Funny Games

Dir: Michael Haneke, USA / France / UK / Austria / Germany / Italy, 2007

A review by Mike Miley, Independent scholar

Haneke's Home Invasion: Three Looks at *Funny Games*

Take One. Thesis: "You shouldn't forget the importance of *entertainment*."

Funny Games (Michael Haneke, 2007) is a boring film. Even though the film is a shot-for-shot remake of one of the most fascinating, terrifying, exhilarating, and—yes—funny films of the past fifteen years (*Funny Games*, Michael Haneke, 1997), this *Funny Games* (hereafter called *Funny Games USA*) appears never to have been exposed to fun or excitement. It lends credence to the argument that shot-for-shot remakes—the most popular example being Gus Van Sant's turgid 1998 remake of *Psycho*—represent one of the worst ideas in cinematic history.

Until *Funny Games USA*, Michael Haneke seemed impervious to failure. His unflinching, systematic dissections of voyeurism and Western cultural imperialism push the boundaries of what cinema can handle. No matter his subject—the impossibility of communication in *Code Unknown* (2000); the violent consequences of "the waning of affect" in *Benny's Video* (1992); the smug reactionary hidden beneath the façade of liberal intellectualism in *Caché* (2005)—Haneke transforms the viewer's passive filmgoing experience into two primal hours of harrowing self-examination. To watch a Haneke film is to know true cinematic terror and to re-enter the world with a heightened sensitivity to the intricate politics of everyday (and aesthetic) life.

Funny Games USA, however, loses the irony of its title because Haneke does little to enlist the audience in the hijinks. The rigors of matching *Funny Games* shot-for-shot, music cue for music cue, absorbs all the energy of the production, making the film feel stilted and empty. Where one left *Funny Games* with several indelible images burned into his/her head, one leaves *Funny Games USA*, a film consisting of the same compositions, with the hazy recollection of desaturated, flat, milky patches of light spilling across a sterile house. Not even experimental composer John Zorn's wailing cacophony over the credits succeeds in snapping the film out of its stupor.

Most disappointing of all, however, is Michael Pitt, whose casting as the lead killer (and therefore the hero of Haneke's film) fits the material perfectly, even more so than Arno Frisch in the original version. But like everything else in the film, Pitt keeps the audience at arm's length, preferring clinical distance to intense engagement. One senses from Pitt's performance that he is as bored with the film as the audience. When he delivers his character's trademark looks into the camera, he does it woodenly, without joy, treating the acknowledgement of his "cohorts" in the audience as a tedious recreation of a shot from *Funny Games* rather than the apotheosis of the film's scathing analysis of voyeuristic entertainment. Pitt's performance, like the film, is mechanical and rote, and it, more than anything else, makes *Funny Games USA*

feel like an icy, lifeless exercise in precision. Despite the sense one gets that Haneke occupies a class of his own, with *Funny Games USA*, Haneke now finds himself in a class with George Sluizer (*Spoorloos*, 1988 / *The Vanishing*, 1993) and Ole Bornedal (*Nattevagten*, 1994 / *Nightwatch*, 1998) as just another foreign director who tries to hit it big in America by remaking his own film only to miss the target wildly.

Take Two. Antithesis: "You shouldn't forget the *importance* of entertainment."

Since one cannot deny Haneke's menacing precision as a filmmaker, one must assume Haneke made *Funny Games USA* a chilly and somnambulistic film on purpose. But why would Haneke set out to make a "bad" or "boring" film? Perhaps because *Funny Games USA* represents Haneke's funniest game yet.

Haneke's decision to make a deliberately boring film for his American debut constitutes the greatest insult to the American moviegoing sensibility imaginable, as he seeks not to indulge the audience with *Funny Games USA* but to indict it. As bold as *Funny Games* is, even it does not dare to shame its audience for watching. In *Funny Games USA*, Haneke invades America's vacation home—the cinema—and tortures its supposed right to be entertained, which actually makes this his most subversive film, even more subversive than the original.

Funny Games USA challenges its audience to confront why it goes to films. The film's plot—if one can call it that—centers on a bourgeois family whose idyllic vacation gets interrupted when two youthful goons invade their home, torture them, and kill them off one by one for sport, all of it done without an ounce of sympathy, judgment, or hope. Such a plot can only lead to one question: why would any sane, compassionate person pay money to see this film, let alone to see two versions of it? More importantly, though, how desensitized to violence must one be in order to watch the film and complain that it is boring? One would almost have to be as sociopathic as the killers in the film. In this light, Michael Pitt's cold looks into the camera become genuinely haunting. He no longer gazes at the audience with indifference: he looks at the audience with contempt, as if to ask "Is this what you animals paid for?" It appears that the audience is so hungry for blood and suffering that it disgusts the killer.

And herein lies Haneke's funniest game: the real villain of *Funny Games USA* is the audience, the ones for whose benefit all of this senseless violence is being done. Sure, Brady Corbet's and Pitt's characters slowly murder a family, but we watch them do it, quite avidly. We do not reject the film by leaving the theater or covering our eyes. In fact, we eat popcorn and sip high fructose corn syrup, hoping the film will get better; not better in the sense that it will become more wholesome, but better in the sense that its degeneracy will be depicted in a more appealing way. And we feel perfectly justified in this, entitled even, because we paid good money for this; and if being American means anything, it means demanding that you get your money's worth.

The real feat here is that Haneke brings about this shift in emphasis without making any fundamental changes; while *Funny Games USA* superficially replicates every element of *Funny Games*, from the shot list to a full-scale replica of the set, the result is an entirely different film. This more harsh and uncompromising vision stems from Haneke's discovery of a flaw in the conceit of the 1997 film: the acknowledgment of the audience is too cute. Although Arno Frisch's looks startle the viewer, like any rupture of the fourth wall will do, *Funny Games* treats the looks as a witty gimmick, allowing the viewer to safely find delight in the cleverness of a film twisted enough to ask its audience to root for the killers. Such a

gag poses little danger for the audience because it avoids a full investigation of how fatally these looks implicate the audience in the film's "funny games." By returning to these looks in *Funny Games USA*, Haneke realizes that if he desires to acknowledge the audience, then the ideology of the film requires him to denounce it.

To believe that the film is boring causes the viewer to embody the exact American consumer ideology Haneke sets out to eviscerate. Throughout Haneke's work, he has implied that American popular culture—and Western culture by extension—craves violence in entertainment. Such violent "entertainment" involves the direct and indirect, fictional and factual, exploitation of others for the benefit of the consumer. Repeated, pervasive depictions of such behavior without comment will not only instill entitlement in the mind of the consumer, but it can also lead him/her to believe that the rights, freedoms, and well-being of others are secondary to his/her own pleasure.

Here the lackluster performances in *Funny Games USA* discourage the audience from viewing these characters as human beings, which facilitates the audience's natural inclination to objectify the weak and to permit the audience to take pleasure in the family's fate. The killers bring this point to the forefront several times when they ask the audience conciliatory questions such as "What do you think?" and "Is that enough? But you want a real ending, with plausible plot development, don't you?" Most damning of all, of course, is Corbet's earnest answer to Watts' stock question "Why don't you just kill us?": "You shouldn't forget the importance of entertainment." These lines all exist in *Funny Games*; however, the gleeful touch with which they are delivered in that film downplays the condemning implications these lines have for the audience. *Funny Games USA*, with its cynical air, instills these lines with so much venom as to leave no room for doubt whom the film truly seeks to attack. In viewing *Funny Games USA*, the audience is not merely complicit in the actions onscreen, it orders them.

The film's most notorious scene—where Pitt picks up a remote control and "rewinds" the film to prevent Corbet from being killed—symbolizes the final lash from Haneke's whip. Viewing traditional Hollywood cinema has conditioned the audience to cheer when Naomi Watts' character succeeds in turning the gun on the killers; however, the audience knows that this scene breaks as many of the film's rules as the subsequent "rewinding." While this tactic can signify a "dirty trick" on Haneke's part as he denies the audience the customary redemption, it forces the audience to face the true consequences of its desire for vengeance. Allowing the family to strike back at the killers with a violence of their own sanctions the audience to identify itself in the roles of both victim and aggressor. This dual role provides the audience with a justification for its desire to inflict violence, which, therefore, not only forgives the audience for enjoying the film up to this point but also absolves it of this thirst for violence, transforming the desire from an illicit one into a morally acceptable one. Countless other Hollywood films do the same thing: give the audience the vicarious experience of helpless terror only to reward them with the ecstatic redemption of retaliatory violence. With the "rewinding" scene in *Funny Games USA*, Haneke robs the audience of its alleged right to have it both ways and demonstrates that the justification for revenge actually serves as an empty rationalization for a desire to punish without guilt or consequences.

Haneke does not shy away from the parallels this has to contemporary political life. One would hope a consumer of violent entertainment would stop short of condoning similar torture in reality, but recent political events amply demonstrate how much an American will consent to in order to preserve his/her way of life, of which the freedom to "pursue

happiness" as s/he sees fit functions as a vital component. What happens "over there" in some other, less developed country to some foreign "other" is actually more removed from the average American's consciousness—and therefore less real—than what happens to the family in the film, which is why it would not surprise Haneke to hear an American call *Funny Games USA* boring.

So, yes, *Funny Games USA* is a boring film, for to make this film "entertaining" or "pleasurable," or to demand that it be so, is to commit a highly immoral act, an act whose deathly implications extend far beyond the cinema. Therefore, any anger the audience chooses to direct at the film must also be directed at itself. Haneke tricks American moviegoers—liberal art house moviegoers at that—to pay for a piece of "entertainment" that forces these moviegoers to stare at their own hypocritical reflection, and he does it so well that most of them do not even notice how their dissatisfaction with the film contributes to their damnation. That's Haneke's funniest game of all.

Take Three. Synthesis: "You shouldn't *forget* the importance of entertainment."

Even though this scheme is quite ingenious, it creates quite a problem because it makes *Funny Games USA* a film with no audience. It is impossible to "enjoy" or "appreciate" this film without being a sadist. Further, one cannot "agree" with or "commend" the film for its critique of cinematic voyeurism, because in order to do so, one would have to watch the film with some level of interest, however detached, which would place him/her in the camp of those who willingly pay money to watch acts of torture and brutality. No amount of critical distance can extricate the viewer from this double-bind. Everyone who comes into contact with the film is tricked into damnation, and if that constitutes a funny game, then it is funny only to the one person who comes out of this attack unscathed: Haneke, its perpetrator.

One has to wonder why Haneke continues to make films if he believes his audience is made up of sado-imperialists. Either Haneke sincerely finds these matters concerning or he simply enjoys the ease with which he can admonish his audience. Yes, there is something to be said for Haneke working within the medium he critiques, but when does this critique turn into a tic, or worse, tiresome moral superiority? A few more films like *Funny Games USA* and Haneke could potentially drive his audience to consume the very kind of cinema he attacks, which would accomplish little more than proving him right. Perhaps that would be enough for him, but doing so squanders the opportunity for which he is best suited: to usher in a new visceral awareness of our relationship to violence in all its forms.

Funny Games USA could contain more energy and wit without endorsing violent entertainment. The film does not attempt this because Haneke fails to accept the difference between entertainment and engagement. A film, even a film as rigidly designed as a shot-for-shot remake, can engross its audience with the power of its conviction without succumbing to the audience's desire to be thoughtlessly indulged. Films like Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) or Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Ordet* (1955) may seem like stringent formal exercises on the surface, but these films are made with such conviction that they allow the active viewer to find an emotional connection on his/her own. The viewer winds up being "entertained" in a sense, but only because s/he has been invited to discover what the film hopes to accomplish and comes to admire it intellectually. Haneke's film has no such conviction. It settles for cruel games and formal stunts when it could strive for a forthright commitment to its ideas. As a result, *Funny Games USA*

disengages both from itself and its audience, leaving the audience detached from a work whose message and intent, perhaps more than most films, needs its attention.

Recognizing the difference between entertainment and engagement would allow *Funny Games USA* to achieve what Haneke wants without making it so cerebral, dispassionate, and dull. One must commend the interesting moments and remarkable degree of restraint present in *Funny Games USA*, but one cannot escape the fact that the film's tremendously off-putting nature, for all its theoretical merits, cannot do anything but prevent it from having a profound impact on its audience. If Haneke loses his audience's engagement, how can he then enlighten it?

But he does manage to enlighten us in one sense, and perhaps here the film can be called a success, if only a moderate one. He enlightens us to the fact that we live in a country that actively engages in torture and violence on a global scale, both in image and in reality. Furthermore, Haneke demands that we recognize how this culture's survival depends on cultivating a consumer base of sadistic voyeurs who gobble up violence and other people's suffering in vapid, amoral comfort. It is not an entertaining fact to learn, nor engaging, and if we do enjoy it, we only work to prove his point further.

We can dislike Haneke for toying with us in this way, but we cannot ignore where he triumphs: he makes a film so banal and dreadful that we never want to see it again. And perhaps this is Haneke's project. He wants to re-sensitize us to violence by demonstrating the banal senselessness of evil and the madness behind our wishing it was otherwise.

Gomorrah

Dir: Matteo Garrone, Italy, 2008

A review by Jonathan Murray, Edinburgh College of Art, UK

Self-satisfied middle-aged masculinity soused in blue neon, rough-and-ready camaraderie, the pampering and privileges associated with the good life, all accompanied by a soundtrack that makes increasingly audible the unbroken hum of power: what the opening scene of *Gomorrah* (2008) sets up and then swiftly, systematically puts down is less a few nameless, fictionalised Neapolitan gangsters and more the very real miasma of glamour that popular cinema has bequeathed the Italian mafia. Early on in Matteo Garrone's accomplished movie we see two teenage would-be gangsters, Marco and Piselli, re-enacting Al Pacino/Tony Montana's histrionics at the climax of Brian de Palma's early-'80s remake of *Scarface* (1932). *Gomorrah* ultimately reveals their naïve act of imitation and adulation as a mistake already containing its own fatal consequences. It is a mistake that the film itself is determined to avoid, forging instead its own clearly distinctive stylistic and moral path.

Thus, while the American tradition exemplified by *The Godfather* (1972) movies concentrates on the fate of those at the top of the tree, *Gomorrah* anatomises instead the situation of those scrabbling around in the dirt below: teenage foot soldiers, elderly bag men, sweatshop labourers. Canonical works like *Scarface* or *Goodfellas* (1990) typically display and provoke an intellectually and ethically illogical mix of horrified attraction, humanising the inhumane as organised crime is personified in the figures of cruel but charismatic capos. By contrast, *Gomorrah*'s multi-stranded narrative deliberately offers us no single (anti-)hero to tidily encapsulate a complex, far-reaching socio-economic system drenched in exploitation and violence or to part-redeem the latter through sheer force of personality. Films such as *Bugsy* (1991) or *Casino* (1995) beguile viewers with the equivocal idea of mob life as Faustian pact: sure, you sell your soul, but for a good stretch the terms and conditions seem good. *Gomorrah* depicts alternatively a culture where lives and morals are financially worthless but sacrificed anyway, often enthusiastically, by their owners. The film's world is awash with money ever changing hands but never staying in those that need or deserve it most. The Corleone myth presents organised crime as a peculiar species of intimate human bonding, however dysfunctional or perverted: in the final analysis, a *family*. *Gomorrah* despairingly portrays a contemporary Neapolitan culture in which essential bonds of kinship have become impossible to forge or sustain. Here, the closest ties of family and friendship are annihilated, not augmented, by the ubiquitous incursions of mafia culture. In *Gomorrah*'s world there is, to coin a phrase, nothing personal: only business.

This central idea, the breakdown of nuclear and extended family units and the disastrous obliteration of civil society that process portends, is carefully foregrounded by each of *Gomorrah*'s five central plot strands. First, aspirant kingpins Marco and Piselli roam their neighbourhood like family pets going feral, their next-of-kin never seen nor mentioned. Second, the wife and child of overworked tailor Pasquale, straining to bring an illicit, mob-funded haute couture contract in on time, are glimpsed but once in the film. Third, Don

Franco, the callous overseer of the local families' illegal disposal of astonishingly huge quantities of industrial waste shipped in from all over Italy and Europe, quite literally poisons the birthright of those forced to sell ancestral farmland at knock-down rates out of financial necessity. Fourth, despite his mother's best efforts, thirteen-year-old Toto traces his imprisoned father's descent into a life of drug trafficking and arbitrary executions. Finally, most of the homes visited by Don Ciro as he dispenses weekly monies in recognition of enduring loyalty to a particular mob family have either been broken (sons killed, fathers jailed) or will soon be so (families evicted by erstwhile criminal protectors, houses torched by rival gangs, mothers executed as internecine warfare spirals out of control).

Reflecting its depiction of a world in which the basic conditions for interpersonal relationships have been obliterated, *Gomorrah* represents the labyrinthine workings of an incredibly powerful, entrenched criminal-economic system as much as the private identities of and ties between those caught up in the machine's workings. The film's distinctive, virtuoso camera style creates a strikingly paradoxical sense of intimate engagement with yet simultaneous alienation from onscreen places and protagonists. Nearly every scene is shot hand-held and in long take. This creates the visceral sense of immediacy we might associate with a journalistic dispatch from a war zone (which is in many ways what *Gomorrah* is). Yet such formal choices also have the ability to distance viewers from what they see. They mitigate, for example, against the powerful, direct identification with character that so much classical narrative cinema forges, even when—as is so often the case in the gangster genre—we know that the Don whose identity and aspirations we temporarily don is clearly a monster. One can count the number of classically defined point-of-view shots in *Gomorrah* on one hand. The first one occurs when Toto is encased in a bullet-proof vest by a mobster about to shoot him as part of a grotesque ritual initiation into manhood, which comes only forty minutes or so into the movie. The remarkable closeness we feel to *Gomorrah*'s characters (even the most clearly sympathetic ones) is therefore of a very particular kind. Garrone's preference for ubiquitous, uncomfortably extreme facial close-up dictates that we nearly always witness protagonists' situations from (quite literally) right over their shoulders or under their noses. Yet we hardly ever see the same things directly through characters' eyes. We are thus right there and yet not quite there with them at one and the same time.

Moreover, the occasional unmediated glimpse afforded of Toto's world from his perspective (a privilege never afforded to the lead characters of *Gomorrah*'s four other main plot strands) is belatedly unveiled as a cruelly effective moral lesson. It serves ultimately to stress the necessary distance between ourselves and the film's world and its inhabitants, rather than, as one would normally expect of the point-of-view device, drawing us closer to these things. Unlike the initially innocent Toto, the central protagonists of other storylines—Pasquale, Don Ciro, Roberto, and Marco and Piselli—are all already imbricated, albeit to varying degrees, within the mafia system. All are aware to a greater or lesser extent of its absolute amorality. All are given some chance to reclaim their humanity through a mix of luck and personal courage. The fact that we see nothing directly from these mens' point-of-view reflects the fact that none of them makes his ultimate ethical choice until towards *Gomorrah*'s very end. The question of whether any or all move back towards the rest of us, by seeing the world once more as we see it and thus allowing us the chance to return the favour, is settled only at the last. By contrast, viewers can be allowed initial but illusory identification with Toto's point of view because youth dictates that his nascent humanity is still his only to lose. When he does relinquish it, sending a female adult friend to her death in order to remain a gang member, the severing of the direct emotional connection *Gomorrah* has briefly allowed us to make with him attains a truly savage impact. For all his intrinsic personal attractiveness and potential, it

latterly becomes clear that Toto's moral fate, unlike that of the other, older, ostensibly more compromised central characters, was in fact always already sealed. The predestined trajectory of his adult life (however long it lasts) entails that we can no longer see, identify with or understand the world as it exists through his eyes.

Elsewhere, Garrone's distinctive rejection of depth of focus, a choice closely related to his general privileging of a quasi-journalistic, hand-held, single take aesthetic, is also instrumental in advancing *Gomorrah*'s unsettling moral analysis. It's noticeable how often the focal length of the director's lens refuses to lengthen or shorten in any given scene. An initial, single point of visual reference is suspended in stark clarity while everything and everyone else around it remains stubbornly blurred; we wait in vain for the refocusing either within a continuous take or achieved through the cut to another shot that would characterise a more conventional shooting style. Usually, this device connotes the near-total extent to which ties between people have collapsed under the weight of the endemic fear and mistrust characterising mafia hegemony. In a scene where Pasquale berates his boss, Mr Enzo, for losing the trust of his factory workforce through exploitative business practices, the two men are sharply in focus in the extreme foreground while the blurred outlines of the larger group of people Pasquale refers to are dimly visible in the background. The imbalance, like the ethical injustice Pasquale complains of, is never rectified within the sequence. The classically unorthodox nature of such visual effects is amplified through sheer force of repetition across the film as a whole. They express powerfully the unenviable place nearly all characters within *Gomorrah* find themselves in, surrounded by, but utterly isolated from emotionally honest and fearless engagement with, their peers.

Such relatively detailed points about film form are worth making for two reasons. Granted, a large part of *Gomorrah*'s impact stems from our inability to dismiss the journalistic veracity of the events, dilemmas and misdeeds the film lays before us, no matter how much their lurid inhumanity makes us want to. Yet Matteo Garrone does not rely unduly on this advantage. His intelligent, accomplished filmmaking choices entail that the full human tragedy of Neapolitan gang culture is felt emotionally as well as recorded realistically. Moreover, to note *Gomorrah*'s careful avoidance of the classically lavish celluloid aestheticization of the mafia myth is not to pigeonhole the movie as a work that puritanically disavows the expressive pleasures and intellectual possibilities of cinematic style. As technically dazzling and formally considered as just about any generic predecessor you care to name, *Gomorrah* simultaneously rethinks the moral murk that characterises both the gangster film and our enduring love of it. This is so in ways most previous mafia movies have either proved incapable of or plain uninterested in.

The Other Boleyn Girl

Dir: Philippa Lowthorpe, BBC, UK, 2003
The Other Boleyn Girl

The Other Boleyn Girl

Dir. Justin Chadwick, US, 2008

A review by Llewella Burton, Leeds University, UK

A Review and Interview with Ruth Caleb

The current Tudor Revival arguably began with the success of *Shakespeare in Love* (Dir. John Madden, 1998) and *Elizabeth* (Dir. Shekhar Kapur, 1998) which introduced a revisionist female – or feminist – focus to the traditional pages of –'his'-tory. In more recent years audiences have had the opportunity to view Tudor history in a more chronological order through popular heritage drama based around Henry VIII's wives including: Philippa Gregory's bestselling novel *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2001) and its two subsequent adaptations; the BBC version *The Other Boleyn Girl* (Dir. Philippa Lowthorpe, 2003) and the Sony Pictures cinema release *The Other Boleyn Girl* (Dir. Justin Chadwick, 2008), *Henry VIII* (Dir. Pete Travis, 2003), *Elizabeth I* (Dir. Tom Hooper, 2005), *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (Dir. Shekhar Kapur, 2007) and *The Tudors* (Dir. Charles McDougall et al, 2007-). The Tudors, dead in historical terms, are certainly alive within contemporary popular culture, exemplified by the current Tudor Revival today. Historian Roy Strong believes that the Tudor Revival popularity stems from it being: "One of the few constant periods of history that is taught in schools and it is easily translatable into drama. It could be because it potentially mirrors our own current times" (Strong 2008).

Even Hever Castle, Anne Boleyn's childhood home, saw a rise in ticket sales in 2008, with the majority of visitors indicating that their reasons for visiting were an interest in the Tudors brought to their attention by recent televised dramas such as *The Other Boleyn Girl* and *The Tudors*. Today it would appear that people just can't get enough of Anne Boleyn or her Tudor counterparts. Seemingly she is just as mesmerising to us today as she was to Henry VIII when she captured his attention in 1527. I will focus my discussion upon two key adaptations in the current Tudor Revival, the BBC and Sony Picture versions of *The Other Boleyn Girl*.

Philippa Gregory's *The Other Boleyn Girl* is a cleverly crafted historical novel about the life and tragic death of Anne Boleyn, narrated in first person from Anne's lesser known sister Mary's perspective. Whilst debated amongst historians and critics as to whether the novel does the history it portrays justice, it has helped shape the current Tudor revival and brought a compelling period of history to the forefront of popular culture. Set against the well-versed backdrop of Tudor history, the novel covers a fifteen-year span where Gregory weaves a romantic tale of spicy sexual intrigue with a sisterly war of ambition. The novel received

mixed reviews from literary and academic sectors as some believed it to brilliantly portray the claustrophobia of the centre of the Tudor court:

> The Other Boleyn Girl has all the makings of a fantastic Tudor soap: a tale of ambition, betrayal, seduction, sibling rivalry, power, lust and sex. It cries out for rumpy-pumpy, bodices full of heaving bosoms, severed heads and hunky guys in tights. Think Jackie Collins meets David Starkey. (Landesman, 2008)

Others however saw it as an affront to the history of the Tudor age. Sue Arnhold wrote: "I suppose it's a good book, it's certainly full of period detail, though I have little stomach for characters whose eyes dance with suppressed merriment" (Arnhold, 2002).

Whilst it may not be historically accurate, Gregory's novel captured readers' imagination with phenomenal success. In its year of publication, it was awarded the Parker Romantic Novel of the Year, and its popularity has subsequently spawned a series of sequels including *The Queen's Fool* (2003), *The Virgin's Lover* (2004), *The Constant Princess* (2005), *The Boleyn Inheritance* (2006) and *The Other Queen* (2008). *The Other Boleyn Girl* was translated into various other media, such as audio book, television and film adaptations, which in turn placed the Tudors even more into the forefront of popular culture today.

The first adaptation from novel to screen was the BBC's ninety-minute television drama, *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2003). It was in effect an improvised chamber piece – filmed on a small scale at Berkley Castle, with a small design budget and an even smaller cast. Producer Ruth Caleb explained why Philippa Gregory's novel was chosen to be adapted even though it was seen to be historically inaccurate:

> I was interested in seeing whether you could do period the same way, whether you could improvise it and do it on a very, very low budget. I did it because I thought it was a cracking story, because I work in drama - not documentary - so I'm just interested in what I think is going to make a really strong drama accessible for an audience. (Caleb, 2008)

There are many interesting devices that have been adopted within the film, for example 'confessional' scenes direct to camera, clearly devised by the performers. This device is an economic way of enabling the writer to condense fifteen years of Tudor history into ninety minutes of drama. Through use of direct soliloquy the characters reveal to the audience the basics of the plot arcs forming throughout the piece. Such a device also acknowledges the performers ownership of the characters they are portraying. This use of confessional tactics, whilst of course referring to the notion of Catholic confession, could also have potentially been influenced by another cultural phenomenon of the early 2000's, the reality television show *Big Brother* (Endemol, 1999-).

Within the first 'Diary Room' moment, the viewer is encouraged to see Anne as little more than a giggling teenager who wants nothing more in life than to fall in love. In contrast Mary Boleyn appears pious, serious and motherly. This characterisation is generally considered by academic sources to be inaccurate and not how the actual women would have behaved. This scene is also interesting as it disputes Gregory's opinions on their birth dates. In the novel she cites Mary as being the younger sibling to Anne, and certainly within this televised version not only does Mary appear older in looks, she's portrayed as older and more mature. When asked about this Ruth Caleb stated: "When you cast for an improvisational drama you go for

someone who's going to bring that part alive and *can* improvise" (Caleb, 2008). This suggests to me that while the BBC was correct in displaying Mary Boleyn as the elder of the two sisters, this was coincidental since the actors were selected primarily to 'bring the part alive.' In my opinion, I find this rather disappointing, as this 'accident' displays more accuracy with regard to the actual birth dates than did the novel. This may be somewhat a blessing - it at least displays awareness from the filmmakers that they were not transforming an accurate document into dramatic form.

The choice of casting is itself important due to the production being produced on a low-budget and semi-improvised. In the BBC adaptation, Natascha McElhone is cast as Mary Boleyn, whilst the younger Jodhi May portrays Anne Boleyn. For me, it is May who stands out as the curious choice, as initially it may seem to viewers that this immature girl portrays her character incorrectly by stereotypical standards. However, in contemporary sources it is noted that Anne Boleyn, whilst being attractive, was no beauty, and as Caleb states, "the thing that the actor Jodhi May [Anne Boleyn] brought to the role is that whilst she's not a classic beauty there's something about her that is very sensual" (Caleb 2008). It is also important to note that May looks extremely similar to a portrait of the young Anne Boleyn, which can currently be viewed at Hever Castle. These elements make May an excellent casting choice. It should also be observed that whilst McElhone is older than May she is also seen to be the more classically beautiful of the two, also correct according to surviving contemporary sources.

The most notable scene comes when it is suggested that Anne Boleyn (May) and her brother George (Steven Mackintosh) have committed incest. Whilst the audience does not observe the act itself it is clearly insinuated that the characters went through with the sinful act signified by their closeness, seductive dress, and the subsequent scene where Anne's child is born prematurely and deformed. It is key to note that this scene does not appear in the novel, and Gregory only insinuates incest briefly in her writing, stating from Mary's point of view: "I guessed that Anne had taken him as her companion on her journey to the gates of hell to conceive this child for England" (Gregory, 2001: 452). The 'suggestion' scene is somewhat more alarming to view than that of the act, for here we see Mary Boleyn (McElhone) persuading her brother and sister to commit this act in order to save them. This is a rather extreme interpretation of the original novel, where the reader is informed that Anne gives birth to a stillborn, deformed child.

Direction should be noted, as the approach displays a quick and 'on-the-hoof' documentary style of filming including use of skewered angles, numerous close-up shots, night vision and time-lapse cinematography. Through these shots the director appears in my opinion to bring the Tudor era into the modern age – creating a parallel of history with today's culture through realism and thus making the plot appear more fast-paced and less composed than the original novel. A clever artistic devise, for this tale is based upon a novel concerned with human emotion rather than historical accuracy. These filming techniques emphasise the human interaction and melodrama of the piece, arguably making it more of a modern-day soap opera. This makes the film subjective and creates a loss of the wider political dimension, as in terms of the plot-arc the camera never goes into third person. This makes the adaptation somewhat more faithful to the source, as Gregory writes entirely from the first-person of Mary Boleyn. Previously the BBC was seen to film period drama in a much more conventional heritage style, displaying political machinations more than that of characterisation. *The Other Boleyn Girl*, I would argue, is all characterisation and displays no clear political comment whatsoever. Lowthorpe does not feel it necessary to include Cardinal

Wolsey, nor does it dwell upon the English reformation or Henry VIII's break from Rome and subsequent divorce from Catherine of Aragon. Caleb explains that she:

> Wanted to make it immediate and do a good love story - a romance - so that was what the focus was. When you're doing a sixty to ninety minutes of drama that has a very large canvas you really have to distil it and determine what your focus is going to be. (Caleb, 2008)

This considered, it seems to be that the aim of this production was to create a romantic drama, not a David Starkey-esque historical documentary.

The most recent adaptation of *The Other Boleyn Girl* exists in the form of the 2008 Sony Picture release, aired five years after the television adaptation. Essentially, whilst both the BBC and Sony Picture productions draw from the same fictional source, this is where the similarity ends. The television adaptation was produced on a low-production budget of £750, 000 and aired post-watershed for a specific adult audience, whereas the cinema version, involving a large budget of $35 million and featuring three high-profile Hollywood stars (Scarlett Johannson, Natalie Portman and Eric Bana), was purposefully designed for both the UK and US markets and to a broader audience. This is most apparent in the age certification; the BBC adaptation is a 15-certification whilst the Sony Picture film is 12a-certified.

The screenplay for the film was written by Peter Morgan and if writer Andrew Davis (who coincidentally worked upon BBC version of *The Other Boleyn Girl* as a script editor) can be said to give impetus for period drama then Peter Morgan is surely the contemporary heritage writer of today. Morgan's other monarchy films include *The Queen* (Dir. Stephen Frears, 2006), *The Last King of Scotland* (Dir, Kevin Macdonald, 2006), and the previous Tudor televised drama *Henry VIII*. In my opinion compared with these films, *The Other Boleyn Girl* falls short of his expected standard. It appears that the production values of *The Other Boleyn Girl* were designed to attract a wider audience and capture the essence of the Tudor period without actually documenting it correctly. For the purpose of obtaining a pubescent audience interest, the original content was toned down, and the film managed to create a completely different tale to the original plot. I would argue that they have used the publicity of the novel in order to gather audience interest without actually using the novel as the source text. Whilst it is a 12a film, it is certainly not accurate enough for pupils studying this period of history, nor is it entertaining enough for adults who would enjoy viewing the scandals and sexual intrigue of the Tudor Court. Here this is where the film fails, and no amount of budget used to create the piece can save it.

The casting choice is curious, with the two sisters being portrayed by Natalie Portman (Anne Boleyn) and Scarlett Johannson (Mary Boleyn). Historian David Starkey was seemingly irked by this 'popular' casting; criticising the choice to cast Americans as key historical British figures (Bamigboye, 2006). They have also been referred to in reviews as the "Paris and Nicky Hilton of the Tudor Court" (Dargis, 2008). In defence of the actors however, this was a piece intended to interest American as well as British audiences and both actresses portrayed the parts expected of them within the confines of the script. Portman, in my opinion, should certainly be praised for capturing her character with more historical accuracy than how Gregory wrote Anne Boleyn and whilst Johannson initially had reservations about the film concerning the melodramatic storyline, she portrayed her character as Gregory believed her to be, allegedly having no other source material to work from with regards to Mary Boleyn.

They should certainly be credited with attempting to fight out of the stereotypical iconography of their characters to portray them as people.

On the general filming of the production, it has been generalised by sources as an "oddly plotted and frantically paced pastiche" (Dargis, 2008). It has been suggested that it was shot in "a ravishing style of an M&S commercial" (Arendt, 2008). As previously mentioned, the BBC version was performed completely through improvisation, which allowed the filming to be much more intimate, and somewhat sporadic. Unlike the BBC adaptation, the film is more static and I believe that by deciding upon this rather safe, classical style, the narrative focus is on the 'romantic edge' (the two sisters) and such singular focus means that the film loses the atmosphere built upon by Gregory's novel that it should possess.

I will now analyse this film's answer to Gregory's theory on the incestuous relationship between Anne Boleyn and George Rochford. The only similarity between the BBC and Sony Pictures adaptations in this key scene is that we see George and Anne Boleyn together in their night clothes. Anne (Portman) has just miscarried a child and failed to inform the King (Bana) for fear of rebuke. Here we see a very different portrayal, where Anne Boleyn requests that her brother George (Jim Sturgess) commit incest with her in order to carry a child to term whilst the King remains in the belief that she is pregnant. Mary Boleyn (Johannson) plays a very different part in this version; she displays horror at the suggestion, as opposed to suggesting the act herself, which the BBC version does. In my opinion this scene certainly works better with the idea that Mary is innocent within such a court of treachery and deceit. The cinema version goes further than the BBC adaptation where Anne and George actually agree that to commit incest would be madness and clearly don't go through with the misdeed. Interestingly both these portrayals remain, in their own ways, faithful to the novel, however within the 12a certified film it is clear that Anne and her brother are innocent, whereas the 15 certified television drama is darker in the implication and goes further by insinuating incest.

So why have both the BBC and Sony Pictures decided to adapt a novel which is subjective at best and historically inaccurate at worst? Ultimately we can see with this novel that whilst it is extremely inaccurate with regards to historical sources, it is an enjoyable read for the general public who wish to read a distinctly feminised version of history. Arguably, Gregory can get away with these historical inaccuracies as there is still much debate among historians about these issues, meaning that Gregory can paint the shady, darker areas of inconclusive history with more colourful tones. In her essay "Fact and Fiction", she writes:

> Readers understand that the books are fiction: we cannot know what someone, dead five centuries ago, was thinking and feeling. But this style is a doorway to the imagined consciousness of the period and has been a joy for me, and for many millions of readers. (Gregory, 2008)

This is where she is correct, because whilst her novel is undisputedly inaccurate, it is rather a frivolous joy to read for those who just want a somewhat 'fluffy' romance. As Ruth Caleb explains about *The Other Boleyn Girl*, "it's fiction but it has its feet in history" (Caleb, 2008). I believe that the BBC adaptation, created economically as an improvised drama is the more successful at adapting Gregory's novel from the page to screen than the cinema release. The 2008 film which advertises the use of the novel as a key source does not appear to have been based upon the text from which it was adapted. Why they did not decide to use other, more accurate source material can only be due to the lucrative nature of literary adaptation in

movie production. Whether the audience expect to view an historical drama or not, it appears that this is what both of the adaptations have attempted to achieve: romance that has its feet in history. Regardless of both adaptations being billed as historical dramas, viewers are expected to know that all three of these contemporary entertainment pieces are merely projections of history and not accurate portrayals. I look forward to viewing a drama where, as Gregory states "the bare history alone gives an amazing and exciting story" (Gregory, 2008).

So what's next for the Tudor Revival? Will we be seeing historical drama glide smoothly into a similar Stuart Revival? Channel 4 has already pitched this idea recently, releasing *The Devils Whore* (Dir. Mark Munden, 2008) on to our television screens. Does this mean that this is the beginning of the end for the Tudors, or would Ruth Caleb be right in believing that we will be seeing more of the Tudors in the time to come? (Caleb, 2008) Whatever the outcome, it seems that history is the future for television drama at the very least, and we haven't seen the last of it yet.

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Llewella Burton: There has been a Tudor Revival over the past few years, with more of the general public becoming interested with this period in history. Why do you think this is?

Ruth Caleb: I suspect that one feeds the other; that once films or television about a particular period are aired then these create an interest. I don't know whether the BBC 2 series *The Tudors* is what pricked the imagination, but why pick that period in history? Maybe it's because it's quite accessible as there is a sort of romance about it. It's glamorous; there is simplicity to it. The King's in charge and does more or less what he wants – which includes people getting their heads chopped off, including his wife!

LB: The novel *The Other Boleyn Girl* itself was published in 2001, and the BBC adaptation was aired in 2003; why was it decided to adapt this novel two years later?

RC: I've known Philippa Gregory for years as I had worked with her on *Respectable Trade* [1998], another of her novels *The Little House* [1998] adapted for television drama. Meanwhile, I had been doing improvised dramas working with documentary makers making their first drama through improvisation, on subjects they cared passionately about. The first was *Last Resort* [2000], which has won awards at film festivals and was a very successful film… I was interested in seeing whether you could do period the same way, whether you could improvise it and do it on a very, very low budget.

I was looking for a suitable story which could do that, so you needed something which in effect was a chamber piece with very few characters and had a very intense plot. I didn't read the book at the time but I got the press release for the book and it seemed from that that it could have been what I was looking for: that it was high drama, very intense and very contained. So I then contacted Philippa and read the book, and extrapolated from the book the essence of it, which was the two sisters – and their relationship. I then approached a very talented documentary maker called Philippa Lowthorpe [director]. Having accessed the book she then did a distillation, where you break down scene by scene what the script is going to be. Then we got a writer Andrew Davies [*Little Dorrit, Brideshead Revisited*] as a mentor. It went into four weeks of improvisation, where the performers play around with scenes: what they could do with the plotting, what they couldn't do, and where they find the character and rehearse.

When we filmed it we decided that we would actually improvise on the day. So you have a scene which you would improvise for about twelve minutes, but when it was edited down it was two minutes. Everything was improvised. If you look at the final version carefully you can see that the actors have to think about what they say and how they express it when speaking to another actor in a suitable language. So therefore they don't respond immediately, there is always a pause when they think about what they are going to say and how they are going to deliver it. What had happened with earlier improvised dramas is those dramas had freshness about them for that very reason, it feels real/authentic. Also the actor creates the role, they have ownership of the role and it can give that performance a real dynamism.

LB: Given its post-watershed airing and subsequent 15-ceritifcation on DVD, do you see this film being used for educational purposes, for example GCSE history lessons?

RC: I hope not, because it's a romance. I think that Philippa [Gregory] would agree that it's a historical romance and that it's not a work of *100%* historical accuracy.

LB: It's widely debated amongst various sources that Philippa Gregory's novel is historically inaccurate, so why was it decided that the BBC would adapt this novel into film?

RC: I did it because I thought it was a cracking story, because I work in drama - not documentary - so I'm just interested in what I think is going to make a really strong drama accessible for an audience with a really powerful story. This fitted the bill because it is a story with heightened emotions – intense love, fear and hate. I never regarded it a piece of historical accuracy and I think that an audience will come to a drama like this knowing that they're not watching a documentary. *The Devil's Whore* [Channel 4, 2008] for example... is

very much billed as a work of fiction but has its feet in history: and I think that's pretty well what I'd say about *The Other Boleyn Girl*, that it's fiction but it has its feet in history.

LB: How do you feel that Philippa Gregory presents Anne Boleyn within the overall context of fact versus fiction? In the novel she's presented as being manipulative, particularly with regard to her sister Mary. She's cunning and quite cruel. Is this how you feel she's depicted in the novel?

RC: I don't think that Philippa [Gregory] would see that... She's a feminist writer who is interested in strong intelligent women and I think that that's how she would see it - Anne Boleyn as a strong intelligent woman at a time when women were in effect pawns used by families to obtain privilege and power and influence - so I think that within that system, that was how as an intelligent woman she operated.

LB: The BBC has retained some of Philippa Gregory's ideas, for example maintaining that Mary Boleyn is innocent and pious; while some of her proposals have been adapted, for example Mary Boleyn is younger than Anne Boleyn in the original novel but in the BBC adaptation she is older. Why have some devices been corrected whilst others kept?

RC: In doing it we saw it as a work of fiction, not a work of fact, and when you cast for an improvisational drama you go for someone who's going to bring that part alive and <u>can</u> improvise, so that's what we did. We went for the actresses we felt were really good. For example, the thing that the actor Jodhi May [Anne Boleyn] brought to the role is that whilst she's not a classic beauty but there's something about her that is very sensual – also an intelligence and an energy, so you can understand what the attraction was for Henry VIII.

LB: It could be said that there's a loss of the wider political dimension through the decision to focus solely on the two sisters through improvisation – for example The Reformation is scarcely mentioned and Cardinal Wolsey is non-existent – why was this subjective style decided upon?

RC: I was looking for a chamber piece. I was looking for a drama within which I could prove that you could do a historical drama through improvisation and get that immediacy so that an audience could connect with the kings and queens of a former age... as people, as one of us. So that's really what I wanted to get at. I wanted to make it immediate and do a good love story - a romance - so that was what the focus was. When you're doing a sixty to ninety minutes of drama that has a very large canvas you really have to distil it and determine what your focus is going to be. What I mean by this is that when producers choose to do Henry VIII, you select from a broad historical canvas where you want the emphasis and focus to be. We could have done a completely different story - for example from the point of view of Thomas Cromwell or Cardinal Wolsey looking at the religious side - but we decided to go for the romance. *The Tudors* take on Anne Boleyn and Henry VIII is different from ours.

LB: This BBC adaptation was very economical; where were these funds distributed in order to capture the essence of the Tudor period?

RC: It was filmed at Berkley Castle and the design budget was tiny but because we were in the castle we made use of the tapestries, so it doesn't look too low budget. If you look hard you can see that the ladies only change their costumes twice; the same with Henry VIII but we get away with it because you can use capes, hats and jewellery - so it was very small

scale, very small cast, but a fantastic location. Because it was filmed in a castle of the period it has a natural look and scale... I guess the 2008 cinema version must have cost forty to fifty million pounds so it's a huge difference in production and scale.

LB: Why did the BBC choose to do a 90 minute film adaptation as opposed to a television series? Aren't there major editorial problems here with regard to compressing 15 years of intense history into 90 minutes?

RC: I suppose its' horses for courses. I could have proposed it as a serial but I wanted to do it as an improvisation. You couldn't do a series through improvisation, it simply wouldn't work. The point of doing this is because it was very small scale and contained. Someone else could have proposed doing a series of that period but it would have been costly to make and it's already been done... So no matter what you're doing, you have to adjust to the practicalities. For example I've just produced *Walter's War* [2008] and we had to fit it into a sixty-minute slot because that was what was available on BBC4. It's a substantial canvas of history – the 1st World War, etc, so we had to compress Walter Tull's story into that time frame - 60". You're often making those sorts of judgements, you often have to compress a substantial canvas and distil the essence into a shorter time.

LB: What did you think of the recent US television series *The Tudors* that has been aired on BBC 2?

RC: Once you hook into the spirit of it, it's very enjoyable: as long as you don't take it as history and just take it as fiction! I thought our Henry, Jared Harris, was very good, he really captured the spirit of Henry VIII for me better than Jonathan Rhys Meyers or Eric Bana. He was as I imagined.

LB: How would you compare your own BBC adaptation with the 2008 film version of *The Other Boleyn Girl?*

RC: I think it's like comparing an apple and a banana because they were for completely different audiences. Ours was for BBC2 with a very distinct focus whereas the film was for a wider market, for the world including the US, so the intention was to make it substantial and commercial. Thus you go for the big stars and you go for a script that is at its most accessible. What I thought was particularly interesting - and what they captured which we probably didn't - was that the girls looked very young. They were very young and there was something about that 'childishness' which I think worked very well in the film. What I thought was interesting in ours as opposed to the film - and again it's to do with audiences! – is that ours is much sexier and theirs is rather devoid of sexuality.

LB: Are you aware of how Philippa Gregory felt about your production once it had been aired?

RC: She loved it I think and was very, very supportive of it.

LB: In *The Guardian*, Alex Von Tunzelmann reviews the 2008 UK/US cinema version of *The Other Boleyn Girl* as: 'A Tudor romp that is neither educational nor entertaining... With wooden performances, clumsy dialogue, and a total disregard for the facts and feel of the Tudor age, *The Other Boleyn Girl* is basically an extended episode of *Hollyoaks* in fancy dress.' Do you agree with this?

RC: [Laughs] No, I think that's a bit harsh. Nobody ever goes out to make a bad film. I think that the intention of the film was that it was an enjoyable period romp. I think that they never set out to make it historically accurate. It's interesting that they weren't evidently allowed to release a DVD of ours whilst the film was being produced and aired, as I presume they felt it could be a spoiler.

LB: In light of the recent Tudor Revival do you foresee a natural progression onto the 'Stuart Revival', for example Channel 4's current Civil War drama, *The Devil's Whore*?

RC: The BBC has already done Charles II a couple of years ago [*Charles II: The Power and the Passion*, 2003]. I think that a lot of it depends upon what writers want to do as well. If a writer brings a very interesting concept about a particular time then you go with it, so I suspect that we may have a bit more Tudor left in the world of television drama. I suspect we haven't seen the end of it yet.

LB: During your career you've produced both contemporary and period dramas, including *Bullet Boy* (2004), *Shooting Dogs* (2005), *Born Equal* (2006) and *Walter's War* (2008) amongst many others. What are your future plans?

RC: Well, I've got another drama which I think will be transmitted in January called '*A Short Stay in Switzerland*' by the Irish playwright Frank McGuinness, with Julie Walters. It's the true story about a woman called Dr Anne Taylor who had a terminal illness and when she was given the diagnosis of PSP by a doctor, knew what was going to happen and she wanted to commit suicide. She ended up going to Switzerland. That's the immediate one, and then I've got dramas that I'm developing but you're never sure which ones are going to be aired.

Blindness

Dir: Fernando Meirelles, Brazil / Japan / Canada, 2008

A review by Sofia Sampaio, CRIA, ISCTE-IUL/FCT, Lisbon

The announcement, in 2006, that Fernando Meirelles was going to direct the film adaptation of *Blindness*, a novel by the Portuguese author and Nobel Laureate José Saramago, was received with much anticipation. The combination of the internationally-acclaimed Brazilian director and a star-studded cast (with Julianne Moore and Mark Ruffalo in the lead roles) promised to do justice to the writer and his best-selling novel. Yet, this announcement also caused some apprehension, mostly to do with issues of fidelity. How would Saramago's portrayal of blindness – a strange, white blindness that we, as readers, come to witness and experience from within, through the author's words – come off when transposed to the visual medium? Would the film retain the allegorical thrust of the novel (established by the book's original title, *Essay on Blindness*, as well as its epitaph: 'If you can look, see; if you can see, take notice') or would that dimension be dissipated and lost? Finally, would the novel's political content survive the film's overriding commercial interests, despite claims to the contrary on the part of the independent producers?

Fidelity to the 'source' is, no doubt, a marginal (if not altogether irrelevant) criterion when reviewing a film: adaptations are autonomous works, especially if we consider that most of the people who watch them have never read the book, nor ever will. Yet, considering that the novel and its literary 'value' have been marshalled to promote the film and that Meirelles himself expressed anxiety over Saramago's opinion in his blog (e.g. Meirelles, 2007: Post 2), I would like to stress this particular aspect. What interests me are not so much the narrative and technical choices made by the authors of the script (namely, scriptwriter Don McKellar and producer Niv Fichman) and, later, the director, as the overall effect of these choices when taken together with the visual medium. In other words, what interests me is what happens during the adaptation process, as we move away from the novel's largely metaphorical plane (in spite of its realistic detail) to the kind of visual 'realism' Meirelles is bound to by cinematic codes, in this case, Hollywood-derived ones.

Briefly, *Blindness* (2008) tells the story of a mysterious surge of blindness that starts by 'infecting' the driver of a car in a busy avenue, then a series of people associated to him (such as his doctor and the patients he meets in the waiting room), to rapidly establish itself as a general epidemic. Fearing contagion, the government orders the immediate confinement of the 'diseased' in a high-security building and former mental asylum. The blind soon find themselves on their own, with no outside assistance except dwindling food supplies, having to endure deteriorating living conditions (especially as far as hygiene is concerned) and, eventually, insecurity and physical abuse, as a group of the interned takes the lead and terrorises the others. In the midst of the squalor there is, however, a ray of hope – one of the characters (the doctor's wife) has kept hidden the fact that she still can see. This enables her to strike back at the bullies and kill their leader, initiating a confrontation that culminates in the destruction, by fire, of the asylum. Forced by the flames to challenge the boundaries of

their confinement, the prisoners learn that the guards are gone and that everyone is free to leave, but also that there no longer is an 'outside world' for the whole population has by now lost their sight. At this point, the story confirms the far-reaching social consequences of the 'white sickness' (the English translation for 'mal-branco' or 'white-evil'), which the general conditions of the asylum, a microcosm of the 'real' world, had foreshadowed. The narrator relates the difficulties encountered by the main characters as they struggle to survive in a completely run-down world; the scale of the disaster reaches catastrophic dimensions and the tone of the narrative becomes apocalyptic.

On the whole, the film follows the novel's storyline. Most secondary characters and minor narrative strands are omitted (most likely for reasons of plot concision), but the changes I wish to focus upon are those to do with the visualisation process. That Meirelles had to come up with images to express what Saramago could suggest by words gives an idea of the nature and extent of these changes. In order to suggest the blindness of the characters, Meirelles and his team resorted to a wealth of techniques and strategies – such as white filters and extreme lighting, abrupt camera movement, shifty close-ups and image discontinuity (some of the images are out of focus and loosely framed, or even partly obstructed) – all of which establish the characters' disorientation and, according to the director, convey the kind of 'space deconstruction' normally associated with lack of sight (Meirelles, 2007: Post 5). Furthermore, the film had to rely (as the novel never had) on the point of view of the doctor's wife (Julianne Moore), the only character who can see. It is on this fragile equilibrium between sight (provided mostly by the 'subjective' focus on the doctor's wife and the camera's 'objective' shots) and blindness (or the constructed sense of it) that Meirelles's film builds its style and much of its 'vision.'

The foregrounding of the doctor's wife (through her point of view) is crucial to the film's 'feminist' agenda – a mainstream, politically-correct, liberal kind of feminism. The novel contains many hints at and reflections on the position of subordination of women in marriage and society. Yet, the film sidesteps Saramago's slightly puritanical and old-fashioned treatment of this subject – which is more inclined to stress the common humanity of men and women than their differences [1] – to focus on the gender-specific travails that afflict the doctor's wife. Indeed, despite this character's active role in the film, which suggests a certain heroic voluntarism, the doctor's wife takes the novel's generic designation to the letter to become first and foremost a *wife*. She literally sacrifices herself for her husband, enduring not only the physical and psychological hardships that beset him (and everyone around her), but also the rapid deterioration of her marriage, which culminates in the ironical prerogative of her being the only one capable of *seeing* her husband's adultery. In a scene that lacks Saramago's subtlety and non-conventional streak, the doctor's adultery is connected with irrepressible 'animal' instincts mixed with resentment at his wife's overprotection, as the scene sequence (the couple's quarrel immediately precedes the illicit sexual encounter) and space unity (both scenes take place in the canteen) establish. Hence, though we are made to identify with the doctor's wife (her sight is largely also *our* sight) and to sympathise with her pain as a cheated woman, we are also invited to understand and pardon her distressed, weak husband. The limits of the film's engagement with feminism, however, come through in the heated discussion that takes place at ward one, following ward three's demand to trade food for women. All arguments seem to boil down to a matter of a woman's right to decide about her body, particularly if she is married. Two positions emerge: a liberal position, eloquently spelled out by the doctor, and a conservative one, espoused by the first blind man, who tries to prevent his wife from joining the group of 'volunteer' women. Neither position, significantly enough, offers any resistance to the rogues' obscene demand.

Although it is, undoubtedly, the story's climactic moment, the scene of collective rape fails to achieve the full range of emotional impact we experience in the written version. This may be due to the film's over-stylised and sanitised form, but also to its concession to commercial mores – as the director reports, the scene's violence had to be toned down in response to a test screening in Toronto, which disturbed a considerable number of the women in the audience (Meirelles, 2008: Post 15). The final result is telling of the film's compromised vision: if the novel conjures up, through words, a powerful image of the rape, the film forgoes its visual prerogatives, relying mostly on aural and verbal elements (the assailants' words of abuse and the women's cries) to convey the scene's violence.

Clearly, the film's most important decision, with far-reaching visual and thematic consequences (not least, its updated mainstream feminism), was the decision to bring the story to our times, in a process that entailed, first and foremost, the actualisation of the novel's unnamed urban setting (in which echoes of the city of Lisbon are nevertheless still audible) into a modern, cosmopolitan global city. One of Saramago's conditions for selling the rights of the film had been that it made no references to a specific location, so the spirit of the allegory would be respected. The requirements of an unmarked, neutral setting were apparently fulfilled in the cities of Toronto, São Paulo and Montevideo – Meirelles refers to the first scene, shot in São Paulo, as taking place in 'a busy street in some city in the world' (Meirelles, 2007: Post 11, my translation). Yet, in his diary, he also reports the difficulties in finding in São Paulo, 'two blocks that could be made over into a street of sophisticated commerce' (Meirelles, 2007: Post 7, my translation). Indeed, what we get on the screen – through the snapshots of an urban landscape of glazed skyscrapers, wide viaducts and recognisable global brands (such as C & A, one of the film's main sponsors) – is a city that, notwithstanding its supra-national/transnational credentials, is no less concrete and history-bound. What we get, in other words, despite the apparent absence of local features, is a contemporary post-industrial, late-capitalist 'global' city that, to be sure, has become a rather common scenario in different parts of the world.

A similar effect is produced by the multicultural casting. In spite of putting at risk the audience's empathy with the characters (Meirelles, 2008: Post 15), Meirelles refrains from naming the characters, keeping to the novel's generic, descriptive labels, such as 'the driver', 'the doctor' and 'the doctor's wife.' However, as if correcting Saramago's 'blind' universalism, all the main characters are played by actors of various nationalities, namely: American (the doctor and his wife); Japanese (Yusuke Iseya as the 'first blind man' and Yoshino Kimura as his wife); Brazilian (Alice Braga as the 'woman with the dark glasses') and Mexican (Gael García Bernal as the 'king of ward three'). With the casting of Danny Glover as the 'man with the black eye patch,' the film similarly addresses the novel's 'colour-blindness': race is introduced as a topic in some of the scenes, adding a new dimension to the romance between the 'woman with the dark glasses' and the 'man with the black eye patch.'

These and other visual choices (in a context of adherence to realist visual codes) ultimately run counter to the film's commitment to the universal. With the shift to the (visual) concrete, the allegory is filled in with specific content. More importantly perhaps, the universal (an abstraction) gives way to the *global* (a tangible reality). The result is far from satisfactory. The global canvas is propitious to the recycling of cultural stereotypes that encapsulate the world's North-South (or West-East) inequalities – a good example is Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Babel* (2006), a massive co-production with global ambitions, in which Gael García Bernal's part comes too close to that of the stereotypical Mexican 'bad-ass hombre'. And so does his role in *Blindness* as the lustful, immoral ringleader, who

distractedly (and effeminately?) polishes his nails while collecting his criminal levy. In fact, a closer look at the casting – whose representative quality is boosted by the film's overt allegorical pretensions – reveals a 'global order' in which the heroes are American (one of them with the exclusive ability to see and lead the others), the villain is Mexican, and (in a last treat!) the prostitute (the 'woman with the dark glasses') is Brazilian. That the argument over the women's 'right' to decide on their bodies should oppose an American liberal (the doctor) to a traditional-minded Japanese husband (the first blind man) reinforces the ideological dangers of this kind of multicultural framing. In the end, the conflict that pits ward one against ward three suggests (in gross caricatural lines) the conflict between 'first world' liberal-democracy – implemented in ward one under the doctor and his wife's 'supervision' (pun intended) – and 'third world' despotism, as exerted by the 'cartel' of criminals and self-anointed 'king' of ward three.

The film's stress on the global is conveyed in other ways, namely, by drawing on the conventions of the Hollywood disaster movie. Indeed, the shots of spectacular plane and bus crashes and traffic-empty roads are typical of the genre. As Susan Sontag once argued, one of the main motifs of the disaster movie is the international scientific convention and its characteristic set, the conference room (Sontag 2004: 40; 46). This motif is certainly present in *Blindness*: in an early scene, the story's most powerful politician, the Health Minister, played by Sandra Oh, an Asian-Canadian actress famous for her role in the internationally successful TV series *Grey's Anatomy* (2005 -), presides a UN-like assembly of medical specialists, expected to yield the solution to the global pandemic. Nevertheless, if in the fifties disaster movie (the subject of Sontag's article) the 'UN fantasy' denoted a 'fantasy of united warfare' (Sontag 2004: 45), in which the international, multi-ethnic assembly stood for the planet's united resistance against the alien invasion, now, in the absence of this outer space perspective, the motif of the conference is more likely to suggest a regime of global governance, one, furthermore, that sees liberal-democracy emerge victorious from a globalization process that has apparently run its course.

This brings us to the issue of the film's politics. Meirelles has described the novel as a 'post-modern story,' by which he means one that is both open-ended and susceptible to a plurality of interpretations (Meirelles, 2007: Post 6). The film no doubt favours fragmentation (especially in its cinematography), but its political vision is tendentiously conservative (as the film's compromised feminism suggests). The novel's apocalyptic material, it should be noted, is congenial to conservative readings. Saramago's terrifying story can easily read as a parable on human nature, according to which human relations under extreme physical and psychological pressure tend to regress to some kind of primitive/pre-civilisation stage. It can also read as a political parable, a study of how power corrupts people, overriding humanitarian principles, as illustrated by the government's (mis)handling of the infected or by the scuffle for power in which the blind become themselves involved. Themes like these – 'human nature,' 'power corrupts people'; the collapse of law and order breeds social anarchy (which seems to characterise the new 'republic of the blind') – are, of course, conservative favourites which have come to attain wide currency and which are likely to occlude Saramago's more nuanced treatment of these elements, grounded as they are in a very different politics.

Indeed, Saramago has been, since 1969, a member of the Portuguese Communist Party and the novel's overall darkness cannot cancel out the power of its central image: that of a community of equals which emerges precisely when everything seems to be going 'to the dogs' (a metaphor the film makes literal in its profuse images of dogs feeding on human

corpses). One of the positive consequences of this generalised spate of blindness is the fact that it has an equalising effect: in a world in which the norm is to be able to see, people tend not to see what ought to be seen (Saramago has clearly in mind normalised social injustice); by contrast, in a world in which everyone has suddenly gone blind, people also cease to see *the things that prevented them from seeing*. Not surprisingly, a direct result of blindness, which the novel explores with interest, is the effective abolition of private property when the blind, unable to find their way home, find themselves forced to roam in groups from house to house in search of food and clothes. Unlike the film, which seems to relish the images of people stealing from each other and fighting for individual survival, the novel tempers more gruesome details (such as people eating raw meat, which Meirelles abstains from showing) with closer attention given to the small acts of solidarity and mutual assistance that emerge among the desperate. As in his other apocalyptical novel, *The Stone Raft* (clumsily adapted to the screen by George Sluizer in 2002 as a Spanish/Portuguese/Dutch co-production), which had at its centre a group of men and women trying to cope with an impending catastrophe, Saramago's hero tends to be a collective hero. Hence, more important than the fact that the doctor's wife has retained her sight, which in the film endows her with a heroic status, is the fact that she can act as an inspiration for (and a kind of vanguard to) her companions, on whom her own survival depends. The film's emphasis on *physical* blindness and its immediate, material and socially disruptive consequences is, on the contrary, achieved at the expense of the allegory's critical edge, which targets the people who *can* but *fail* to see, rather than the people who, for reasons beyond their control, are visually impaired. From this perspective, the condemnation of the film by some American organisations, such as the National Federation of the Blind (2008), though far from justified, is understandable, as the film's realism and dominant logic of representation (which contemplates gender, race and cultural diversity) does compromise its effective and rather negative depiction of the blind. In fact, the novel offers a more sympathetic account of this condition, dwelling on the main characters' awakening to other senses and realities as they traverse their blindness, and the half-blindness of the 'man with the black eye patch' lends itself particularly well to the exploration of the allegory's many-sided complexities. Adopting a position that might be described as materialist (or even Marxist), the novel allows for the possibility that out of the new material conditions a different kind of society might be allowed to arise. It is this possibility (and hope) that the small group at the centre of the narrative ultimately personifies.

Needless to say, the film contains very little of this possibility. In keeping with his first feature film, *City of God* (2002), which took the international film scene by storm with its Tarantino-like depiction of violence in a Brazilian slum or *favela*, Meirelles fixes his attention in the hopeless and claustrophobic scenes set in the asylum, which resembles his *favela* in more than one ways. One of the film's innovations is the replacement of the loudspeakers with Orwellian 'telescreens', introduced with self-ironical reflexivity by the doctor's remark: 'It's a video. It's scary. Makes you question what kind of an idiot would play a video in a quarantine for the blind'. Meirelles, however, is no idiot. The televised 'Big Brother'-like figure is clearly meant to pick up and foreground the novel's dystopian (and anti-totalitarian) vein, which the words uttered by a prison guard prior to shooting a helpless detainee ('stay in the line, little man, stay in the line') also reinforce. This aim may be attained, but only in a banal kind of way. The fact that it needs to draw on second-hand popular culture 'props' (such as the disaster movie and the dystopian political thriller) to convey the horror that Saramago was able to invoke in a self-sufficient metaphor is, no doubt, an index of the film's serious limitations.

The same can be said of hope, which fails to rise above the rather banal association with the doctor's wife – whose sighted exceptionality grants her a heroic status that recalls Julianne Moore's role in *Children of Men* (2006) – or the even more banal thematic of lack of communication within couples. The last scene, in which the first blind man regains his sight, is devoid of any gravitas. In fact, more difficult than understand the sudden appearance of the epidemic is probably to understand why people suddenly recuperate their sight. Meirelles' film opts for the easiest (and tritest) solution, which connects this moment to the reconciliation of the two estranged couples and the slightly awkward intimacy that finally blossoms between the 'woman with the dark glasses' and the 'man with the black eye patch'. Yet, the scene lacks any sense of epiphany. Apart from the romantic solution, the problem is, once again, to do with the visualisation process, more specifically, with the fact that the 'cure' takes place in a context of comfortable (upper) middle-class domesticity that is taken as emblematic of 'civilisation'. The film thus comes full circle, retrieving the kind of life exhibited in the opening scenes in props and visual cues such as the first blind man's designer house (which impresses us as much as the man who steals his car), his classy, stylish wife (a financial advisor) and the doctor's own modern and cosy home. The latter, in particular, acquires a mythical dimension: initially presented as a domestic idyll, where a devoted wife serves home-made tiramisu to a tired working husband, it ends up becoming synonymous with civilisation's final retreat from 'outside' barbarism. If Saramago's text endows the white 'blindness' with deep social overtones – the 'disease' is meant to subvert and call into question society's apparent 'normality'– what seems to be ultimately at risk and worth saving in the film is, precisely, such normality: the comfortable, well-to-do life of a specific class (one, furthermore, with no qualms about passing itself off as 'humanity').

To conclude, Meirelles' film is not only a different version of a novel, but a whole different story. The reason for this is not so much lack of fidelity – the last scene, for instance, translates into images with almost literal precision the novel's last words – as the film's failure to meet the challenges the adaptation *of this particular story* to a *visual* medium necessarily posed. Unable to resist the allures of a big international production, Meirelles' film falls captive to the industry's constraints and visual conventions. In the end, it is the contemporary sets, the multicultural casting (which allows for a certain multilingualism, with some scenes spoken in Japanese), the aesthetic choices, the almost-pastiche motifs borrowed from popular genres (such as the disaster movie) that guide our way through the film, rather than what ought to be the story's really intriguing question, namely: what this blindness is all about, what it signifies. But the most disturbing of the film's visual transformations is its reliance on an affluent and trendy middle-class lifestyle to construct the story's allegedly neutral backdrop. Such an 'upgrade' may reflect the need to portray realistically the contemporary life of the characters (all middle-class by current standards), yet, it also undermines the story's subversive impetus, as Saramago's emerging community of equals is ultimately cut down to the dismal shape of a *gated community*. At the end of the film, the blind may be able to see again, but – to take up Saramago's epigraph – nothing suggests that they are now any more able to 'take notice' of the world around them. The same could, sadly, be said of Meirelles' adaptation, another banal transnational film which fails to see, let alone take notice of, the blatant local, national and cross-national contradictions that shape the so-called 'global' condition of today's world.

Notes

[1] See, for instance, the following passage towards the end of the novel, in which the doctor's wife looks at her naked guests and views them as 'simple sexless contours'. The full

quote reads: 'A mulher do médico sentiu frio, lembrou-se dos outros, ali, no meio da sala, nus, à espera não saberiam de quê. Entrou. Tinham-se tornado em *simples contornos sem sexo*, manchas imprecisas, sombras a perderem-se nas sombras.' (Saramago, 1995: 260, my italics).

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Yemeketyiz

Dir: Show TV, Show TV, Turkey, 2007 -

A review by Laurence Raw, Baskent University, Turkey

Come Dine With Me (2005 -), the Channel 4 programme, has proved a notable ratings success – so much so that the format has been exported to several countries, including Germany, Hungary, Greece, Spain and Turkey – where it occupies a large slice of prime-time programming on the private channel Show TV with the title *Yemeketyiz*. The format is simple enough: five amateur chefs compete against one another, hosting a dinner party for the other contestants. We watch them buying and cooking the food, and then presenting it. The other contestants comment on what they eat – usually in filmed inserts – and at the end of the programme give a mark out of ten. The programme's attraction consists not so much in watching the food being prepared or eaten, but rather discovering how the ritual of preparing an evening meal reveals prevailing attitudes towards nation, gender and class.

Unlike the British version – which consists of weekly episodes lasting half an hour – *Yemekteyiz* is broadcast every weekday in two segments. The first (broadcast from 5.30 – 8.00 p.m.) shows each contestant shopping for food, and commenting on what they will cook later on in the evening. The second (broadcast either from 8.00 – 10.00 p.m. or 10.00 – 12.00 p.m. depending on the day) shows the meal being eaten. On the week I watched it, all five contestants lived in the Turkish community in northern Cyprus; three of them had lived there all their lives, one had returned there after spending several years in London, while the fifth was a British national (Deborah) married to a Turkish Cypriot. As the week unfolded, it became evident that the meal became an excuse for a show of nationalism. Turkey prides itself on its food – a recent tourist guide explains that the people "enjoy [it] so thoroughly that they have even composed poetry and ballads in its honor […] eating is part of an overall sense of community" (Kneib, 2004: 91). This automatically placed Deborah at a disadvantage – as a foreigner she was believed to lack sufficient culinary skill to help perpetuate this "overall sense of community." The other four contestants were particularly cruel in their observations; one accused her of preparing a pancake as part of her evening meal as she was "physically incapable" of cooking Turkish food. By contrast Güller – one of the Turkish Cypriot contestants – received due congratulation for her dish of köfte (meatballs), which according to one of her fellow-contestants embodied "the true spirit of Turkey." Such comments help to explain *Yemekteyiz*'s popularity with local audiences: the programme reinforces their sense of national unity during a period of economic crisis. Deborah's presence reinforced this notion, proving beyond doubt that no one can cook like the Turks.

Although Turks (and Turkish Cypriots) have made significant advances in terms of gender equality (Kemal Atatürk was one of the first leaders in the region to give women the vote), some attitudes remain difficult to shift – particularly in the kitchen. Women are believed to possess superior culinary skills, on account of having to provide at least one square meal a day for their families. Ready meals have still not yet penetrated Turkish domestic life: meals are still prepared from scratch. *Yemekteyiz* emphasizes the importance of this by showing the female contestants taking care over their shopping, ensuring that each ingredient is right so

that they can create tasty dishes. While preparing the food, they take meticulous care to season it properly; the men, on the other hand, throw salt, pepper and other herbs into their dishes and hope for the best. These gendered attitudes play a significant part in the contestants' evaluation of one another's food: if a man produces a good meal, it is considered something unusual; women, on the other hand, are expected to get it right every time.

At the same time *Yemekteyiz* shows the extent to which social attitudes have changed amongst the Turkish people over the past three decades. Since the early 1980, when the late President Turgut Őzal introduced a series of measures designed to promote private enterprise and reduce state control (using a Thatcherite model), a new, gentrified class has emerged that according to the sociologist Altan İlkücan differentiates itself from "not only [the] old middle class, lower- and upper classes, but also other fractions of the new middle class" (2004: 167). They believe this is evident through their television viewing habits (İlkücan's research discovered that they prefer reality-shows to dramas and/or news programmes), as well as "conspicuous consumption patterns shaped by materialist values, as well as an urge to stay away from the 'real' social diversity within […] society" (167). Programmes like *Yemeketyiz* are designed to appeal to such viewers: the camera focuses lovingly on the interior of the contestants' apartments with their designer fitted kitchens and living-cum-dining rooms stuffed with heavy Ottoman reproduction furniture. While evaluating one another's culinary skills, the contestants pass judgment on their surroundings, from the light-fittings to the wall-units, the tablecloths and the cutlery. Whoever wins the competition at the end of the week is not just the best cook; they have also created the best lifestyle suitable for public display.

This aspect of *Yemekteyiz* creates an interesting contradiction which is very culture-specific. On the one hand viewers understand how evening meals forge a sense of community, with the contestants sitting round a dining-table. On the other hand the programme celebrates individualism, as each contestant puts on a performance in their apartments for the benefit of viewers and fellow-contestants alike. In an attempt to resolve this, each episode ends with the contestants bringing in professional musicians who play a variety of Turkish pop and folk-tunes. As they perform, all five contestants sing, dance or clap in time to the music. This segment of the programme reinforces the idea of continuity-within-change – even if social attitudes have drastically altered (particularly in an urban context), Turks have not forgotten their traditions. İlkücan remarks that the urban gentry's identity "is constructed […] on the appreciation of the historical fabric of the [country's] core," as well as a belief in "consumption as a strategy to acquire status, and cultural capital" (2004, 170). *Yemekteyiz* reaffirms both notions.

At one level, *Yemekteyiz* demonstrates Turkey's success story over the last three decades (which encompasses the Turks in Cyprus) in promoting social mobility. Anyone can achieve the kind of lifestyles enjoyed by the contestants if they are prepared to work hard. At a deeper level, however, the programme addresses the anxieties arising from social change, particularly in terms of nationality and gender identity. What does it mean to be Turkish in an increasingly pluralistic society? And is it important to redefine popular notions of masculinity and femininity? *Yemekteyiz* suggests that such questions can be answered by appealing to what M.Başkın Yenicioğlu describes as "re-traditional communal relationships through […] activities like organizing dinners" (2005, 162). *Yemeteyiz* creates a microcosm of life in contemporary Turkey (and the northern part of Cyprus), wherein conservative values retain their importance for an increasingly mobile population. It's not just a lifestyle programme; it tells viewers something about themselves. No wonder the executives at Show TV want to show it so often and at such length every weekday evening.

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