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I AM: Afia, Megha, Abhimanyu and Omar

Dir: Onir, India, 2011

A Review by Rohit K Dasgupta, University of the Arts, London

Indian films outside the rubric of 'Popular Indian Cinema' are little seen or heard of abroad. Some are celebrated at film festivals but few are shown in mainstream theatres. Onir's entry into Bollywood, in 2005, with *My brother Nikhil*, heralded a new beginning, being the first mainstream film dealing with queer identity and HIV issues in a sensitive manner.

His latest film *I Am*, a portmanteau film looks at issues around child sexual abuse, Queer Rights, artificial insemination and racial tensions in Kashmir through four interconnected short films. The film rejects the generic conventions and aesthetics of Bombay Cinema instead creating something new. From the very beginning, the film works on a narrative of loss. The first story *Afia*, shot in Kolkata, looks at and critiques the idea of motherhood. It is a reminder of the discriminatory structure within Indian society and problematises the very categories which society has thrust upon the creation of the 'ideal Indian woman'. Nandita Das plays Afia, a woman who has been rejected by her lover and thinks the only way she can be complete is to embrace motherhood. She wants to do this without having to depend on a man, and instead decides to conceive a child through artificial insemination. What follows is a path of self-discovery, and ownership of her own body. In one particular interview Onir says, 'In our society, motherhood is made out to be the most fulfilling experience for a woman but if a single woman wants to have a child, suddenly, there is judgment and criticism. A woman's body is her own, as are her choices or should be but things are not as simple.' (Moudgil, 2011)

Abhimanyu charts the story of a young boy who is sexually abused by his stepfather. The story is based on an article that Onir read about Harish Iyer and Ganesh Nallari from Bombay and their harrowing experience as children. Sanjay Suri plays Abhimanyu in this film. Suri who is also the producer of the film has possibly delivered one of the finest performances of his career. What is unique about the treatment of this strand of the story is its complete rejection and de-pathologisation of the issue. By stark contrast to the rest of the film, Onir uses subtle suggestive imagery especially in the scenes where Abhimanyu is seen as a child. The audience is forced to confront the issue of child sexual abuse which pervades Indian society and yet remains in silence. Abhimanyu's own painful experience as a child is reflected on his adulthood, when we see him struggling with his sexual identity and the inability to maintain a steady relationship. The film also breaks the popular myth that child sexual abuse has an effect on sexual orientation. In a style of a Greek tragedy, Onir keeps all that is violent and the grotesque in the background which is only referenced through subtle close ups

and in dialogue. Abhimanyu's lack of confidence in confronting his step father or being able to tell anyone about his experience is not uncommon. The storyline comes to a logical end only with him finally managing to convince his mother about his abuse at the moment of his stepfather's death which brings closure to this narrative.

Omar, the third story of the series, is the first visual narrative looking at the aftermath of the Delhi High Court case, which removed homosexuality from the criminal offence register in 2009. Rahul Bose plays Jai who is returning to the city after a considerable length of time and is quite surprised to see the transformation around him. Onir deliberately does not depict any physical transformation but rather implies an attitudinal transformation. *Omar* uses flashback narrative to explore gay lifestyle in the city. Jai picks up Omar (played by Arjun Mathur), a male prostitute, and is then caught by a policeman who starts physically abusing him (with the help of Omar) for his sexual choices and threatens to put them in prison indefinitely. Unlike *Abhimanyu*, Onir does not use subtlety; rather he is very explicit and raw in this feature. We are confronted with the hypocrisies existing within our society. When Jai is forced to give the policeman a blowjob in exchange for his freedom, we are left wondering how something as fundamental as sexual choice can be subject to moral and social policing. Jai comes back much later to confront Omar who is hustling on the streets and tells him how that night left him traumatized. He tells him that justice has finally prevailed and post the High Court decision, they (referring to Queer identified individuals) were free now. Jai drives off leaving a shame faced Omar on the streets.

B Ruby Rich, in her 1992 essay 'The New queer Cinema' coins the term new queer Cinema where she identifies a group of films which uses techniques of avant-garde social constructionism, of creating socially constructed reality to rework histories, and celebrate difference and sexual leeway and resist reduction to any normative coding, thereby questioning the paradigm of normativity itself. I locate these characteristics in some of the new emerging independent queer films being made in India. The ongoing production of Queer themed films provides a compelling frame of cultural artifacts to construct a post liberalised, postcolonial Indian Queer history. By addressing queer issues via the cinematic medium has helped propel a greater queer consciousness and widened discourse around queer issues.

I Am can be placed within this rubric. The film creates a strong presence for diverse, under represented and silenced voices. By fusing arts and politics the work strengthens the connection between films and social change. It focuses on issues of identity but goes well beyond just exploring racial, sexual, religious and gender identities, rather exploring the intersections and overlaps between them. The film pushes the boundaries of genre as a category by introducing a very

unique film structure which very few other film makers have explored in mainstream Bollywood.

Ancient India's celebration of sexuality is very well documented through Sanskrit writing, and temple sculptures, significant among which are the Khajuraho and Konarak sculptures. Our social conditioning has been such that we have learnt to subscribe to only the hetero-patriarchal monogamous structure of family. Intolerance and a gripping fear for all those who are homosexuals is a trend that can be noticed throughout India today (Khanna, 2005: 159) The film critiques and challenges the notion that society can interfere and regulate the lives and bodies of people, such as in the cases of Afia to Omar, all of whom challenge society. *Omar* dismantles the silent monolith of same sex love, and there is jubilation when we hear Jai shout "We are legal now."

John Clum's model of 'anarchic impulse' which he sees as a way of 'ridicule(ing) straight society and its institutions in favour of creative chaos which allows free expression of sexual impulses' can be seen as a recuperative logic used by Onir in creating this very sensitive queer narrative.

The fourth story, *Megha*, interrogates the divides between religion and ethnicity in the background of a militancy torn state- Kashmir. Megha, a Kashmiri Pandit (Juhi Chawla) had to leave Kashmir with the rise in terrorism and crimes against her community. She returns years later to sell her house but when she confronts the reality she left behind and the present political anarchic situation it shakes her belief in humanity. Rubina (Manisha Koirala) her childhood friend, a Muslim, has her own story. Her plight is no different; she is seen as a terrorist in her own state and the frequent police raids and interrogation of her family members don't make life any easier for her. The perspectives of the two women are thrown against each other and what emerges are two different stories but the same sense of pain and suffering. Onir does not attempt to query the political situation; his perspective is more on the individual's emotions which have no place in the national rhetoric on Kashmir. The South Asian Nationalism is 'monstrous' (Dasgupta, 2007). It focuses on disjunctions and differences and blanks out commonality. This sort of rhetoric creates a divided heterogeneous national identity which is problematised on the basis of religion, gender and ethnicity. Women are known to suffer the most during any given crisis and as Veena Das and Urvashi Butalia's work have shown us they become objects of national honour and a sort of barter pawn between states. Their lives are controlled by a patriarchal political mechanism. In this particular feature we are not certain whether the rupture caused by the violent politics of identity can be reversed by the act of narration. The moment thus ceases to be about a struggle between two communities, the violence enacted in the name of nationalism and community is then seen to be less about national fervor. *Megha* seems to put forward this thesis and thereby effects a radical demythologization of the discourse of exclusionary nationalism through its treatment of gendered

violence. Megha reiterates how the female body is imagined as a repository of communal honour. Both Megha and Rubina become bodies on which power has been contested and the final interaction between the two does not offer a closure, but rather leaves their relationship in a flux which mirrors the contemporary situation in Kashmir. Onir portrays society as a model which thrives on exclusion rather than inclusion and seeks to critique it through these four narratives.

This film is not unique only because of its narrative, it is also distinctive for being one of the first crowd sourced films in India, where major social networking sites, such as Facebook and Orkut were used to fundraise money from the general public to make these films and each donor was credited as a 'Co-Owner' and thus made to feel a part of the film.

The film also boasts of an amazing soundtrack composed by Amit Trivedi and songs such as *Baangur* and *Bhojhal Se* have become extremely popular. We'll come across six different languages- Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Kannada, Kashmiri and English.

The characters- Megha, Afia, Abhimanyu and Omar as well as Rubina and Jai confront us, the viewers as different facets of society which the Indian viewing public is eager to obliterate from their memory. These are characters we encounter but never pay attention to. What Onir attempts to and achieves is to bring those in the fringes of society in to its mainstream narrative. As part of the New Indian Cinema and New Indian Queer Cinema, the film opens up a new space in Indian cinematic history and ushers in a new form of Indian Cinema which successfully closes the gap between mainstream Bollywood and alternative art house cinema.

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Filmography

I Am. 2011. Dir: Onir. Anticlock Films.

My Brother Nikhil. 2005. Dir: Onir. Four Front Films.

Phineas and Ferb

Dir: Zac Moncreif, Dan Povenmire, Robert Hughes & Jeff "Swampy" Marsh, USA

A Review by Derek Jones, Indiana University of Pennsylvania (Indiana, PA)

Most animated programs that are shown on prime time television (*The Simpsons, Family Guy, Archer*, etc.) are designed for adult audiences. It may be argued that *Phineas and Ferb*, whose new episodes currently air Fridays in prime time on Disney Channel, can be perceived as a cartoon that caters to both children and adults. Co-creator Jeff "Swampy" Marsh has even admitted that the series is not made especially for children (Gallas, 2009). While some of the humor in *Phineas and Ferb* is geared toward adults, the show itself sports three characteristics that Robby London (2007) states are key for a children's television program to thrive: child-relatable characters, a large fantasy component, and stories that embody the concept of empowerment.

The entire series is a chronicle of two suburban stepbrothers, Phineas (voiced by Vincent Martella) and Ferb (Thomas Sangster), who spend each day of their summer vacation working on a grand project with their friends, much to the dismay of their sister, Candace (Ashley Tisdale). When Candace is not trying to garnish the attention of her boyfriend, Jeremy (Mitchell Musso), she tries to get Phineas and Ferb in trouble by attempting to show her mother, Linda (Caroline Rhea), what they are doing. Meanwhile, Phineas and Ferb's pet platypus, Perry (Dee Bradley Baker), sneaks underground and transforms into a secret agent responsible for thwarting the evil schemes of Dr. Heinz Doofenshmirtz (co-creator Dan Povenmire). Throughout each episode, the viewer experiences a variety of running gags and musical numbers. Eventually, Perry's confrontation with Dr. Doofenshmirtz results in the destruction or disappearance of Phineas and Ferb's project right before Candace is able to reveal the project to her mother.

London (2007) mentions that child-relatable characters are an important asset to a quality children's television program. The characters on *Phineas and Ferb* are interesting and easily identifiable. The protagonists are unique in a sense that they come from a blended family. It is rare for a blended family to be portrayed on television. In an earlier study of 60 television families, 44 of those families were classified as nuclear families (two parents, dependent children), but only four of the nuclear families were blended (Callister, Robinson, & Clark, 2007). However, many children today can relate to being involved in a blended family since about 50% of all Americans have some kind of step-relationship (Hurwitz, 1997 cited in Gonzales, 2009). Other characters on the show reflect various stereotypes such as the nerd (Baljeet – Maulik Pancholy), the girl scout (Isabella – Alyson Stoner), the bully (Buford – Bobby Gaylor), and the evil mad

scientist (Dr. Doofenshmirtz). Stereotypes are not new to animation. Chu and McIntyre (1995) determined that sexual stereotypes exist in cartoons. In this case, the stereotypes help the viewers identify and relate to the characters.

Another desirable quality in children's television is the fantasy component, a premise that is perceived as "larger-than-life" (London, 2007: 79). The majority of projects constructed by Phineas and Ferb certainly fit into that category. The pilot episode, "Rollercoaster," featured the boys building a gigantic rollercoaster that spans across the town of Danville. Throughout the series, Phineas and Ferb have performed ludicrous feats such as turning the family car into a monster truck (episode entitled "It's a Mud, Mud, Mud, Mud World"), running their own trendy restaurant ("Chez Platypus"), and performing their very own hit song ("Flop Starz"). The confrontations between Perry the Platypus and Dr. Doofenshmirtz are "larger-than-life" (London, 2007: 79) as well. In most episodes, Dr. Doofenshmirtz presents an elaborate evil scheme or invention that is intended to fulfill his goal of taking over the entire tri-state area. His plans have included trying to throw the Earth off of its axis with the Magnetism Magnifier ("Rollercoaster"), attempting to make everyone else ugly with the Ugly-inator ("The Best Lazy Day Ever"), and trying to move Big Ben from London to Danville ("Elementary, My Dear Stacy").

The final element London (2007) describes that can make a children's television program successful is a story or character that embodies empowerment. London explains how empowerment helps produce successful children's shows with the following statement.

> The theory is that because kids experience such strong feelings of powerlessness in terms of the ability to control their real world, consequently their imaginations are particularly stimulated, captivated, and fulfilled by stories portraying normally "weak" or "powerless" characters being able to "transform" into a superhero. (London, 2007: 80)

Phineas and Ferb are not superheroes, but London (2007: 80) does mention that "superpowers are not the only means to empowerment". Phineas and Ferb are empowered by their ability to design and build enormous structures that their mother never discovers. In certain episodes, they are also empowered with helping their older family members. In the episode entitled "Ladies and Gentlemen, Meet Max Modem!", the boys transform their father, Lawrence (Richard O'Brien), into a 1980s rock singer after he fears their mother, who was an actual pop singer, will not find him attractive anymore after she sings at a reunion concert. It must be noted that throughout the series, Linda is portrayed as a competent, mature mother, while Lawrence, who does not appear in every episode, is portrayed as a nice, but clueless father. This reflects the study conducted by Classiter et al. (2007) where male caregivers were found to be portrayed as less competent than female caregivers in cartoons. Phineas and

Ferb have also helped their grandmother, Betty Jo (Caroline Rhea), settle a score with an old roller derby rival by constructing a track and holding a match race ("Crack That Whip"). They even help Lawrence teach Candace how to parallel park ("It's a Mud, Mud, Mud, Mud World") and give Candace a luxurious spa treatment after a hard day helping to build a house for the homeless ("Spa Day").

The majority of humor in *Phineas and Ferb* relies on running gags and catchphrases that are easy for children to understand. For example, in several episodes a delivery truck driver asks Phineas if he is too young to be involved in a complex or dangerous activity, to which he responds, "Yes, yes I am." Examples of catchphrases used in the series include Isabella asking Phineas, "Whatcha doin'?", Phineas saying "Ferb, I know what we're going to do today!", and Dr. Doofenshmirtz yelling "Curse you, Perry the Platypus!" when his plan ultimately fails. Some of the jokes are directed toward older viewers, such as a scene in the episode, "We Call It Maze," where Phineas, Ferb, and Baljeet are trying to count the number of jellybeans in a jar in order to get through a passageway. Frustrated with the length of time it is taking for them to count, Buford eats all the jellybeans and shouts the number zero, which opens the door. When Baljeet demands that Buford shows his work, Buford replies, "I will in about twenty minutes." Another way the show caters to adults is the satirical nature of certain episodes. This series has poked fun at various forms of pop culture such as dancing-based reality shows ("Nerdy Dancin'"), game shows ("Let's Take a Quiz"), 1980s rock singers ("Dude, We're Getting the Band Back Together!"; "Ladies and Gentlemen, Meet Max Modem!"), and even the movie *The Wizard of Oz* ("The Wizard of Odd").

For a family-based program to be successful, it must be appealing to both adults and children. *Phineas and Ferb* is a program that caters to both audiences. The dated references mentioned earlier and some of the jokes draw adult viewers to the program. However, the presence of London's (2007) three elements combined with fun songs and nonstop action makes *Phineas and Ferb* an appropriate entertainment choice for children of all ages.

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Filmography

Archer (2009 – present) FX.

Family Guy (1999 - 2002, 2005 - present) Fox.

Phineas and Ferb (2007 – present) Disney Channel.

The Simpsons (1989 – present) Fox.

The Wizard of Oz. 1939. Dir. Victor Fleming. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

The Turin Horse

Dir: Bela Tarr, Hungary 2011

A Review by Philip Phillis, University of Glasgow

"In Turin on 3rd January, 1889, Friedrich Nietzsche steps out of the doorway of number six, Via Carlo Albert. Not far from him, the driver of a cab is having trouble with a stubborn horse. Despite all his urging, the horse refuses to move, whereupon the driver loses his patience and takes his whip to it. Nietzsche comes up to the throng and puts an end to the brutal scene, throwing his arms around the horse's neck, sobbing. His landlord takes him home he lies motionless and silent for two days on a divan until he mutters the obligatory last words, and lives for another ten years, silent and demented, cared for by his mother and sisters. We do not know what happened to the horse."

This is the opening sentence to Bela Tarr's ninth feature film, *The Turin Horse* (2011). It is a reflexive scene that mirrors the theme of the end of the world that lies beneath the surface of its unbearably simple story: the everyday struggle for survival of an elderly father and his daughter who own a small farm and a horse in an obscure and isolated land. Tarr portrays the textures of everyday life, the utter banality and monotony of every passing day, to sublimely deliver his pioneering apocalyptic vision. This feat is achieved thanks to the director's personal use of cinematic formal language. His themes and style are often compared by critics, cinephiles and academics to Tarkovsky, who presented his own apocalyptic vision in *Stalker* (1979) and *Sacrifice* (1986), and to Tarr's Hungarian predecessor Miklos Jancso whose style is strikingly similar to his successor's. Finally it is compared to Antonioni, whose modern men and women are alienated by an environment that seems to constantly deteriorate and to corrupt the living. I believe that the aforementioned are Tarr's key departure points, from where on he established a cinema of his own that combines style and theme to project his own outlook of the world.

Let us begin this review with the reference to the German Philosopher. It seems like no surprise that the director is inspired by this fictitious event from the life of Nietzsche. Indeed, in the past and especially in Tarr's highly acclaimed unofficial trilogy, *Damnation* (1988), *Satantango* (1994) and *Werckmeister Harmonies* (2000), Nietzschean nihilism has been an insightful point of reference. One may recall the hopelessness in Karrer's futile actions in *Damnation* and the final scene of the post-apocalyptic wasteland, where the torrential rain appears as if it came out of a scene of biblical catastrophe. Additionally, this is reminiscent of the inexplicable and shocking suicide of the little girl Estike and the collective sadness and madness in the strutting of the barflies in *Satantango* and lastly the insanity of Valushka who predicts the end of the world in *Werckmeister Harmonies*. Tarr's heroes seem to be inflicted by an

inexplicable force that drives them to destruction. The source of disruption is neither the alienating modern landscape of industry (Antonioni) nor the presence of man (Jancso). One may look at Tarkovsky again for a more clear interpretation. However, although Tarkovsky's metaphysical Zone in *Stalker* seems closer to the natural mise-en-scène of Tarr's films, in Tarr's world God is not present. It is as though the universe deems man's presence to be unnecessary. One may interpret the source of disruption in Tarr's films as cosmic. Here is then the metaphysical aspect of Tarr's point of view: the End is nigh and man's presence in the cosmos is absolutely meaningless.

To comprehend the importance of this introduction in *The Turin Horse*, the flogging of the horse in Turin, one must examine the openings of other films. This is an expressive tool used by numerous modernists, from Rossellini and Antonioni and to Tarkovsky. In *Damnation*, the opening scene of the buckets on a wire hovering over an old coal mine, moving very slowly in no specific direction, is a metaphor that is linked to the subjective gaze of Karrer who stares at this scene out of the window, just as Ingrid Bergman stares at the bodies at the excavation at Vesuvius in *Voyage to Italy* (1954). These are both reality and mind screen an image that reflects the psyche of the protagonists, a dialectic conversation between subject and image. In *Damnation*, it reflects the course of Karrer's life – pointless and stagnant. This is a technique often used by Antonioni in *The Passenger* (1975), where the story of the blind man who dies after gaining back his sight and the architecture of Gaudi mirror the plight of Antonioni's protagonist. In Godard's and Truffaut's films, the heroine very often breaks into song in the beginning of the film, as for example in *Pierrot le Fou* (1965) and *Jules et Jim* (1962), narrating the course of the couple's passion, love, break-up and final devastation, reflecting the theme of amour fou which is built throughout the film.

Modernist films, since Neorealism, construct their worlds on the textures of life and deal with characters that are projected as mysterious, layered, occasionally coarse and unsympathetic. There is no pretext to adorn their actions which are veiled by mystery, as predicated by impulse (Orr, 1993: 15). Answers are then sought in the numerous images that gradually build the theme of the films. These images could indeed be a text, a story, a song, very often a dream, like those of the Stalker that form the theme of Apocalypse. As these dreams and visions in Tarkovsky reflect the concept of divine Apocalypse, we participate in Valushka's staging of his initial vision of eclipse with the barflies representing planetary movement. This event prepares us for what will come, without however any form of trumpeting or dramatic proclamation. The same method is executed in *The Turin Horse*. Nietzsche witnesses an event that suddenly leads him to isolation and madness, for no apparent reason. The question here is not "why," but what this tells us. The answer, or maybe the interpretation, is in Valushka's words: "The sky darkens. The dogs howl, deer run in panic, stampede in fright and in this awful incomprehensible dusk, even the birds are

confused and go to roost. And then… complete silence. Everything that lives is still. Will heaven fall upon us? We don't know, for a total eclipse has come upon us." A similar sensation can be experienced in the opening of *The Turin Horse*, preparing us for a total eclipse, a gradual descent into hopelessness. And without a doubt, through the style and content of a neorealist film, Tarr opens a window to the audience, to witness the end of life, gradually building his theme through different points of reference that are intrinsically linked to the film's story and (minimal) plot. As I describe further on, this vision has been completed with *The Turin Horse*. At this point, let us examine how formal language supports our theme, as well as display another one: stagnation and repetition.

The Turin Horse is divided into six chapters: days one to six. Day one: A man is riding his carriage through a mountainous environment where the wind is constantly blowing with immense force. The camera flows with the movement of the horse's walking and galloping, fixed on the man's figure and gradually moving around the vehicle. This opening shot lasts for ten minutes, essentially, as the director has mentioned in numerous interviews, for the whole duration that the Kodak film permits. The scene is accompanied by minimalist composer Mihaly Vig's main theme of the film, a powerful and somber tune that introduces an additional sense of dread. Vig has been a steady partner of Tarr since *Damnation.*

In this ten minute shot, we witness all the stylistic traits of Tarr that comprise his signature, which was established in *Damnation*. This is based on mise-en-scène and camera work. As mentioned earlier, the foundation of Tarr's oeuvre lies in Neorealism. This scene is based on this. It is an absolutely realistic scene not only in the quality of the image, but mainly because the director uses the long take to document an event, one which is not ruled by cause and causality. It is merely an event taken from the everyday life of an individual man, documented as such, unadorned and in its totality. What then makes this scene so original? For one, Tarr returns to the roots of modern cinema, but with a twist: The duration of the scene is unprecedented. Very seldom do directors stretch time to its full extent (we have seen it in the works of Sokurov and Tarkovsky, but only in very specific moments, while for Tarr this is a necessity in every instant). The duration and the narrative emptiness of the shot resemble the qualities of the minimalistic soundtrack: repetition, the key term underlying minimalism, creates an impression of pulsating stasis, as though time is not actually moving. The protagonist and the audience are caught in a time loop. For Tarr, this scene is what it displays: a man driving his carriage towards a destination. It is an event in its totality, filmed in real time, compressed in order to conform to the demands of cinema. This is Tarkovsky's concept of sculpting in time in its best application.

Where is this carriage headed to? Where are we situated? We are left with the same question in *Werckmeister Harmonies* when the truck carrying the circus arrives in the town, but keeps moving monotonously towards the darkness. No one knows where it came from or where it goes. Time and space seem to work in mysterious ways in Tarr's locations. This is the effect of stagnation, which has been the backbone of his vision of Hungary in his trilogy: life is not progressing, constantly going in circles, or at most remaining still. We are repeating the same futile moves in our demonic tango, as if possessed, moving like buckets on a wire in no direction, waiting for some form of redemption which never arrives. However, in *The Turin Horse*, although Hungarian is spoken, the location remains totally unspecified. The farm of the small family resembles the muddy and dilapidated yard in *Satantango*. The yard is Tarr's most obscure and isolated location. One interpretation may be that this was an allegorical location, a Hungarian microcosm where the rise and fall of socialism are reenacted. If we keep this in mind, then the farm in *The Turin Horse* is humanity's last fortress, which will inevitably fall.

Days one and two: the old man wakes up and his daughter dresses him. The wind outside is still blowing carrying with it dust, branches and leaves. The man walks to the stable and cleans up the area where the horse stands. He fills its feeding station. The girl walks to the water well with two heavy buckets that weigh on her like building blocks. She carries the water to the house where she boils two potatoes in an old iron pot which are then served plain and piping hot on an old wooden table. Their means for survival are limited and humble. The man removes the skin from the potato which is still steaming, his hands burning as he blows on them. He devours his meal and returns to his chores, while his daughter is left to clean up, still nibbling on her potato. They hardly ever speak to each other, merely mumbling the necessary phrases, like "it [the food]'s ready." Each task seems to be strenuous and endless.

This austere presentation of everyday life and its struggles is Tarr's main interest. In other words, as he described at the film's screening at the 2011 Edinburgh International Film Festival where I was present the "unbearable weight of being" as opposed to the "unbearable lightness of being." His camera work is linked to this theme. The man's ride in the beginning is long and tiresome. We know this because the shot lasts for so long, documenting the sounds and the overall movement of the carriage, the horse and the fierce resistance caused by wind, which has substituted the repetitious and torrential rain of the trilogy.

Indeed, mise-en-scène is as defining as camera work. It supports the theme of nihilism, creates a dreadful atmosphere of supernatural proportions (the biblical deluge of the trilogy) and serves as an extension of the impoverished protagonists, as a wasteland of the soul, a haptic environment – one can almost touch the rough exteriors of houses, or even feel the weight of the doctor's old

and bulky boots in *Satantango*. Moreover, repetition, not only a quality of the camera work or of the actor's role, is highlighted in the mise-en-scène. The Hungarian landscapes in all the aforementioned films are vast, barren and bleak, strikingly similar to those of Jancso in his film *The Round-Up* (1966). The scenery resembles a free and open vista, but is actually a prison, offering no shelter to the guerillas of *The Round-Up* who may run but are still caught, like sheep by their evil shepherds. The horizon-less valleys of Tarr's films are as terrifying and bleak as the yard or the Titanik bar in *Damnation* and the dilapidated houses in all four films. All escape routes are sealed. The power of stagnation is such that life seems to be driven by a demonic force which has been substituted by the camera and the mise-en-scène (Orr, 2001: 24). Tarr's medium is austere and cold, conspiring against all human subjects (just as Jancso's camera does in *The Round-Up*, constantly verifying that resistance is futile).

Day three. The schedule remains as is. Stoically, the man and his daughter do their chores, with greater fatigue, yet with dignity and persistence. Repetition is key here. The impression of time and the perception of space have already been eliminated. Time leaves no imprint, as it has been paused, moving in circles – the essence of stagnation. The wind is even stronger, blowing as it did in the beginning. The man struggles to get the horse out of the barn, to load it with supplies and its gear. It is reluctant. It has stopped eating and fights its master, ending back in the barn. Frustrated, the couple continue their chores, have their lunch break just like the previous day. A drunk man visits them asking for a new bottle of spirit. He sits down and begins talking. His is a soliloquy, like those of the old lady in *Damnation* who would cite passages of the Old Testament to Karrer, from the book of Revelations. He talks about destruction in the city, the arrival of some strange people who are debasing everything and everyone, as though a great disaster is imminent. His speech is marked by repetition of the word debasing and by a prophetic tone. He leaves. Dark falls and a small candle burns.

Day four, the horse is not eating, standing almost lifeless, the wind still blowing fiercely, knocking over items and swaying the girl in her walk to and from the well. A small tribe of gypsies arrive and try to vandalize the well, which the family defends. The gypsies leave. They have their lunch break, the same potato meal, steaming hot, burning their fingers, in the same dark and austere environment, where the dark has now taken up most of the light. On the fifth day they make an effort to move elsewhere, dragging their horse which has given up on life, like Nietzsche after the witnessing of the flogging of the horse in Turin. They return again after their futile search, like the inhabitants of the yard in the end of *Satantango.* The light in the house is barely working – there is not enough fuel, as the darkness becomes increasingly dominant and overbearing. Day six is shorter. The camera barely moves, almost stuck on the table and the floor documenting the nothingness – black surfaces in the dark.

There is no event happening in the frame, while the only event is the actual filming of pitch black darkness. The film ends with the light fading to black, with the father and daughter sitting at the table struggling to eat two raw potatoes.

Tarr has substituted the six days of creation with the six days of destruction. And on the seventh day, life came to a definite stop. Valushka's prophecy comes true. The horse confused and frightened, rejects life and then…complete silence. Everything that lives is still. Tarr's apocalyptic vision ends in the most definite way. In his trilogy, the prospect of the Apocalypse was postponed and we would always return to the familiar sense of stagnation, of life hanging in the balance, an allegory for Hungarian society. In *The Turin Horse*, the end is not postponed any longer. This is also the end for Bela Tarr's cinema *The Turin Horse* is his last film, thus bringing his stark vision, full circle. Is this coincidence? Surely, just as was the case for Nietzsche and Tarr's horse, the answer is not to be found. But what does this tell us? Is this the end of cinema? No one knows. No matter though, even if this is the case, we are left with a truly precious heritage of an artist whose art, no matter how bleak and dark is exhilarating and profoundly moving. This is the ability that great art contains and which makes it timeless.

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The Monk

Dir: Dominik Moll, France, 2010

A Review by Simon Dawes, Nottingham Trent University

Based on the late 18th Century gothic horror novel by Matthew G Lewis, *The Monk* tells the story of the downfall of Ambrosio (Vincent Cassel), a pious Capuchin monk in Inquisitorial Spain, led into temptation, rape and murder, and ultimately the offering of his soul to the Devil. The setting and ostensible narrative of the film is suggestive of the pre-Hitchcockian horror genre, where the fate of a man's soul is what's at stake, and otherwise mysterious and inexplicable events are explained as the work of the Devil. But, as with Moll's previous two films, *Harry, He's Here to Help* (2000) and *Lemming* (2005), where surface readings describe the plot but fall short of explaining satisfactorily the plausibility of the actions and motives of characters, *The Monk* also requires a psychoanalytic reading, and a sensitivity to the flexibility of the fine line between what's real and what's not.

Having been abandoned as a baby at the door of a monastery, Ambrosio is raised by the monks to become a formidable exemplar of piety. Once ordained as a monk himself, we see him preach with such emotional conviction that a young woman in his awe-inspired congregation faints, and nuns waiting to give their confessions hope that he will be the monk to hear them. But there are also discomforting side-effects of his extreme piety and hints that not all is well. After hearing the partial confession of a nun and divining the secret she withholds from him, he reports her to her superior without remorse, whereupon she and the child she's carrying are starved to death for their sin. During one sermon, he wears a crown of thorns and mutilates himself to perform more effectively the role of Jesus. There are tensions between him and at least one of the other monks, suggested by Ambrosio's questioning of his brothers' prejudices when they're reluctant to accept as a novice someone from a less privileged background, setting him transcendentally apart from his peers. Unlike them, he is allowed his own private garden within the monastery grounds, to which he retires to suffer in peace from the severe headaches that plague him. And he is troubled by a recurring dream of a woman whose face he cannot see and whom he cannot touch. The explanation of the ailing Père Miguel that it could be the Virgin Mary fails to satisfy him. When Miguel (Ambrosio's only real father-figure) dies in his arms, he shows no grief and chastises a younger monk for doing so. His abandonment as a baby and the reasons and fate of his mother seem also not to pre-occupy him.

Although the conflicts within him can be discerned from these elements, the sexuality and violence that follow give clearer expression to them. When Valerio, purportedly a young man so badly burned that he has to keep his face hidden

behind a mask to protect it from sunlight, is accepted into the brotherhood, Ambrosio finds himself upon the path to temptation. Having proven himself able to cure Ambrosio's headaches, Valerio removes his mask and reveals himself to be in truth an unscarred female admirer, willing to wear a mask and live a lie within the confines of the monastery just to be close to her idol. Ambrosio's initial response is characteristically to threaten to denounce her, but he is bitten by an unusually violent and poisonous insect before he has the chance. While the monks offer only prayer to save him, Valerio sucks the poison from him, and in a possibly fever-induced hallucination we see Valerio naked and making love with Ambrosio. When Iago, the brother with whom Ambrosio has a turbulent relationship, becomes suspicious of the time he and Valerio spend together and threatens to denounce them, he is mysteriously killed by a falling gargoyle.

In what begins as a subplot, Antonia, the beautiful and implausibly innocent young girl that fainted during Ambrosio's sermon, is courted by the romantic but correct young Lorenzo. While Antonia has been disinherited from her father's family and left to care for her dying mother, Lorenzo is an orphan who is more or less master of his own inheritance. Free to make public expressions of his love for Antonia and financially capable of supporting her, he stands in stark contrast to Ambrosio's removal from such earthly considerations as love and material welfare. After it is revealed that Antonia is the woman in Ambrosio's dreams and his subsequent attempt to kiss her has been rejected, he attempts to make love to Valerio instead. She refuses him because she knows it is not she he really desires, but through black magic gives him the power to make love to Antonia against her conscious will. Putting Antonia in a trance, he makes love to her. To the sound of the unaware Lorenzo serenading Antonia from the streets below, they are discovered naked and post-coital by her mother, who, recognising Ambrosio by the birthmark on his shoulder as the child she abandoned and thought dead, is stabbed and killed by her son. Antonia wakes and screams. Ambrosio is captured and sentenced, and offers his soul to the Devil, who appears to him as the lecher whose confession he heard at the beginning of the film, and whose questioning of the extent to which the monk was above temptation was left unanswered.

We are led to believe that Ambrosio's downfall has been orchestrated by the Devil all along, with Valerio sent to lead him into temptation. Without this religious interpretation, the monstrous insect, falling gargoyle and power to control Antonia's will, nevermind the suddenness of Ambrosio's decline and the coincidence of the relationship between him and his victims, would require a very effective suspension of disbelief. But this interpretation still doesn't satisfy, as Miguel's interpretation of Ambrosio's dream failed to satisfy him. There is little in the way of suspense compared with Moll's earlier, more Hitchcock-inspired films, and the story is rushed through at an accelerating pace, so that the dramatic climax of the rape and murder feels more like an anti-climax. The predictability of Ambrosio's actions weaken their dramatic effect, and viewers

are prepared early on for the tragedy of his true relationship to his victims, so there is little in the way of a surprise and certainly no twist. But to accept this interpretation and that everything we have seen has actually happened for the characters would be to confuse narrative with plot. A more satisfactory alternative to the literal reading of the plot, and the religious interpretation of the protagonist, is to read the film psychoanalytically.

Abandoned at birth and raised in a monastery, Ambrosio has no parental role models and no real relation with women. Jesus and the Virgin Mary are idealised father and mother figures for him. Within the walls of the monastery, separated from the city by a desert-like plain, he is cut off from the real world of earthly concerns and temptations. Unlike the other monks, who come from privileged backgrounds and for whom the monastery is a retreat, he knows no other world. For him, his private garden is his only retreat, but one that serves to isolate him with his own thoughts, and separate him from his fellow monks. His headaches, unrelieved by prayer, and his dreams, unexplained by reference to Mary, are the symptoms of the repressed conflicts within him. His inflexible judgment on others, resulting in the silencing and erasure of a sinning nun, as well as the silencing of the monk about to expose his digression, are expressions of his attempt to contain those conflicts.

Ambrosio takes pride in the reputation he has, even among monks and nuns, for his extreme piety. Misrecognising himself as the idealised Jesus, most obviously in the scene where he wears the crown of thorns, he confuses the worship of God with his own idolatry. Valerio's obsession with him is the projection of his need to be desired by others, if only to narcissistically complete this idealised version of himself. His love for the idealised Virgin Mary is confused with sexual desire, as well as the conflicting emotions he feels towards his absent mother. Upon the blank canvas of Valerio's face mask, he projects the image of woman, and Valerio becomes a woman sexually obsessed with him. Unsatisfied with this reciprocated lust and recognising that Valerio is not the true object of his desire, he mistakes again that object, this time for the more unattainable embodiment of innocence and purity, the virgin Antonia. The gender blurring of Valerio's character (called Rosario and then Matilda in the book but not given a female name in the film) hints at the possibility that his true female self is just wishful thinking on the part of Ambrosio, trying not only to repress his desire but also his homosexuality. But ultimately it appears to be the violent and vengeful penetration of his mother as well as fornication with the Virgin that is the true object of his desire.

The Monk is dramatically less engaging than *Harry* and *Lemming*, possibly because with this film Moll is working backwards from Lewis's well-known plot rather than developing his own from scratch. Unlike the earlier films, co-written with Gilles Marchand, there is no humour and no genre bending or defiance. Whereas *Harry* veers between comedy and suspense thriller, and *Lemming*

begins as a social comedy, takes a sudden turn into psychological thriller, then slowly develops into a surreal horror film, *The Monk*, co-written with Anne-Louise Trividic, is a relatively dry, conventional horror film. But it is also because in the case of the earlier films we are invited to consider the implausibility of the developing story psychoanalytically. With *Harry*, the surprise arrival of the stranger into the life of the protagonist, his extreme actions and the neatness with which he leaves the story, all call into question the extent to which he exists and to which the events we've witnessed have actually happened. In *Lemming*, the story becomes so complex, unrealistic and contradictory that a superficial reading becomes impossible; it can only be appreciated and understood by unravelling its unresolved themes. With *The Monk*, however, we're almost tricked into following the deceptively predictable story for what we're told it is. Unless the viewer is familiar with Moll's films and looking for a master-class in psychoanalysis, they are likely to walk away from this film disappointed with the conventional treatment of a predictable plot. But Moll is not so much interested in the telling of the original melodrama as the deconstruction of the character of Ambrosio, and the raw material of the binaries of sin/virtue and the dualities of the subsidiary male/female characters upon which the story depends. The symbolism of the two-dimensional characters around him and their potentially composite nature lend themselves well to the 'imaginary realm' of psychoanalytic and film theory to which Moll's films refer.

Further, unlike the earlier films, *The Monk* does not have a happy ending. With *Harry* and *Lemming*, it's suggested that the protagonists have worked through their internal conflicts and are better off for it. Yet with *The Monk* we're led to believe that Ambrosio actually does carry out his ill deeds, and even more surprisingly, we accept that he really does offer his soul to the Devil at the end. More in line with the narratives of the earlier films, however, it would be more appropriate to assume that none of the crimes, in fact, really happen; that Valerio may not be a woman, be so obsessed with Ambrosio, or even exist at all; that Antonia, Lorenzo and Antonia's mother may not exist either; that the congregation, nuns and the other monks may not be quite so in awe of Ambrosio as we're led to believe; and that any workings of the Devil and offering of souls are merely how Ambrosio interprets his conflicting thoughts and emotions. The only 'real' scene in the film may be the prologue, in which a lecher confesses his sins to the monk, and which ends with Ambrosio reflecting on the extent to which he is above temptation himself. Although the film ends rather badly for him and everyone else, we could imagine an epilogue of our own in which Ambrosio, after the lecher departs, is seen leaving the confessional with a contented smile on his face, happy to have worked through a few things. Although the lecher does indeed return in the final scene of the film, it is in the role of the Devil, and his demeanour is very different – no longer ashamed and tormented, but gleeful and gloating – suggesting that he has become just

another signifier in the film, no longer a three dimensional character in his own right.

Although one can detect the influences of Hitchcock, Chabrol, Antonioni and Lynch on Moll's films, this particular film owes more to Bunuel, who even co-wrote with Jean-Claude Carrière the screenplay for an earlier version (directed by Ado Kyrou, 1972), and it would be interesting to read a comparative analysis of these two films. Moll's exploration of the sexual repression at the heart of the monk's piety suggests a wider critique, no doubt more pronounced in Bunuel's version, of the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church. But Moll's focus is on the individual rather than on organised religion, which is here no more than an inadequate means for the monk to channel, contain and interpret his unconscious, with faith critiqued for its false consciousness, for the way it encourages repression and invites subjects to misrecognise themselves, and as an inferior alternative to psychoanalysis. Although no good seems to come of anyone's confessions, the monk's salvation is provided in confessional by the opportunity given him by the lecher, in a reversal of roles, to confront his own inclination to temptation. In the films of Dominik Moll, however, everyone is repressed; even non-Catholics.

That Girl in Yellow Boots

Dir: Anurag Kashyap, India, 2010

A Review by Sukhmani Khorana, University of Queensland, Australia

In the last decade, the West has started to take notice of the pastiche beyond the song-and-dance melodrama of India's Hindi-language commercial film industry, colloquially known as Bollywood. This has coincided with a marked increase in monographs and edited collections on Bollywood history and contemporary trends. Recent academic and journalistic studies of Bollywood cast it in the mould of a 'global mass culture' rather than a 'national cinema'. In a book titled *Brand Bollywood: A New Global Entertainment Order*, journalist and film jurist Derek Bose argues that it has become the dream of every Bollywood filmmaker to produce a film that is a success on the international stage (Bose, 2006: 56). He cites the example of 'Bollywood dream merchants' like Aditya Chopra, Karan Johar, Ashutosh Gowarikar, Nikhil Advani and Yash Chopra, as well as diasporic directors such as Shekhar Kapur and Mira Nair as instances who have come close to crossing over (Bose, 2006: 56-57).

At the same time, while a parallel strand has existed in Indian cinema since the 1940s, it is only now that this independent element that embraces world cinema's arthouse aesthetics has both large-scale local as well as global recognition. Foremost amongst its young bastions is screenwriter-director Anurag Kashyap. He shot to fame with his screenplay for *Satya* (1998), an era-defining film for Indian cinema by noir director Ramgopal Varma. After a long period of struggle involving unfinished projects, problems with censorship, and the resistance of a formulaic industry, Kashyap finally gained both critical acclaim and box-office numbers with *Dev D* (2009), a modern take on classic Bengali novel *Devdas*. His chapter structure and fearless visual style in the film was compared to Hollywood's own leading independent filmmaker and mixer of world cinema styles, Quentin Tarantino.

Kashyap's latest film, *That Girl in Yellow Boots* (2010), opened the London Indian Film Festival in July 2011. I had the privilege of both watching the movie at the festival's BFI venue, and subsequently hearing the director in a masterclass at a conference on Indian cinema held at the University of Westminster around the same time. When Kashyap revealed that this project was entirely an in-house production and therefore unconstricted by external demands, I began to see how his fearlessness as a filmmaker (and a visual artist) has been taken to another level since *Dev D*. He also spoke passionately about getting into filmmaking after watching Vittorio de Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* and being inspired by its neorealism as a university student. Again, the impact of

both neo noir and new wave realism is evident in all of Kashyap's films, but especially in *That Girl in Yellow Boots.*

This is not a technically flawless film as it breaks the rules of the conventional three-act narrative structure. For instance, as opposed to beginning on a note of equilibrium, there is internal conflict in the main character throughout, and key scenes at the end produce an anti-climax rather than a clear resolution. Also of significance in terms of the independent genre is the film's complete overhaul of viewers' expectations about how heroes, heroines and villains (in any cinematic tradition) are expected to behave and act out their roles. For starters, the protagonist of the film is nineteen-year old British-Indian Ruth (played by Indian actress of French ancestry, Kalki Koechlin) who is on a tourist visa in India to find her estranged father in a bid to recover his 'unconditional love'. One empathises with her for her emotional naivety, even as she defies the stereotype of the guileless foreign woman by bribing bureaucrats in the visa office, working illegally in a massage parlour and earning extra by offering 'happy endings' to her clients, clinically nursing her drug-addict boyfriend, and dealing with the latter's criminal drug lords with unmatched stoicism. Not only is a non-Indian female lead unusual in Indian cinema, but also to have one who is realistic in the sense of displaying both agency and vulnerability is certainly a break from a past of strict cinematic gender roles.

The only character who appears to be too puritan, and whose purpose in a convention-defying narrative is therefore unclear is that of Divakar, an elderly middle-class gentleman played by Naseeruddin Shah. As one of Ruth's most loyal customers, he comes across as a father-like figure who is grateful to have her massage his frail legs, and is later shocked to learn of her sexual service to her clients. The point in the narrative where he discovers this uncomfortable fact is also when Ruth is on the verge of finding out the identity of her real father who left their British home when her older sister passed away. As Shah storms out of the parlour, never to surface again, one wonders whether his exit is symbolic – I could only read it as an indication that Ruth's expectations would come to a similarly disappointing end.

One leading character who lives up to the film's deconstruction of genre expectations as well as its realistic yet humorous exposition of urban India's underbelly is that of Ruth's boyfriend, Prashant (played by Prashant Prakash). While initial scenes show him as an alpha-male demanding sex from his unwilling girlfriend, he practically turns into her serf by the end of the film. Chained to the window in her bedroom to overcome his drug addiction, he turns into a pet-like figure rather than the traditional heroic male lead of the film. It is during this period that he confronts Ruth for her lack of attachment to him, and she is forced to admit that he is no more than a 'timepass' to her as she goes about the read business of finding love through the search of her father. In the closing sequence, she is confronted with the underwhelming truth that her father

is the one client who visits her daily, has been following and photographing her throughout her sojourn in India, and abused and impregnated her half sister. Carrying the burden of this knowledge, she shuts out the world, refusing to talk to both the parlour owner and her boyfriend. As Ruth walks through the Mumbai bazaars in a daze before hailing a taxi, Prashant follows her and leaves no stone unturned in 'manning up' and apologizing. However, she is unruffled by his pleas and leaves him behind – it is as though he doesn't exist and his masculinity is an absence which she has no hope any longer of filling.

The film, therefore, is not merely about a girl in yellow boots, but references and pastiches a culture that is increasingly disruptive of middle-class respectability and gender mores. In terms of genre, Kashyap appears to be closing the gap between independent and crossover texts in contemporary Indian cinema and carving out a new niche, sometimes referred to as "New Bollywood" (see Arora, 2011). He announced at our conference masterclass that as a result of the screening in London, his film now has an international distributor. The mainstream reception of *That Girl in Yellow Boots* in eagerly awaited by this reviewer.

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