's invention (the attack on the Telmarine castle), the other a greatly magnified and more lethal version of the episode in the book where the Telmarines are finally defeated. The first of these battles is depicted in the film with due acknowledgement of the pain and sorrow of failure, defeat and death as the bulk of the Narnian army is trapped within the castle courtyard and cut down. The second battle is represented as a scene of triumph with swelling martial music as though the failure, defeat and death of the Telmarines was simply cause for rejoicing. Here the children and Narnians merely replicate the treatment visited on Narnia by the Telmarines: as such, the film's climax is morally loathsome.

Lewis's novel invites difficulties into itself when he introduces among Aslan's supporters Bacchus, Silenus and the Maenads (well known in Greek myth for frenzied dismemberment of their enemies), though he makes haste to tame them; equally inappropriate for a novel about learning from one's mistakes is the seemingly permanent transformation of boys into pigs and a bad man into a tree. Wisely, Adamson omits all of this material, but the surging battle music in the film is a Bacchic rather than Christian celebration of intoxicating violence.

Apparently the qualms voiced about battle in both the novel and film versions of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* have been swept away in *Prince Caspian*. Where Lucy (Georgie Henley) and Susan (Anna Popplewell) were told not to fight in their first adventure, in this second film Susan unhesitatingly aims her arrows to kill. Only Lucy remains more or less untouched by the general enthusiasm for killing. The film's Edmund (Skandar Keynes) is defined as the best of all swordsmen while Peter's identity as High King is proven by his sword. How such martial values stand against Aslan's call for patience and faith is never explained. Such moral issues become most overt at the end of the film, when Susan and Peter reveal that they will not be returning to Narnia because, according to Aslan, they have learned all they can from being there. This comment (not to be found in Lewis's text) begs the question, exactly what have these two learned? Peter seems to have acquired some humility alongside the confusion between militant Christianity and waiting for the Lord. Susan seems to have forgotten what she had learned on her first visit. She has also enjoyed the beginnings

of a sexual relationship with Prince Caspian, another of the film's inventions and an improvement on the 'wet-blanket' Susan of the novel: what can she have learned, though, from Aslan's decision to deny any prospect of reunion in this lifetime, except that sexual love is not approved by Christ-the-Lion?

It is in the interludes between its episodes of war and teen romance that Adamson's film is at its strongest. There is a powerful short scene, for instance, in which Lucy approaches a bear, believing it to be a talking animal and potential friend, only to have it shot dead as it attacks her. Lucy's grief and bewilderment convey, as little else in the film does, just why Narnia is worth fighting for. The episode in which Nikabrik (Warwick Davis), with a hag and werewolf to help, summons up the White Witch (Tilda Swinton, as glorious as she was in the first Narnia film) conveys a mixture of seductiveness and menace far more compelling than the merely human threat of the Telmarines. As the good but disbelieving dwarf Trumpkin, Peter Dinklage is excellent, and the computer-generated talking mouse, Reepicheep (voiced by Eddie Izzard) is as irresistible as would be expected from the director of *Shrek* (2001). If only Adamson had expanded on these fantasy elements from the novel and followed Lewis's lead in lightly touching upon war!

Belonging

Dir: BBC Wales, UK, 2000-2009

A review by Elizabeth Jane Evans, University of Nottingham, UK

The usefulness of genre theory in considering the vast array of content available via television broadcasting has already been problematised by a number of writers (see, for example, Feuer, 1992). Despite this, it persists as a central theoretical model for understanding narrative and style or, perhaps more particularly, how programmes are sold and packaged by broadcasters and greeted by audiences. There is still, however, scope for both the models of individual genres and the wider application of genre theory as a whole to be refined, something that is evident when considering the BBC Wales late night 'soap opera' *Belonging* (BBC Wales, 2000 – 2008). In many respects it quite neatly fits the idea of a soap opera, or more specifically a British soap opera since, as Robert C. Allen writes, "each country's experience with the range of texts to which the term 'soap opera' has been applied is different" (1989: 45). At the same time however, it raises questions about the criteria used (or privileged) in defining a genre. Is genre the product of a certain set of narrative and stylistic codes? Or should we look at, as Jason Mittell has argued, "how that text functions within a larger cultural context" (2004: 3). In particular how useful is generic identity when these two sets of criteria seem to contradict each other?

Narratively and structurally *Belonging* is clearly identifiable as a British-style soap opera. It is domestic in interest and melodramatic in subject matter, following Dorothy Hobson's assertion that "[t]he central concept of soap operas is the family and life within and between families. The drama of the soap opera is the way that the family in various forms survives the forces which attack it" (Hobson, 2003: 116). Storylines focus on a few key families that live in the small Welsh valley town of Bryncoedd and the origin and development of interpersonal relationships (romantic, platonic and familial) is the central concern of the programme. The importance of the familial structure within which the characters are positioned is emphasised in the programme's website (www.bbc.co.uk/wales/belonging). Viewers who are new to the programme, and therefore may turn to the website to ensure they can follow the on-screen action, are directed towards character descriptions that are grouped according to the individual's relationship to other characters. [1] As such then, they are encouraged to define each character within a network of family members. The character of Ceri (Eve Myles), for example, is linked to her son, Jake (Lewis Lloyd), husband Robbie (Alun Raglan), and nephew, Cai (David Smith), along with characters who have since left the series including her mother, brother and niece. This is reflected in the programme's narrative, with the closing episodes of the final series, for example, focusing strongly on her choice between two suitors (her estranged husband Robbie and new boyfriend Jon) and the two men's relationship with her teenage son Jake, with the final resolution seeing the family unit of Ceri, Robbie and Jake reunited and leaving to travel through France. [2]

Similarly, the setting of the series not only reinforces this preoccupation with the domestic but also reflect additional generic tropes of soap opera. Scenes are set in the characters'

homes and small businesses, including the obligatory pub. Action rarely leaves this setting, in the same way that storylines in *Coronation Street* (ITV, 1960-) rarely leave Weatherfield and the characters in *Emmerdale* (ITV, 1972-) are rarely seen venturing outside of the village. Whilst the final special, broadcast in April 2009 and signalling an end to the series, was set outside of Bryncoedd the narrative still privileged the village, with the final scenes promising the return "home" of two characters who had left in an earlier series. At the same time, the emphasis on family and by extension community links with how the programme deals with regional identity, another of Hobson's key features of British soap opera (2003: 120-121). Although in English, the setting of rural Wales is never in dispute, with accents, dialect and references constantly reinforcing it. The importance of the relationship between community and identity is even reflected in the programme's title, suggesting that the core idea of the series is knowing one's place in the world. The characters belong to a specific social group, one that is defined by geographic place as much as close familial and social ties. *Belonging* offers a community of family and friends that is clearly Welsh, and united against outsiders. The only non-Welsh character in the programme's final season, Jodie (Hema Mangoo), is revealed to be a threat to the community through her relationship with Nadine (Sarah Lloyd-Gregory), which results in her estrangement from her family. Ultimately, however, Jodie breaks Nadine's heart, returning to England and allowing the family unit (and pure Welsh nature of the community) to be restored.

Structurally, in terms of both narrative and format, most of the key elements of the British soap opera are also present. It consists of half hour long episodes, just like every other British soap opera, and has strong serial elements. Individual episodes do not stand alone but build on pre-running storylines and initiate new ones, incorporating new stories whilst expanding existing ones. [3] The narrative therefore follows Robin Nelson's model of soap as 'flexi-narrative':

[a] number of stories involving familiar characters in familiar setting are broken down into narrative bytes and rapidly intercut. Any lack of interest of an audience segment in one set of characters or story-line is thus not allowed to last long as another story with a different group of characters is swiftly taken up, only in turn to give way to another before taking up again the first narrative, and so on in a series of interwoven narrative strands. (Nelson, 1997: 32-33)

This is true of *Belonging* as much as it is true of other British soap operas, with multiple characters (a total of twenty in series eight) and up to five storylines running in any single half-hour episode creating a narrative that moves swiftly between narrative arcs. At the same time the kinds of pleasures offered by the narrative are those that make use of the long-running, serial nature of the storylines. Karen Lury argues that "the long duration of [*Eastenders*] means that even the most ordinary and mundane of places can, for the long-term viewer, become imbued with a series of visually inspired memories of different characters and plot lines" (Lury, 2005: 15). Whilst Lury is referring to *mise-en-scène*, the same can be said to apply to audience engagement and interpretation of narrative moments, as memories of past plot developments add additional interpretive possibilities onto current narratives. The happiness that Nadine temporarily finds in her relationship with Jodie, and the subsequent heartbreak she feels when Jodie leaves her, acquires an extra layer of meaning when the viewer is aware that she had previously suffered from depression and used to self-harm.

Up to this point, then, *Belonging* seems unproblematically a soap opera; indeed the previous discussion merely serves to reinforce existing models of the genre. However, the programme fails to fit into the generic model of the soap opera when considering the relationship between soaps and a wider television culture, something that further highlights the complexities in applying genre theory to television content. The function that television can play in providing a sense of security has already been discussed by writers concerned with the relationship between television and daily life. As Roger Silverstone writes, "[b]odies ... require comfort and security, both material and symbolic. It is in the repetitiveness of the everyday, its very familiarity and predictability, that such securities are sought and sometimes found" (Silverstone, 2002: 765). Broadcast television, with its rigid schedule and fixed time slots, plays an important role in providing this comfort, despite the increasing ability for viewers to control the schedule, and soap operas (along with news programmes) serve as the epitome of this sense of security. [4] It is perhaps not surprising that David Gauntlett and Annette Hill use both a soap and news as examples of the importance of television to maintaining domestic routines when they argue that, "particular TV programmes such as the news and *Home and Away* provide fixed marker points in the day, reliable parts of the routine" (Gauntlett and Hill, 1999: 27). Whereas other forms of television drama are based around a limited number of episodes and often associated with a particular season (*Doctor Who* with Spring/Summer, *Waking the Dead* with winter, *Spooks* with autumn), soaps are a constant, reassuring presence. They do not have 'seasons'; no matter what time of year it is, we can tune into the residents of Albert Square, Coronation Street or Emmerdale and follow their lives in sync with our own. Whereas once it was the lack of the *Today* (1957-) programme that was considered an indication of impending apocalypse, now it more likely to be recognised as the lack of *Coronation Street*.

Belonging, however, does not fit this pattern. Its scheduling late in the evening at 10:35pm, immediately after the 10 O'Clock News, may initially seem to mark it as different from most soap operas but in fact places it alongside other late-night programmes such as the short lived *Night and Day* (ITV, 2001-2003). What positions *Belonging* apart from the traditional concept of the soap opera is directly related to the above discussion concerning the wider positioning of soap operas within the television landscape and the domestic role that such programming plays. Unlike *EastEnders* (BBC, 1985-), *Coronation Street*, *Emmerdale* or the Welsh language soap *Pobol y Cwm* (BBC/S4C, 1994-), *Belonging* does not provide the regular reassurance of being on a set time of day, on set days of the week, every week of the year. Instead of a constant stream of episodes that run regularly all year long, it is divided into seasons of eight or thirteen episodes, before going off air until the following year. Whereas soap opera is constant, *Belonging* is temporary.

In this respect then, *Belonging* follows the pattern of prime time television dramatic series such as *Waking the Dead* (BBC, 2000-), *Spooks* (BBC, 2002-). However it is equally not the same as this form of drama, which consist of longer episodes, higher production values and an exploration of the extraordinary not just the mundane, and therefore raises questions over what the defining aspects of a television genre should be. Should it be the overwhelming narrative and structural codes that fit neatly with previous models of the soap? Looking at an individual episode, its generic status seems quite clear. However, when the wider role of the genre, the expectations the audience may develop away from the specific content of individual episodes, is taken into consideration, that clear generic status becomes muddled. The social function of soap opera to provide a fixed point in the day or week that does not waver with the seasons is not present with *Belonging*. If the series had proved to be a failure, then this internal conflict in its generic status would serve as evidence that audiences have

rigid expectations for soap opera. However, *Belonging* has proven popular enough to be recommissioned for eight years, which suggests that it has found an audience that has accepted these generic ambiguities, despite the perceived importance of genre to the television industry in terms of communicating with its audience.

Looking at *Belonging* ultimately raises the question of what kind of television it actually is, and in turn highlights the often complex landscape of drama that is available on British television screens. Although 'soap opera' seems a relatively straightforward genre to identify, for industry, audiences and academics alike, *Belonging* raises the question of which aspects of generic identification are given more weight. Should its genre be defined by its textual characteristics or its production and reception context? If it is not a soap opera then what it becomes unclear; it cannot be equated with other forms of drama such as the one-hour 'quality' series. Instead it presents the need for a more fluid understanding of genre definition, and a recognition that the factors that contribute to defining 'soap opera' may be unbalanced. Ironically considering its title, it is not that easy to see where *Belonging* belongs within our current understanding of television drama.

References

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Notes

[1] This is a technique that is also used on the websites for other soaps. The *Eastenders* site (www.bbc.co.uk/eastenders) includes a series of Flash animation 'family trees' that link to character histories. Similar versions such as the *Neighbours* website (www.neighbours.com) use households instead, to account for the use of substitute families such as close friendship groups. Although the specific grouping may be different, the focus on small units of co-dependents, be they blood related or not, persists.

[2] Although Robbie is not Jake's biological father, Jake is clearly shown as viewing him as a substitute father figure, whilst consistently rejecting Jon. Ceri's decision to reunite with Robbie therefore represents her choice to form a traditional, harmonious family unit rather than a potentially broken and turbulent one.

[3] A related narrative feature of soap operas also exists in that despite the serial structure it is often easy for the viewer to catch up and follow the plot even if they have missed one or several episodes.

[4] This sense of constant presence is only emphasised when soaps include special references to events in the historical world, for example Pauline Fowler and Dot Cotton commenting on the Queen Mother's funeral in 2002.

Vicky Christina Barcelona

Dir: Woody Allen, Spain/USA, 2008

A review by Larry Taylor, USA

Vicky Cristina Barcelona (2008) is, if anything, evidence that Woody Allen can still develop and tell a charming story. It seems that leaving the confines of his native New York has revived Allen and allowed him to tell stories rather than plod along in a Manhattan rut of cliché and repetition. The result has made a quaint, enjoyable little movie that manages to keep light about heavy things.

Vicky, played by the lovely European actress Rebecca Hall, and Cristina, played by the American beauty Scarlett Johansson, are the best of friends, mostly due to their opposite views of life and love. Vicky is the sensible, focused, realistic one while Cristina is mostly lost in the clouds of imagination and dreams of living a life of art and culture. Case in point: the two girls travel to Barcelona to live with friends of the family (Patricia Clarkson and Kevin Dunn). Vicky is there to study the Catalan culture since that is the subject of her Master's thesis, while Cristina is there to clear her head of a twelve-minute film that she made and hated.

It isn't long before Vicky and Cristina run across Juan Antonio (Javier Bardem), a bohemian artist, more famous for his fiery relationship with his ex wife, Maria Elena, than his painting. Bardem as Juan Antonio is excellent, and his dry sense of humor is perfect for the role. It is interesting to note that the role is a 180 degree turn from his chilling, psychopathic Chigurh in *No Country for Old Men* (2007). Juan Antonio frankly invites the two ladies to spend a weekend with him in Oviedo where, he hopes, the three of them will make love. Juan Antonio's hedonistic approach to the meaninglessness of life fits Cristina's sensibilities perfectly, but Vicky is the voice of reason. Her reason soon loses out to whimsy however and the three are off to Oviedo.

Things become complicated after a twist of fate in Oviedo leads to Vicky and Juan Antonio becoming intimate rather than he and Cristina, and the three soon return to Barcelona where Vicky tries to forget the weekend and move on with her life and subsequent marriage to Doug a cliché of American materialism, and the antithesis to Juan Antonio and Barcelona.

Meanwhile, Cristina decides to move in with Juan Antonio, having become his muse of sorts. Before long Maria Elena, played with volatile passion by Penelope Cruz, resurfaces in Juan's life. Maria is a fiery artist, and more talented than Juan Antonio. The two have a powerful love/hate relationship that, according to Maria, can only work with the presence of a third in the relationship. In this instance, the third is the free spirit Cristina, so the three spend some time together in a partnership that effectively overturns the conventions of relationships.

The film elevates a notch once Cruz arrives, as her Maria Elena is a fascinatingly unstable "artist". Her instability creates the genius in her work, and her volatile relationship with Bardem's Juan Antonio is an excellent juxtaposition of mood and emotion. Cruz is definitely

the draw once she shows up, and her raw beauty and sexuality is something to behold in and of itself. Cruz does her best work in her native tongue, and her high-pitched, rapid-fire Spanish can be violent and funny all at the same time. Bardem and Cruz play off each other well. Johansson's Cristina is merely a passive body in the film to be acted upon rather than take action. She is a muse, a floating blond beauty that inspires, but she has no real idea what makes her inspiring. In this sense, Johansson plays the part well, but one wishes she was given the chance to showcase her talent as an actress the way she did in *Lost in Translation* (2003).

While the three free spirits roam the Spanish countryside, Vicky is back in Barcelona, pining away at the ins and outs of Catalan culture while Doug stays distracted with what house they are to buy when they eventually move back stateside. All the while, Vicky is preoccupied by the memories of that weekend with Juan Antonio, and she is conflicted about what to do and what direction her once stable life should take. Hall takes on the 'Woody Allen persona' early, as her neurosis resembles the unsure ramblings of most of the characters Allen writes for himself. But she is not trapped by this as she transforms and evolves several times throughout the film. Hall's narrow, thin-framed beauty and appearance is a perfect foil to Johansson's fuller, more voluptuous bombshell appearance.

Allen shoots the film with the perfect splash of sun-drenched yellows, highlighting the beauty of the Spanish countryside. The set is not exploited however, as the look is tight and small in stature so as to serve the actors in the world Allen creates. By adding smart, spot-on musical notes and a rapid-fire narration, Allen also keeps the action of the film immediate and moving so that it serves the Bohemian culture being displayed. Allen also has a knack for conversation much like the late Robert Altman, as many of the scenes feel organic or unforced. Dialogue bounces off other dialogue and weaves in and out as conversations do in the real world. Allen seems to have found new inspiration shooting his pictures in Europe. *Match Point* (2005) is a far superior film, but it is meant to be. *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* is meant to be something pretty to look at and something to get a laugh out of from time to time. At the same time, it also confronts the very notion of human sexuality and relationships as understood in their common definition.

I do wish that Allen had not created such a cliché for the American influence of Doug. Everything he does feels like it is what he is supposed to do, not necessarily what he would do. And the subplot involving Patricia Clarkson's character, while serving Vicky's development, seems tacked on. But these are minor setbacks in a film that shows up, does what it is supposed to do, and does it well.

Pride and Glory

Dir: Gavin O'Connor, USA, 2008

A review by Nazmi Al-Shalabi, The Hashemite University, Jordan

Pride and Glory (2008) is set in New York City, directed by Gavin O'Connor, rated R for strong violence, pervasive language and drug content, released in October 2008, based on a novel by Robert Hopes, and released by Warner Brothers and Pictures. It includes violence, swearing, drug references, and a bit of pointless nudity. It presents an authentic portrait of the New York Police Department, and explores the officers' personal and professional lives told through the lives of a three-generation family of cops. When four cops are gunned down during a drug bust gone wrong in Washington Heights, the news of this crime sends the whole department into a frenzy of activity, and a task force is set up by the Chief of Manhattan Detectives, Francis Tierney, Sr. (Jon Voight) to capture the murderer. The cops killed in the bizarre shootout are under the command of Noah Emmerich (Francis Tierney, Jr.), who assigns his son, Ray Tierney (Edward Norton), to lead the investigation, and to protect the interests of all involved. During the process, Ray Tierney (Edward Norton) discovers a string of outrageous police abuses that implicate both his brother Noah and his brother-in-law Jimmy Egan (Collin Farrell), which engulfs the police force and the family itself in scandal. Ray (Norton) finds out that he has to choose between his loyalty to his job and his loyalty to his family. This is the moral conflict constituting the heart of the story, and into whose center audiences are put.

It is clear that the culprits are not any usual cops. One of these is Jimmy Egan (Farrell) who heads a squad whose members are hired assassins. Collin sees nothing wrong with this deed, and lays the whole blame on drug dealers. He is a dirty cop who augments his income by moonlighting as a paid murderer and a drug dealer. On the surface, he seems to be a decent guy. The other culprit, Noah Emmerich, also heads the squad from which the dead cops come. The fact that the culprits are two cops demonstrates the corruption of the New York Police Department as well as the corruption of the Tierney family. The corruption of the police isn't anything new. This theme has been dealt with by many directors in previous films, such as Sidney Lumet's *Serpico* (1973) and *Prince of the City* (1981), and James Gray's *We Own the Night* (2007). In other words, *Pride and Glory* does not break new ground. It follows the pattern of traditional cop drama. It consists of elements that have been seen in previous films. The film story is well-written, and makes for an interesting character study. It is also a compelling tale which keeps viewers interested up to the end. This engaging storyline is a strength of the film, and so too is its sound acting.

As far as acting is concerned, several first-rate actors star in this film. It is the performances of Edward Norton, Collin Farrell, and Noah Emmerich that make *Pride and Glory* something special. These performances are terrific in the way they show the men struggling with the morality of their actions. Edward Norton, for instance, plays the role of a man caught up in a moral dilemma. He himself is torn up over a past incident in which he was forced to abandon his principles as a human being and as a cop. Here, we see him in a struggle not to face a

similar situation again. Similarly, Emmerich, whose character is a combination of decency and cowardice, shows a man embroiled in an intense investigation at the same time as dealing with his wife (Jennifer Ehle) dying of cancer. Regarding Farrell's performance, he portrays a shady cop whose own vested interests determine his behavior. Notably, he practices his own unique hobbies, sometimes smoking and playing football. These men play their roles well and do most of the expository screaming on which the film partly relies.

Though these men are amongst the film industry's first-rate actors, the real star of the film is Declan Quinn, the cinematographer, whose camera turns the viewer into an investigator, as it sneaks around corners and peers through window panes. With this camera, Quinn takes many creative approaches to shots, providing a variety of significant scenes. While there are indoor scenes marked by intimacy which holds the viewer's attention, there are also scenes of family life and horrifying ones which demonstrate brutality. Besides, there are also powerful scenes in subplots with the supporting performances of Farrell's minions and Jennifer Ehle who is dying of cancer and has lost her hair.

Direction throughout the film is decent. O'Connor, the director, makes a few good choices. He does not hurry the action, giving his characters room to breathe. The portraits of these characters are uneven, and no one of the characters is central. However, they all do their best to attain the viewer's interest. Although the theme of the film has been handled by several directors, O'Connor does his best to be different from others. This difference lies, I think, in the actors' performances and the use of the camera. In an opening shot, O'Connor employs foreshadowing to give the viewer an idea about the result of the investigation of gunning down four cops. Ray Tierney (Norton) is seen out of focus behind a chain-link fence while a nearby football announcer remarks about a quarterback sack, arguing, "He didn't see that coming." The "fence" probably refers to the laws and boundaries that Ray should honor; the word "chain" hints, I think, at restricting or confiscating freedom. Regarding Ray's being seen out of focus and behind the fence, this shot constructs an unfavorable image of him. He is a man who operates outside the law; he is a man of checkered past. But as long as he is in the task force, he remains in focus, and still with his freedom.

This film teaches us a few lessons. Firstly, people are obsessed with appearances. This means that people care more for appearances than reality. But appearances themselves are deceptive. Therefore, it is not a mark of wisdom to judge others by their appearances which are so often not in harmony with reality. This lack of balance between appearance and reality hints at the absence of 'authenticity.' Jimmy Egan (Farrell), for instance, seems to be a decent guy on the surface, but in reality he is not. Secondly, selfishness leads to blindness. The selfish care only for their interests, and, thus, they are blind to the interests of others. To take an example, Egan (Farrell) is a selfish cop whose interests determine his behavior. He has assembled a squad of thugs who work with nasty drug dealers. He wants to go on with working this way, increasing his income, and operating outside the law without being questioned.

Thirdly, balance should be struck by all between the workplace and the family. During the investigation, Ray (Norton) discovers a string of outrageous police abuses implicating both his brother, Noah (Tierney, Jr.) and his brother-in-law Jimmy (Farrell). Ray (Norton) realizes that he has to make a choice, to choose between his loyalty to the family and his loyalty to the police department. In my own judgment, it's no use making a choice of this sort. It's unwise to choose either the family or the department. However, Edward should really choose both of them, and keep both of them protected. The police department where he works should be as important as his own family. Just as he is keen on not scandalizing his personal family, so

should he be keen on not scandalizing his professional family. While Ray maintains only his pride if he chooses to be loyal to his family, he certainly maintains his pride and does a glorious deed by choosing both of them, striking the necessary balance, and paying equal attention to both of them. This is, I think, the right thing to do.

All things together, the film advocates a murky morality about doing the right thing and blind loyalty to the institution, but ultimately suggests that the right thing is to be loyal to both of them. At the end, Ray (Norton) does the right thing by New York Police Department standards. Instead of ratting out his brothers in arms, he withdraws a little from career and family, takes a leaky boat to be his home, and takes care of a scar on his face. As well as this interesting moral dialogue, this film is marked by good acting, decent direction, tight script, a well-written tale, and many attention-holding scenes. It is worth certainly watching.

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The Curious Case of Benjamin Button

A review by Elizabeth Rosen, Muhlenberg College, USA

Director David Fincher and his starring actor, Brad Pitt, have made a daring choice in setting their quirky, poignant film *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008) in New Orleans during the approach of Hurricane Katrina. In a movie which is already full of tear-inducing moments, such a change in setting (the original was based in Baltimore) might have felt either like overt manipulation or exploitation of a city and culture that has already been, and continues to be, victimized, first by a natural disaster, and then by the neglect and ineptitude of the government after Katrina's landfall, as well as the short memories of people nationwide which made that neglect possible. But the change works, in part, because the film is interested in this phenomenon of remembering and forgetting. This is a film about how we are inextricably bound by time: by our memories of it, by our wasting of it, by our sharing of it with others.

Improbably based on a short story by F. Scott Fitzgerald, the film shares almost nothing with the light-hearted piece of whimsy Fitzgerald wrote. Yet writer Eric Roth has extracted gold from this little fable about a baby born old who becomes younger as he ages, and he's crafted something quite profound: a meditation on life which includes a philosophical and touching acceptance of death and loss. Not surprisingly, the film is framed with a scene set in the New Orleans hospital room of Miss Daisy, an elderly woman who is so close to dying that all the nurses and her daughter, Caroline, can do is treat her pain as they wait. Watching the rains of the imminent hurricane batter the hospital window, Caroline takes the opportunity to tell her mother how much she will miss her when she is gone.

In response, Daisy begins to recount a story that at first appears to be the ramblings of dementia, but which turns out to be the emblematic story of the entire film. In this whimsical tale, Daisy recalls a blind clockmaker in New Orleans circa 1914 who was hired to build the new clock for the train station. The clockmaker, Mr. Gateau, and his wife send their son to fight in WWI and soon receive the news that he has been killed. When Mr. Gateau unveils his clock in a public ceremony, there's a collective gasp, for the clock is running backwards. Apologetically, the clockmaker explains that he has purposefully designed his clock to run in reverse in the wistful hope that perhaps by reversing time, "the boys who were lost in the war might come home again" and live out the lives they should have done by rights.

This is a beautiful moment in the film. Accompanied by the narration by the dreamy Daisy, Fincher, using a patina to age his footage, runs the story of the clockmaker backwards, showing the son and his fellow soldiers rising up from the muddy trenches in which they've fallen. We see bullets miraculously reversing out of their torn, mutilated bodies, and their charging figures reversing backwards over the battlefield, backwards through time, back to the train stations where they were seen off by their families, back into the arms of the parents who will soon enough grieve for them. Yet not even a whimsical clock running in reverse can bring the past back. "Everything changes" and "nothing stays the same" are two of the refrains of the film, but the poignancy of the story of Benjamin Button is that it shows an acceptance of exactly this loss and change. It is a lesson Benjamin learns living his early (or

rather late) life in a retirement home for the elderly where nothing stays the same: familiar people die; new ones take their place. The Nolan House is perpetually re-inventing itself as residents die or arrive to live out their last days.

Benjamin narrates his story through a diary which Daisy has inherited from him and from which Caroline reads to her. It is this connection that allows the film's central story to be told with Benjamin informing the viewer that he was born on the final night of WWI. The scene opens on a jubilant Jackson Square in New Orleans, where joyful people waving American flags crowd the streets and celebratory fireworks periodically light up the night sky. The camera pans alongside a man running desperately through the crowds trying to reach a house just outside the square. He bursts into the house to find his wife nearly dead after having given birth to their son. Mr. Button pulls back the swaddling cloth from his newborn and draws away in horror at the tiny decrepit face of his child. Disgusted, he grabs up the baby and races into the streets, eventually abandoning the newborn on the steps of the Nolan House.

Here, the baby is found and adopted by a black woman, Queenie, who takes care of the elderly and dying residents of the home. The doctor of the house tells Queenie that the baby shows all the physical signs of a man of advanced age and that he won't survive long, but Queenie is unswayed. "You still one of God's children," she tells the ancient, arthritic baby in her arms. She names him Benjamin and introduces him to the elderly residents of the home, telling them that he's not long for this world, but that he'll stay with them until he goes. There is a canniness to this opening. Born at the end of the very war to which the clockmaker has responded, Benjamin and the clock both tick backwards. One wonders whether this is a meditation on the abnormality of war itself: that young men die before their proper time. Later, when Benjamin himself goes to war and witnesses the terrible deaths there, he tells us that, unlike all the deaths he had seen at the retirement home, these war time deaths don't feel natural to him. One wonders, then, whether Benjamin's unnatural premature age is, like the clock, a kind of reverse version of the comment on the unnatural loss of youth to war.

Benjamin doesn't die as predicted. Instead, as he "ages" he physically grows younger. Through it all, Queenie steadfastly remains his most ardent supporter, and Benjamin becomes as much a part of the retirement home community as any of its other residents, except that he, like the people who work there, keeps outliving the residents. Both the folksy Queenie, whose motto is "you never know what's coming for you," and the elderly residents themselves are the dispensers of wisdom, a strategy which doesn't feel as saccharine as it usually might because the film itself is so unblinkingly honest about old age and death. When someone tells Benjamin that he's sorry to learn of Benjamin's condition, Benjamin tells him, "There's no need to be; there's nothing wrong with old age." Amongst the many comforts which *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* offers, this is perhaps one of the most comforting. No other film in recent memory seems so confident and comfortable with old age and infirmity, and in a country, like America, which is so obsessed with youth, *Benjamin Button* reminds us that old age is just another age and that there's nothing shameful in it.

Through Benjamin's interaction with the residents, the film also makes clear why we cheat ourselves when we hide our elderly away and sanitize our homes from death by sending them to live out their old age and die in places like hospitals and retirement homes. The residents are alternately funny, charming, quirky, irritable, forgetful, and sage. One elderly woman comments as she tenderly cuts Benjamin's sprouting locks that she feels sorry for him getting younger while all the people he loves are getting older. "It's an awful responsibility," she

notes, and then when she sees the shadow cross his face, she lays her hands on Benjamin's shoulders and says to him as they both stare at their reflections in the mirror, "We're meant to lose the people we love. How else would we know what they mean to us?"

Benjamin Button doesn't hide from the sorrow of aging and it doesn't fall back on the stereotype of the wise old codger; we're told about residents "messing themselves" and we see plenty of infirm bodies, demented minds and the maddening repetitiveness which plagues the conversation of the elderly. But even this isn't exactly what it appears to be, for the film's aim doesn't seem to be to raise old age in our estimation so much as to lower our estimation of youth. It doesn't hide from the embarrassments or suffering of age; it shows us that there are equal embarrassments and suffering in youth, and one of the funnier lines which Queenie delivers is a folksy version of something Shakespeare noted four hundred years ago: we all start out and end up in diapers.

One of the admirable things about the film is that there is no wasted piece of story-telling. One of the recurring jokes in the film comes by way of an elderly man in the home who repeatedly asks Benjamin, "Did I ever tell you I was struck by lightning *seven* times?" Over the course of the film, he recounts these incidences with bewilderment. Once, he says, he was just getting the mail. Once, he was just riding in his car, and so on. The hilarity of this joke is enhanced again by Fincher's filmmaking. Each time the man recalls one of these lightning strikes, Fincher shows it to us in the sepia-toned, jerkiness of early film, complete with the black spotting of decayed film. The technique reinforces the man's age to be sure, but it also recalls the kind of slapstick of Charlie Chaplin and Harold Lloyd films. Yet, Fincher isn't interested in this repeated joke merely for the fun of it. The old man's bewilderment that he was *just* doing this or that when he was struck is the visual partner to Queenie's comment that you never know what's coming for you. Indeed, in recounting Benjamin's life, one might count seven life-altering events which strike him, just as his old friend has been struck by lightning. Each of these events *just* happens as Benjamin was going about his normal life, and true to Queenie's word, he never does know it's coming for him.

The emotional center of *Benjamin Button* is its love-story, an element which was never in the source material at all. The aged Benjamin first meets the pre-school aged Daisy when she comes to visit with her grandmother, a resident of the home. It's clear from the first that they are enchanted with one another. But timing, as the old saying goes, is everything and the film follows this repeatedly aborted love story over the course of the two characters' lives. The next time Benjamin sees Daisy she's nine, back for another visit. Later, when Benjamin - now literally seventeen years old, but still in the body of a seventy year old - goes to sea, the pre-teen Daisy, already attached to Benjamin, makes him promise to send her a postcard from everywhere he goes.

This is a promise he keeps, as we learn, because Fincher wisely keeps returning to the dying Daisy's hospital room, where anxious staff are keeping an eye on the approaching hurricane and making plans to evacuate as many patients as they can. Caroline and her mother will stay put since they are told they will be safe in the hospital (a promise which is all the more poignant for the audience, knowing as we do now that seven of New Orleans' hospitals drowned along with the city). Caroline finds the postcards which Benjamin sent to her mother, and later in the film's most emotional revelation, she will find a second bundle of postcards addressed to her instead. In a story in which the main characters are always passing one another by because they aren't yet ready for one another, these postcards are tokens of something greater than themselves. Like all postcards, they are messages sent from afar to a

loved one to try to include that other in experiences he or she simply cannot appreciate from his/her own position in space and time.

And so Benjamin and Daisy meet again when she is twenty-three, then when she is twenty-five, and then eight years later when they seem, as Daisy muses to herself, finally to meet in the middle. It is here, in the middle of their lives, that these two characters, seemingly destined for one another, can finally be present, in time, in each other's life. But the true love story of *Benjamin Button* isn't revealed here, but much later as the couple loves and cares for one another both through Daisy's aging, and Benjamin's return to babyhood. If one of the most repeated lines of the film is that "nothing lasts," the love story of the film argues otherwise. "Some things last," Daisy tells a pensive Benjamin, and watching how these characters love each other through old age and young, the audience can too find this a comfort.

Cate Blanchett is a marvel in her role as Daisy. Unerringly, she manages to get the details of Daisy's mental age just right, from the self-involved, self-important twenty-three year old trying to show off her worldliness, to the dying woman, laboring for breath and moving between her dreamy memories of Benjamin to her shrewd observation of the daughter to whom she is revealing the most intimate parts of her past life. Blanchett's make-up is by far the more effective, and it is not until late in the movie that one realizes that it is actually Blanchett playing the dying Daisy and not an older actress.

Pitt is the lesser actor of the two, but he handles the aging voice of Benjamin well, and he – like almost everyone in the film – manages to almost always get the tricky New Orleans accent right. In a strange turn of events, Pitt's real life age is his best ally in the film, for when the aging Benjamin reappears in the body of a seventeen year old, and we see Pitt (through the help of digital effects) as his younger self, the one who first made hearts leap in *Thelma and Louise* (1991). When we compare this with the middle-age Pitt we see on magazine covers today, with his broadened, lined and still-handsome face, we see before us exactly the process of aging, with its beauty and the accompanying melancholy of knowing we'll never again see that angelic seventeen year old again.

As director, Fincher seems to have a profound sense of how to handle not just the material, which might have been maudlin in less sure hands, but the themes themselves. He doesn't overuse the technique of running his film backwards, for example. Other than the instance of Mr. Gauteau's wish for the war to run backwards, the only other time when Fincher even comes close to reversing the film is when he wants to underscore Benjamin's narration that life "is a series of intersecting lives and incidents" - a point the director emphasizes by showing a series of events leading to a crisis in Daisy's life, and then re-running each one of the tiny intersecting events. In this way, Fincher shows these events had to happen exactly as they did in order to result in what they did. It's a beautiful filmic way of depicting the complexity of timing.

The film itself is beautiful to watch, taking full advantage of the opulent and simultaneously gaudy, exotic city in which it is set. There are breathtaking shots of sunrises on Lake Pontchartrain, the decaying mansions and Spanish-moss-draped oaks on the Lakeshore and Esplanade Ave., the boisterous, sweaty brothels of the early twentieth century French Quarter, and the luxurious privilege of the Sazerac Room where the upper class came for the drink for which the room was named. In this way, New Orleans itself becomes a character in the film, and we watch it, too, move backward and forwards in time.

In Fitzgerald's *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (1921), the story was originally set in the city of Baltimore, but both Fincher and Pitt have said that shooting in Baltimore would have driven the budget of their already \$150 million film even higher, and that tax incentives in Louisiana helped them make the decision to relocate the film's story to New Orleans instead. But given that the filming of *Benjamin Button* took place in 2006 (and 2007) - only a year after Katrina devastated New Orleans and while the city was still struggling in many neighborhoods to get even the most basic amenities like sewer, electric and water lines up and running - trying to make a multi-million dollar film in such a place borders on madness. How would you find usable locations, get the power you needed, find the people to inhabit such a large cast in a city as decimated as New Orleans was at this point in time?

The answer, one suspects, has more to do with the director's and leading actor's sense of how the tragedy of Katrina - how it wiped away history and destroyed time for a million people - perfectly embodies the themes of the film. No doubt it was cheaper to make the film in New Orleans than in Baltimore, but Pitt in particular knows New Orleans, or what it used to be, from his experience filming *Interview with a Vampire* (1994) there many years ago. From that experience, he would have been familiar with the peculiar *joie-de-vivre* of the people there, their quirky ways of talking, their pride in their unique culture, music, and food, but most of all their intense sense of family history and tradition. Moving the film to New Orleans would have been a way of helping the city without showing patronizing pity.

New Orleans is a city which has always shown strong allegiance to, in fact, is renowned for and defined by, its own history and traditions. This is evident for anyone who has visited New Orleans and heard the ragtime backbone throbbing up through the city's fabled Storyville history into today's funky brass band performances; anyone who has eaten a plate of red beans and rice knowing (as every native New Orleanian does), that for hundreds of years, it has been the Monday night supper of choice because traditionally Monday was wash day and beans could cook all day long while the laundry was beaten and washed; anyone who watched the dogged resistance to change that the oldest Mardi Gras crews displayed when asked to integrate; or who has listened to a native New Orleanian tell stories about his great-great-grandmamma.

In a film that reminds us in so many ways that time is not to be wasted, but is precious and unrecoverable, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* ends on a devastating image. In a dim and dingy storeroom, Mr. Gateau's clock, still ticking backwards, sits half hidden under a tarp, as the storm waters of Katrina flood into the storeroom and slowly begin to swirl around it. This clock, and all that it represents - the wish to recover time, the life of Benjamin Button, and the historical past of New Orleans - will, we know, be swept away in a matter of hours, all of it, unrecoverable, except through memory. Eventually, the people who remember will, like the residents of the Nolan House, also disappear into time. This, most of all, is the reason for re-locating *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* to New Orleans during Katrina: in setting the film in New Orleans, Fincher and Pitt do their part to preserve the history and tradition of a city which we have nearly lost to time.