

# Film Reviews – June 2012

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## ***Jane Eyre***

Dir. Cary Fukunaga, UK/USA, 2011.

### **A Review by Catherine Paula Han, University of Hull**

“[W]e’ve had at least as many adaptations as the Brontës had hot dinners” was The Telegraph’s Tim Robey’s response to Cary Fukunaga’s 2011 adaptation of *Jane Eyre* (Robey: 2011). Robey’s jibe emblematises the challenge of breathing fresh insight into Charlotte Brontë’s novel. Despite being “poor, obscure, plain and little”, Brontë’s heroine has captured the attentions of filmmakers from the silent era onwards (Brontë, 2001: 216). As the 2011 production’s publicity website acknowledged, since “1910, there have been over 30 film and television adaptations, as well as a score of theatrical ones” (Focus Features 2011a).

This review examines Fukunaga’s attempts to reinvent Brontë’s narrative for contemporary audiences and considers how the production dealt with its screen predecessors. In the 2011 adaptation’s publicity, the filmmakers emphasised the studio era *Jane Eyre* (dir. Robert Stevenson, 1944), starring Joan Fontaine and Orson Welles, as a significant inspiration. Throughout, I will compare the two versions to interrogate the filmmakers’ advertised debt to Robert Stevenson. Furthermore, I use Stevenson’s work as a reference point to identify the most inventive elements in Fukunaga’s interpretation of *Jane Eyre*. As I shall argue, two specific aspects inject interest into an uncontroversial rendering of Brontë’s novel. Firstly, the treatment employs a chronology that eschews the novel’s structure. Secondly, the film evinces an emotional pitch that differentiates it from earlier remakes. An emotional and stylistic reserve permeates *Jane Eyre* (2011), characterising the production’s use of genre, actors’ performances, and aesthetic. Moreover, the review also briefly discusses the near-contemporary BBC miniseries *Jane Eyre* (2006). Due to the 2006 television adaptation, Fukunaga’s subsequent effort suffers from an unfortunate belatedness. Yet the cultural déjà vu also suggests why *Jane Eyre*’s (2011) personnel chose to emphasise the 1944 production’s influence.

Anticipating responses such as Robey’s, the 2011 film’s marketing acknowledged the existing adaptations in a calculated manner. The

publicity associated the contemporary production with prestige of the aforementioned 1944 classic, thereby obscuring over six decades of filmmaking. In an interview, Moira Buffini, the scriptwriter discussed the antecedent screen interpretations:

I feared I would've sunk under the weight of other people's ideas. So instead, to get a sense of what came before, I watched the odd chunk on YouTube. I watched a ten-minute section of the 80s version with Timothy Dalton. And then there was the one from the 90s with Charlotte Gainsborough, and I watched a 10-minute chunk of that. But Cary Fukunaga and I both loved the Orson Welles version of *Jane Eyre* from 1944. That one was so beautiful and the language was so rich, I found it very inspirational (Focus Features, 2011a).

Likewise, Fukunaga professed a specific acquaintance with Stevenson's treatment: "My Mom was a big fan of that movie, so in turn I became one too, wearing out our VHS copy of it by the end of primary school; I really loved it" (Focus Features, 2011b). The filmmakers' references indicate an effort to disavow more recent adaptations and construct an illustrious cinematic pedigree.

The publicity emphasised the 2011 filmmakers' cinematic hypertextuality, but also the "responsibility" to "honor" Brontë's hypotext (Focus Features, 2011b). As an adaptor, Buffini practices a pragmatic fidelity and refrains from introducing major divergences from Brontë's text. Nevertheless, she abridges episodes to hone dramatic impact and expunges unwieldy literary material. For example, the production effaces the coincidence that St John and his sisters are Jane's cousins (Brontë 2001: 327-8).

Plotwise, the 2011 version contrives to incorporate the major events in the novel, including episodes eliminated in Stevenson's version. Extended screentime portrays the child protagonist's (Amelia Clarkson) suffering, which include her ordeals in her abusive step-aunt's (Sally Hawkins) household, and subsequently at Lowood School. After reaching adulthood, Jane (Mia Wasikowska) becomes a governess at Thornfield Hall and falls in love with her employer, Edward Rochester (Michael Fassbender). Despite various obstacles, the two eventually become engaged but a surprise visitor interrupts the wedding day to reveal that Rochester has imprisoned his previous wife, Bertha (Valentina Cervi), in Thornfield's attic. Learning of Rochester's attempted bigamy, Jane flees Thornfield and loses herself in a moor landscape. Homeless and abject, she almost dies

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of exposure until a curate, St John Rivers (Jamie Bell), rescues her. The inclusion of this episode constitutes the most obvious plot difference from the 1944 version, which invents an alternative trajectory for the heroine (Sconce, 1995: 156-60). However, the 2011 film portrays Jane's stay with St John and his sisters, during which she hides from her past under a false name. However, St John ascertains the heroine's true identity as an heiress to a substantial fortune. Jane uses her inheritance to provide comfortable lives for herself and the Rivers family, who she regards as pseudo-siblings. Despite their platonic bond, St John proposes to Jane that they marry and work as missionaries in India. Still besotted with Rochester, Jane rejects St John's offer and psychically hears her former lover's voice calling her back to him. She responds to his summons and returns to Thornfield, to find that Bertha has burnt the building to the ground. In the fire, Rochester has lost his sight but also his wife. The film ends with the couple's final reunion in the ruins of his former home.

Though the screenplay rarely departs from the novel's *fabula*, Buffini's *syuzhet* is the most innovative aspect of the film's appropriation of *Jane Eyre*. Renouncing Brontë's retrospective but linear chronology, the adaptation opens with Jane's flight from Thornfield; her friendless wanderings; and her adoption by the Rivers. Henceforth, the film unfolds in parallel temporalities. The production interweaves Jane's previous life as a child and then a governess with vignettes of her sojourn with St John's family. The narrative maintains this double structure until the appearance of Bertha necessitates that Jane leave Rochester. After revisiting the opening scenes, the production employs a singular time frame to represent Jane's discovery of her inheritance and her return to Thornfield.

The film reworks the novel's sequence of events as an effective strategy that enlivens the crucial, but arguably tedious, St John subplot. Structurally significant, the Rivers period delays *Jane Eyre's* romantic resolution. Nonetheless, this section of the novel has plagued adaptors. During script preparation for 1944 version, the director Robert Stevenson declared the Rivers interlude "a dull, shoddy and boring piece of writing" (Sconce, 1995: 147). The studio era production invents an alternative reason to prolong Jane's absence from Rochester without recourse to her religious conundrum or lengthy recovery from illness. In contrast, Buffini's screenplay relieves the dramatically uneventful Rivers episode by interpolating it with flashbacks from the heroine's previous existence. Moreover, the structure builds suspense through the unclear connection between the two timeframes. The film alleviates the subplot's potential

dullness, and later compresses it into one chronology for the ensuing, tightly paced, revelations: Jane's inheritance; St John's marriage proposal; the immolated Thornfield; and the lover's reunion.

Furthermore, the chronological device contributes emotional poignancy to a film that avoids high-pitched outpourings of feeling. Buffini identified repression as the novel's key tone: "Much of what goes on in Jane goes on inside of her. She's so self-controlled – it's the challenge of any adaptor of that book to get under her skin and to hint at all this passion inside" (Cathy IdeasTap: 2011). Hence, the editing functions to belie the adult heroine's subdued exterior. As well as implying unspoken sentiments, the structure creates a continuity of characterisation that the 1944 version lacks. In the earlier treatment's linear temporality, the rebellious child (Peggy Ann Garner) has limited consistency with Joan Fontaine's cipher (who reflects wartime gender constructions in her portrayal [Brosh, 2008: 45-64]). Contrastingly, the 2011 adaptation uses thoughtful juxtapositions to construct effective analogies between the lonely orphan and the isolated woman. For example, the film develops the friendship between the young Jane and fellow student Helen Burns (Freya Park) in Lowood. The latter's death heightens the abandonment of the child heroine's situation. Economically, the chronology transfers the pathos and applies it to the elder Jane's circumstances. As the child Jane realises that Helen has died, the scene segues into the later timeframe to show Diana Rivers (Holliday Grainger) and Mary Rivers (Tamzin Merchant) departing to become governesses. The sisters' exit consigns the mature Jane to the company of their dutiful but unaffectionate brother St John. Though Jane fails to express her suffering, her ongoing lovelessness resonates across the time shifts.

Though using an unusual structure, the 2011 production construes Brontës' novel as a straightforward romance. To achieve this interpretation, the film seeks to contain the narrative undercurrents caused by Rochester's first wife. Her existence implies Rochester's potential abusiveness to complicate the central couple's happily-ever-after. The 1944 film represented Bertha as an unfilmable horror to justify the hero's domestic mistreatment. Yet in 2011, the adaptation attempts to cohere Rochester's imprisonment of Bertha with his status as a loving husband for Jane. The portrayal refrains from demonising his first wife and garners understanding for the male protagonist. Unlike Stevenson's silhouetted monster, Fukunaga's version shows her as elegantly dishevelled to highlight her husband's humane treatment. He

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depicts their marriage: "Her temper ripened, her vices sprang up, violent and unchaste. Only cruelty would check her, and I'd not use cruelty." Under duress, he displays a modern sensibility to mental illness. His words stress how Bertha has caused him to suffer, an emphasis that transforms *Jane Eyre* into a tale of a young bride who heals her husband of his traumatic sexual past.

Privileging *Jane Eyre's* romance, the production draws upon but ultimately allays the source text's gothic content to nullify the disturbing nature of Rochester and his household. The film's publicity emphasised this generic aspect but the Thornfield setting operates to establish the heroine's fearful reactions as paranoia. Fukunaga stated his excitement at the "spooky elements" and "the idea of pushing that side of the story further than in previous adaptations – not full-blown horror, but a definite vibe" (Focus Features 2011b). The adaptation appears to conform to a recognisable gothic formula, in which "tenebrous settings and mysterious places victimize heroines as fully as do villains and other specific perils" (da Vinci Nicholls 1983: 187). Yet the treatment diminishes the horror and attributes the feminine menace to the protagonist's subjectivity. At her first arrival, a disquieted Jane experiences the location as a series of candle-lit passages. In the next scene's first shot though, a shallow focus foregrounds the heroine's doll in morning light to imply a female-friendly and safe space. Comparison with Stevenson's version further underlines Fukunaga's restraint. The 1944 film uses chiaroscuro and shadow throughout to maintain the site's uncanny potential. Yet in the 2011 treatment, the neutralised setting conjoins with the first wife's humane incarceration to invalidate any objections to the final marriage.

Even as a romance, the film negotiates a unique emphasis in the couple's relationship and resists generic excess. Fukunaga's direction instils the love story with a downbeat nuance that differentiates this production from previous versions. In the 1944 film, the triumphant couple walk into the distance as the heroine's voice-over foretells the birth of their first son and the return of Rochester's vision. Yet the 2011 film's most romantic scenes exude a trance-like quality that functions as a prolepsis for subsequent melancholy. After the characters' engagement, the editing combines jump cuts, soft focus and shaky cam to consolidate Jane's description of events as "unreal" and "phantom-like." The cinematography suggests that the couple will achieve contentment but not unqualified happiness. In the final moments, a blind and weakened Rochester describes her return as a "dream" whilst both gently weep. Their relieved and chaste kiss illustrates the finish to mutual trauma rather than passion.

The lead actors' performances underline the pervasive restraint. Wasikowska and Fassbender construe Jane and Rochester in a subdued manner that contrasts with the Fontaine and Welles' more overt characterisations. Though Fontaine's performance is chiefly notable for its passivity, whilst Welles's star persona and booming voice ensured an over-the-top Rochester. Contrastingly, the 2011 lead roles accentuate the suppression of emotion. In the unusually charged proposal, Rochester and Jane declare their love. Wasikowska's almost weeping delivery manages to communicate an impressive self-control that checks her hysteria. Fassbender also highlights Rochester's battle for composure. When Rochester asks Jane to live with him unmarried, he holds her throat and mentions his superior physical strength to communicate his desperation. Though he verges on violence, his sudden curtailment evidences his self-mastery. In addition, his inability to dominate Jane clarifies her iron will, which grants a greater significance to her few tears. In conjunction, the performers' composure enhances the gravitas of their rare outbursts.

Nevertheless, the production may have benefited from a more varied pitch. Several reviewers questioned the actors' onscreen chemistry, such as *The Guardian's* Peter Bradshaw who stated: "I kept waiting for a blaze of emotion between Jane and Rochester, and it somehow never quite came" (2011). Bradshaw's comments suggest that the production's careful rendering fails to deliver full satisfaction at key romantic moments.

The film's reserve also permeates its aesthetic, as attested by the costume design. The wardrobe choices visually entice and complement the developing narrative but never function as "spectacular interventions" (Bruzzi 1997: xv). Dissimilarly in 1944, Welles wore "slimming and glamorous coattails and heightening heels" and "monarchical dressing gowns and cloaks decorated with dazzling chains" (Sadoff, 2010: 76). His outfits reflected his cultural reputation and suggest his domination of the production both in the front of and behind the camera (Sadoff, 2010: 76). However in the 2011 publicity, Michael O'Connor highlighted his costume design's "authenticity" to stress its seamlessness with characterisation or plot (Focus Features, 2011b and Lopez, 2011). Discussing Wasikowska's final outfit, O'Connor pointed out that the actress wore a shawl dating from the period and that he sourced nineteenth-century straw for her bonnet (Focus Features, 2011b and Lopez, 2011). This delicate ornamentation indicates her newly wealthy status, yet the drab rust colours underline the scene's autumnal atmosphere. O'Connor engineered



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a subtle transformation; his work contributes to the overall mise en scène to maintain continuity with the melancholy of Rochester and Jane's reunion.

The 1944 and 2011 films evince contrasting approaches to Brontë's text, but in the last moments Buffini and Fukunaga reify their self-confessed inspiration. The final scenes pay an obvious homage and borrow one of the 1944 reconfigurations of the novel. Jane (Joan Fontaine/ Mia Wasikowska) returns to the burnt-down Thornfield and encounters Mrs Fairfax (Edith Barrett/Judi Dench), who relates the tale of the building's destruction before the heroine reunites with Rochester (Orson Welles/Michael Fassbender). The narrational technique combines the spectacle of the ruins with Mrs Fairfax's first-hand account. Furthermore, the films dispense with Brontë's convoluted plotting, which delays the couple from meeting and introduces a new location. With their cultural pilfering, Buffini and Fukunaga retain temporal/spatial immediacy for the romance's conclusion.

In spite of the allusion to the 1944 production, Fukunaga's attempt exhibits more obvious similarities to the television miniseries, *Jane Eyre* (BBC, 2006). The post-millennial *Jane Eyres* possess several connections, which complicate the 2011 filmmakers' self-identified, direct descent from the 1944 adaptation. The review's focus precludes an in-depth comparison, but the two versions share concrete links. The BBC commissioned and transmitted the miniseries, whilst also co-producing Fukunaga's adaptation with Focus Features and Ruby Films. Furthermore, the film recycles the television treatment's central locations. Haddon Hall and Wingfield Manor represent, respectively, Thornfield Hall before and after its destruction. The reused space ensures that the later production delivers a sense of visual repetitiveness throughout. Compounding the effect, Franco Zeffirelli's *Jane Eyre* (1996) also employed the two settings for the same purpose.

Diminishing the freshness of Fukunaga's production further, the 2011 and 2006 *Jane Eyres* share thematic emphases. Many resemblances derive from a need to counterbalance Brontë's Victorian attitudes to race and gender to accommodate dominant post-millennial values to race and gender. Unlike in 1944, political correctness does not allow the demonisation of Rochester's Creole first wife. As in the 2011 interpretation, the 2006 Rochester (Toby Stephens) treats Bertha (Claudia Coulter) with a sympathetic devotion. Likewise, the productions both develop the protagonists' creative identity, reflecting a recent



tendency in period/heritage dramas. For example, the separate Janes exhibit watercolour portfolios to the two Rochesters, who evince surprise at the content and ability. In contrast, the 1944 Jane never expresses herself in any media apart from briefly playing the piano. The trend elides nineteenth-century authors and their fictional characters, perpetuating and capitalising on the popular imaginary's conflation of life and art (Cartmell and Whelehan, 2010: 93-4). The 2006 and 2011 adopt distinct approaches to Brontë's text yet, due to temporal adjacency, display common features.

However, the 2011 production's unique elements do differentiate it from the near-contemporary television treatment. As well as deploying an imaginative narrative structure, Fukunaga exercised restraint throughout. In contrast, the 2006 miniseries used a flamboyant approach that ensured generic excess. The two proposals highlight the separate version's contrasting emphasises. In the 2006 scene, Jane (Ruth Wilson) believes that Rochester will marry another woman and she weepingly bawdies some of the text's most iconic speeches whilst mucus streams from her nose. Wilson's hysterics illuminates the treatment's bias towards extreme feeling and self-expression. Yet in 2011, Wasikowska's eyes brim with tears but she maintains her composure. In a lone acknowledgment of the miniseries, Focus Features' website implies the different tones adopted by the 2006 and 2011 versions. The site quoted a blogger's accusation that the 2006 remake was "sensationalizing" and "more of a Gothic/Harlequin romance" (Focus Features 2011c).

Overall, the 2011 film's publicity implies an effort to discourage comparisons with the 2006 miniseries. Fukunaga and Buffini exaggerated their debt to Stevenson's adaptation to distract from the inevitable similarities with the post-millennial television treatment. Moreover, the 2011 filmmakers highlighted their studio era influences to confer their version with a prestigious, but distant, celluloid pedigree. The association exposes the lacuna for a fresh remake and occludes the existence of a production made five years prior. The paratextual marketing ensured a direct line of descent between the 1944 to the 2011 films, and blatant interfilmic quotation consolidated the connection.

Nonetheless, the earlier productions overshadow the 2011 *Jane Eyre*. In his review for *The Observer*, Philip French decries contemporary filmmakers' ability to compete with their studio era counterparts. Yet he perceived Fukunaga's referential ending as "perfunctory" and concludes: "[s]ome would argue that only a five-hour TV mini-series could do justice

to the tone, detail and character development of Brontë's triple-decker Victorian novel, and I think they're probably right" (2011). Though French remains fixated on fidelity and fails to identify any specific television comparison, his comments remain illuminating. His evaluation suggests that the 2011 filmmakers' cinematic homage operates on a spectator not only familiar, but intimately so, with both the source text and its screen legacy. Additionally, the reworked 2011 ending underlines how the 2006 treatment incorporated Brontë's epilogue. Even when highlighting its celluloid pedigree, the 2011 film creates an inadvertent reminder of the television adaptation's approach. Moreover, its cerebral subtleties are unlikely to become seared into the cultural imaginary. In contrast to Stevenson's version, future adaptors are unlikely to reference the 2011 *Jane Eyre* as an iconic inspiration.

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Jane Eyre. 2006. Miniseries. BBC

Jane Eyre. 1944. Dir. Robert Stevenson. Twentieth Century Fox

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Jane Eyre. 1996. Dir. Franco Zeffirelli. Miramax

Jane Eyre. 1983. Miniseries. BBC

## ***J Edgar***

Dir: Clint Eastwood, USA, 2011

### **A Review by Serena Daalmans, Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands**

A new type of man can be added to Clint Eastwood's resume with *J Edgar* (2011). From portraying a long line of lone wolves who doled out their own type of justice in lonely (Western) towns, from *Dirty Harry* (1971) to Walt Kowalski in *Gran Torino* (2008), he now turns his directorial gaze to the ultimate bureaucratic puppet master. It soon becomes clear that Hoover's power and effectiveness in meting out justice and defending America against enemies both foreign and domestic is unrivalled by the likes of *Dirty Harry*.

Clint Eastwood's latest film portrays the life of John Edgar Hoover, the controversial first director of the FBI who held onto the directorship with a vice-like grip for more than four decades. The biopic is not an accurate, historical account of Hoover's life and times, since Eastwood for one seems to play with the mechanism of using Hoover as an unreliable narrator in the film. Screenwriter Dustin Lance Black and Eastwood are more invested in capturing, through non-linear flashbacks, this man's accumulation and subsequent use of almost unrivalled political power. Hoover, who worked under eight presidents, from Coolidge to Nixon, was so powerful that the two presidents (Truman and Kennedy) who toyed with the idea of firing him decided against it for fear of political backlash (Powers, 1987).

The movie deftly integrates Hoover's lifelong obsession with Communists and maintaining the established order, since this formed the background to most of his professional endeavors: from his witch-hunt and consequent deportation of anarchist Emma Goldman, his involvement in the Julius and Ethel Rosenberg case, the wiretapping of Martin Luther King Jr., to the hundreds of millions of fingerprints he kept in store, to the dossiers he accumulated on the rich and famous. He used this wealth of information to silence his critics, destroy his enemies and keep a stream of Presidents, Congressmen and Attorney Generals in line. This immense power is never clearer than in the scene with Attorney General Robert Kennedy (Jeffrey Donovan), where Hoover tells Kennedy—who was his superior—that he has evidence of his brother's sexual liaisons with women of questionable reputation.

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The script by Dustin Lance Black humanizes Hoover, explaining his authoritarian rule of the FBI as stemming from his repressed sexuality and his relationship with his domineering mother. With a compassionate eye the movie sheds light on the life of a man who by some is defined as a corrupt, paranoid, power-hungry and egomaniacal tyrant. The movie, like a lot of historic accounts, doesn't make definitive statements concerning Hoover's much discussed sexuality. While Clyde Tolson's obvious homosexual feelings for Hoover become abundantly clear in a jealous fit of rage, the sexual inclinations of J Edgar himself are never exactly pinpointed in the film. As Richard Gid Powers (1987, p.172-173) concludes about the relationship in his biography of Hoover:

[g]iven Hoover's straitlaced Presbyterian upbringing and his almost fanatical conventionality, it is not inconceivable that Hoover's relationship with Tolson excluded the physical sexual dimension. Yet human drives being what they are, it is also possible that it was a fully sexual relationship. There is no compelling evidence for a definitive judgment in either direction. ... Throughout Hoover's life, official Washington simply accepted the situation at Hoover's own valuation: that he and Tolson were associates and friends. The prevailing attitude was that the actual nature of the relationship was no one else's business.

The movie does make crystal clear that Hoover came to depend on and tremendously care for Tolson, as well as his loyal, lifelong secretary Miss Gandy (Naomi Watts). The professional and personal companionship of the three is convincingly concluded, when we see Tolson covering up Hoover's dead body while Miss Gandy is fulfilling Hoover's last request, namely destroying Hoover's secret files so that President Nixon won't get his hand on them.

Eastwood once again proves to be a great actor-director; with confidence and a steady hand he draws excellence from his actors, especially Leonardo DiCaprio. DiCaprio who is no stranger to biopics, playing Howard Hughes (*The Aviator*, 2004), Frank Abagnale (*Catch Me If You Can*, 2002) and rumored to play Frank Sinatra in Martin Scorsese's upcoming movie (Farber, 2010), delivers a subtle yet captivating performance as the titular character. DiCaprio mastered Hoover's mannerisms as well as his Washington drawl, but he is at his most convincing in Hoover's younger years because awkward prosthetics and make-up seem to lessen his power as an aged Hoover. In supporting roles, especially Arnie Hammer as Hoover's life-long companion Clyde

Tolson and Judi Dench as Hoover's domineering mother Anna Marie light up the screen.

The beautiful cinematography, by Tom Stern, works its magic on viewers who can almost smell the cracked leather and polished hardwood floors of Washington in a time gone by. The secrecy and repression that marked Hoover's life, both professionally and personally, is accentuated by Stern's subtle use of low-lit rooms and faces that are partly concealed in shadows (Goldman, 2011), while the use of desaturated colors also reveal a stylistic connection to film noir.

The movie is flawed in a couple of significant ways, the most important being the script. Scriptwriter Dustin Lance Black, whose work on the biopic of Harvey Milk earned him an Oscar, delivers a much more uneven script for director Clint Eastwood to work with. The fast pace of the movie as well as the use of non-linear flashbacks is agreeable for most of the movie, although at some points it takes away from the gravitas of the scene at hand. In his effort to humanize Hoover, Black also glosses over Hoover's questionable involvement in the McCarthy hearings as well as the aid he provided Nixon in the Alger Hiss case.

The prosthetics and make-up used to age all the actors, in order for them to play the characters during the course of their lives, are so bulky and unrealistic that it literally weighs down the performance of the actors. DiCaprio spent a reported six to seven hours in the make-up chair, and the crew was amazed that they did not need CGI to age the characters (Snead, 2011). With CGI they could have aged the characters much more convincingly, which was stunningly and award-winningly done in for example David Fincher's *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008) (Seymour, 2009; Sydell, 2009).

All in all, the film is a mixed bag. The work demonstrates a steady directorial hand, excellent acting and beautiful cinematography, but also a rather uneven script and bad make-up and prosthetics. In the end, the acting and storytelling do deliver an intensely captivating film, which will no doubt disappoint some and enamor others, but on the whole gives us insight into the secrets of a hugely influential man obsessed with keeping and harnessing other people's secrets for his own purposes. A man who like no other shows us that there is immense power in secrecy.



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*Catch Me If You Can*. 2002. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Dreamworks Distribution

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## ***Andy Hardy Collection, Volume I***

Dir. George B. Seitz, USA 1937, 1938, 1940, 1941 (box set released in 2011)

### **A Review by Judy Beth Morris, Susquehanna University, USA**

The Andy Hardy series was one of the most lucrative film serials in motion picture history and therefore it is fitting that Warner Brothers has released six Andy Hardy films on DVD in a box set, "Andy Hardy Collection, Volume I." The films included in the set are *You're Only Young Once* (1937), *Out West with the Hardys* (1938), *Judge Hardy and Son* (1938), *Andy Hardy Meets Debutante* (1940), *Andy Hardy's Private Secretary* (1941), *Life Begins for Andy Hardy* (1941).

The Andy Hardy series was unique because so little money was put into the films' production, yet the films consistently did well at the box office, providing MGM with a profitable investment. These were B-movies, often thrown together in a couple of weeks, with actors who may have been working on more than one film project at a time. The most popular films of the series grossed between two and three million dollars the year they were released. *Love Finds Andy Hardy* (1938) and *Life Begins for Andy Hardy* (1941) grossed somewhere around two and a half million dollars each. The top box office grossing film of the year at that time typically made around \$6 million and cost much more than MGM spent on a Hardy film.

Mickey Rooney's rise to teen stardom was largely due to the popularity of the Andy Hardy series, which helped him to retain the number one ranking on the top ten list of box office stars for three years in the U.S. (1939-1941). He was arguably the first movie star specifically packaged by a studio as a quintessential symbol of American adolescence. His popularity may have single-handedly awakened Hollywood moguls to an awareness of the viability of market segmentation and, in particular, the lucrative youth market. Writers for the mainstream press did not know what to make of his popularity, often barraging him with names such as "rope-haired kid," with a "kazoo-voice" and "comic-strip face" (Agee, 1940: 84). They berated him unmercifully, but were occasionally forced to recognize his talent; Rooney could sing, dance, act, and energetically perform comic bits with whole-bodied grace and dexterity.

Andy Hardy was a likeable, though often mischievous, goofy kid, whose exploits involving schoolboy romances, school plays, high school graduation, and missteps into adulthood became the main storylines of the films as Rooney's popularity reached its climax and the films' other characters were reduced to roles of supporting players. The first film in the series, *A Family Affair* (1937) starred Lionel Barrymore as the local town's judge and Mickey Rooney as the youngest of his three children. In the sequel, *You're Only Young Once* (1937), Rooney was the only central member of the original cast to resume his role. Lesser-known actor Lewis Stone replaced Barrymore (who did not want to be tied to a B-movie series).

The series continued to perform well at the box office but really took off with the fourth offering, *Love Finds Andy Hardy* (1938) in which Andy's name became part of the films' titles and his character took over as the central entity of the series. It's a pity that this new box set does not include *Love Finds*, the strongest film of the series. But it does include *Life Begins for Andy Hardy*, which runs a close second. The other two films in the set worthy of note are *Andy Hardy Meets Debutante* and *Andy Hardy's Private Secretary*. Both *Life Begins* and *Debutante* feature Judy Garland as Betsy Booth.

In viewing the series now, it is tempting to analyze it as an example of 1930s Depression escapism. More specifically and significantly, however, the Andy Hardy films, taken together, can be examined as an idealized version of adolescence in America. The films were so successful in playing with and to audiences' perceptions of what life should be like for a teenager, MGM saw fit to churn them out until Rooney was twenty-seven. Thus, the Andy Hardy series presents an extended adolescence, from which he (Rooney himself and Hardy within the films) and the society around him receive immediate gratification while postponing, or even forfeiting, the greater rewards of maturity and adulthood.

Throughout the series we see Andy trying to receive the rights and privileges he feels belong to him, as a "man". His understanding of what that entails is decidedly childish, as is his over-estimation of his own maturity, worldliness, and appeal to women. The humor and charm of the films are chiefly derived through his missteps towards manhood. In *Love Finds Andy Hardy*, he wants to buy a car, although he is only fifteen. He does manage to acquire the car, but when it eventually breaks down, he wants a brand new one with leather seats in *Andy Hardy's Private Secretary*. In *Andy Hardy Meets Debutante*, Andy orders and consumes

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an expensive meal at a fancy New York restaurant as he waits to see the "number one debutante" who is expected to dine there. He soon finds out the meal costs nearly five times the eight dollars he has in his pocket, and, to exacerbate his troubles, he loses Betsy's father's four-hundred-dollar pearl shirt stud. After Andy fails to make amends on his own, his father steps in and pays for the meal and recovers the shirt stud at the end of the film.

The series repeatedly drive Andy toward failure, humiliation, and a recognition of his true state as a child, dependent on others for success. Andy simply is not allowed to succeed, at least not on his own. He repeatedly steers the plot toward bobbysoxer "crises" but must rely on others to extricate him from these same crises. At the end of *Love Finds Andy Hardy*, Betsy snidely compliments Andy on his helplessness, "You've got to be smart to get into as much trouble as Andy does!" she says to Polly, Andy's girlfriend. Andy then thanks Betsy for her help, saying in a babyish voice, "Anybody else [who] had my troubles wouldn't be able to figure a way out." Of course, the joke is that he is not the one who figured the way out, though he appears to believe he masterminded it all.

Only in *Life Begins for Andy Hardy* do we see him successfully navigate the set of obstacles he finds himself in, and this occurs only when he hocks his new car and succumbs to hunger, fainting on his boss's office floor (after which the staff feeds him a meal). Even in this film, after reaching a pseudo-level of independence, he finds adult life too overwhelming because of the apparent suicide of a friend, the costs of living on one's own, and the demanding expectations of his low-paying job. So he returns to his hometown of Carvel by the end of the film, gladly stepping back into the role of son, child, and household consumer.

In viewing the series as a whole, Andy seems to age at a snail's pace, rewarded when he acts as a teenager but punished or humiliated when he attempts to take on genuine responsibilities of a "man." In two of the films in the box set, *Andy Hardy Meets Debutante* and *Life Begins for Andy Hardy*, Andy suffers defeats of character pride and then career when he goes to dark and scary New York City. In *Life Begins*, he begins dating an older woman who works as a switchboard operator in the office where he himself is an office boy. Sophisticated and good-looking, Jenitt's designs are not as wholesome as the small-town girls back in Carvel, we are lead to believe, when, in an early sequence, she tricks the beauty-blinded Andy into buying her an expensive bottle of perfume.

Ironically, when the films do present a single, working woman in the form of Jenitt, she is vilified. Though Jenitt lives alone and earns her own living as a humble switchboard operator in the big city, she is after much more. She is promiscuous, attempting to lure Andy to her lair when her divorce has yet to be finalized. Jenitt also uses men and their money, as when she buys a fur coat on her husband's credit without him knowing about it. Towards the end of the film, Jenitt lures Andy into her apartment in order to seduce him. Andy follows; he appears to be eager to lose his virginity. Yet Jenitt's self-seeking, man-manipulating ways are revealed to Andy before anything can happen and Andy has a change of heart, which allows him to retain his boyish innocence and the series to continue. Andy must not have sex now or for years to come, even if he wants to or is capable of it. No, that would be a fast and furious initiation into "manhood" and childhood would be forever lost and irretrievable. The Hardy series was determined to hold Andy in a state of suspended teenage animation. The only females deemed acceptable for him are the harmlessly girlish Polly Benedict (Ann Rutherford) and the sweet but more-of-a-sister-or-gal-pal, Betsy Booth.

The makers of the Hardy series seem to play with the idea of manhood, dangling it in front of the character of Andy like a carrot never to be grasped. The films parody the very concept of masculinity (though inadvertently), just as they mock and humiliate Andy in his pursuit of it. Andy never really achieves maturity or reaches his idea of manhood, unless one counts the forgettable *Andy Hardy Comes Home* reunion-style picture from 1958. Even in *Life Begins*, a film that allows him to experience some autonomy in New York, Andy eventually is pulled back down to regain his original status as a dependent. In fact, the film's ending echoes this ongoing dilemma of Andy as an adolescent who wants to be a man but is trapped in a series that continually draws him back home to mother.

At least Andy's entrapment in adolescence is made more palatable by the inclusion of tender scenes that would later become obligatory rite-of-passage rituals in family movies and television sitcoms: the father-son talk. Andy typically finds himself in a mess and goes to have a "man to man talk" with his father, who straightens everything out or threatens the appropriate punishment (such as a weekly allotment taken from Andy's allowance—like in *Andy Hardy Meets Debutante*) by the end of the discussion. Of course the "man to man talk" is an amusing cover for what is really going on; it is an unspoken agreement which allows Andy to be

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open in revealing his current catastrophe and, in turn, makes Dad promise to deal with him honestly and fairly—as he would with another man. But Andy would not have needed the man-to-man talk if he had truly been a “man” and acted responsibly in the various situations that lead him to assume the hot seat before his father. The “man to man talk” is really a wink at the audience, who realize that is precisely the opposite of what is going on. Eventually, even Andy realizes this himself in *Life Begins for Andy Hardy*, when he says there is “a funny thing about that man-to-man business. When you’re a kid you always want to talk to your father man to man, but all of a sudden you realize that only a kid would want to do that.” Immediately after saying so, however, he goes home with his father in order to move back into his room (after his returning from the “trial” of living on his own in New York City). Andy wants to remain a kid, after all.

Judge Hardy’s lectures to Andy were often eloquent statements that captured dearly held American values and respect for American institutions, as when he urges his son to retain his virginity in *Life Begins for Andy Hardy* by saying: “Marriage is the one happiness in the world that can be spoiled by anticipating it. Many marriages are ruined just that way.” When Andy asks for clarification, the Judge urges him to remain sexually pure and faithful to the girl he will one day marry. “How could a fellow be unfaithful to a girl he hasn’t even met yet?”, Andy asks. The judge replies:

Well, it’s very easy. Why, entering into an illicit romance, you’re just inviting yourself to the habit of unfaithfulness. Infidelity is a habit all too easy to acquire, if it begins before marriage. The habit of transferring one’s affections from one girl to another is very apt to destroy the ability to bestow those same affections permanently on your wife.

Though Andy dutifully follows Dad’s advice on chastity in the rest of the series, he and other teens do “play house” and pretend to be adults without performing any actual work or responsibilities. In *Andy Hardy’s Private Secretary*, Andy indirectly refers to Polly as his “wife” and says her “place is in the home.” While the family is in New York City in *Andy Hardy Meets Debutante*, Andy attempts to enter high society and eventually succeeds to some degree, after his father pays for the expensive meal mentioned earlier and Betsy provides the appropriate formalwear and introductions. Andy, though only sixteen or seventeen, cavorts around the city in Betsy’s family’s chauffeured town car and attends a coming-out ball where he dances with New York’s number one debutante. Meanwhile, his



parents are content with just visiting the Statue of Liberty. Such scenes reinforce the notion that Andy Hardy's adolescence was not anything like most teenage Americans' lives in the Great Depression.

The press of the time period was well aware that Andy Hardy and Rooney's boy-next-door persona were not depictions of reality. Writing in 1941, Thomas Brady of *The New York Times* says that he believes Andy Hardy is popular because adult movie patrons see him as an awkward yet ultimately triumphant adolescent, "an idealization of youngsters they knew" (1941: M8). A 1940 *Time* article discusses Rooney's real life bad-boy exploits, which were endangering his clean-cut image, and then explains almost cynically that a publicity campaign to restore Rooney's image as "the typical American boy" has been "highly successful and is still carrying on" (Agee, 86). Agee says that Rooney eagerly "discussed the first stirrings of his young libido with a candor that amazed even the publicity boys." Apparently, reporters learned how to "uncork Rooney" and "let him spill his thoughts on forbidden subjects," but when MGM heard of this, they sternly reprimanded him, which put an end to his blabbering (Ibid.). MGM convinced him to remain quiet, at least in public, about his sex life by showing it was in his own best interest. Rooney was later to fill two autobiographies with tales of his sexual escapades.

Agee implies that the movie-going public is fully aware of Rooney's "true" personality, but they want to believe he is just like Andy Hardy and they can be easily duped into forgetting what they know and embracing the persona fabricated by MGM. Did Americans want to believe in the "reality" of Hardy's goodness so badly that they so easily forgave Rooney's soiling of the boy hero's image? It appears to be so.

Just as studios sought to churn out as many films as possible capitalizing on Shirley Temple and other child stars' youths, MGM enlisted Rooney in eleven Andy Hardy films from 1937 to 1941. While Rooney was discovering his sexual prowess, purchasing cars and a house, and eventually marrying his first wife, Ava Gardner, in 1942, his on-screen counterpart was not experiencing much headway in his march towards manhood. Andy Hardy does graduate from high school in *Andy Hardy's Private Secretary* and even goes to college in *Andy Hardy's Double Life* (which is not included in this box set). But Andy's personality and pranks remain consistently of the teenage variety throughout the series. Of course, it is not difficult to see why; MGM had found a successful formula and was going to squeeze it for all it was worth. And audiences did not seem to mind that Andy was taking a long time in growing up—rather, the

series' continued box office success hints that audiences relished his arrested development. Thomas Schatz proposes that Rooney's popularity as Andy Hardy "was a kind of centripetal narrative force that picked up speed with each picture, as character and actor steadily merged into a cultural icon of perpetual motion and perpetual adolescence" (Schatz 1988: 257).

Rooney, as Andy Hardy, captured a version of male youth in a moment of time that still emits charm when revisited. Although not an accurate depiction of youth during the latter part of the Depression, nor a truly perfect ideal presentation of adolescence, the Andy Hardy series presents viewers with a vision of youth that is complex in construction and in relationship to the lived experience of those who originally viewed the films. Probing deeper into a series made so quickly and cheaply makes us realize the problems and contradictions that lurk behind a glossy veneer of supposed "all-American" experience. Perhaps the B-movie cheapness of the Hardy films allows them to be particularly revealing in that their makers worked from gut instincts and deeply held beliefs and did not fully think through or foresee the implications that exist within their finished products. If this is true, these and other B-movies are worth studying just because they contain many of the thoughts and hopes of influential storytellers and dream-crafters of modern American history.

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## ***The Avengers***

Dir: Joss Whedon, USA, 2012

### **A Review by Brady Hammond, Independent Scholar**

The events of September 11, 2001, permanently changed the psyche of the United States. The homeland was no longer viewed as a sanctuary, but instead as a territory which needed to be defended. While Hollywood has sparingly dealt with the actual events of the day in films like *World Trade Center* (2006), the approach it has favored has instead been a fantastic revision of the events. *Spider-Man* (2002) and its sequels, for instance, met with enormous success by giving New York City a guardian that fought off the domestic threats. Other blockbusters have continued this theme of defense such as *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (2011), which both showed heroes protecting cities. *The Avengers* (2012) does as well, but by relocating the action to Manhattan, and presenting the destruction as the result of a foreign invasion, something with which *Spider-Man* did not contend. It creates a scenario that vividly recalls the events of 9/11 and the heroism that followed.

Yet the film revises rather than recreates the attacks of 9/11, a process which is not unusual for Hollywood cinema. This is evident with a film like *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), which revised the trauma of the Vietnam War. It did so, however, from the vantage of Reagan-era politics (Kellner 1995: 65-67). Similarly *The Avengers* presents 9/11 from the perspective of the contemporary nation and its mythic identity. Specifically, it revises 9/11 by exploring American exceptionalism in relation to the partisan politics that have become the hallmark of post-9/11 politics, suggesting that the United States needs to enter a post-partisan state. Given the record-breaking success of the film in the United States, including the largest domestic opening weekend ever at 207 million USD, it is apparent that the simultaneous exploration of these themes has struck a chord with audiences and, as a result, reveals much about the United States and its relationship to its recent history, including the War on Terror.

*The Avengers* begins with Loki, the primary villain, coming to Earth and stealing an object which will open the doorway to another world, permitting an alien army to invade. From this introduction the film begins its first act in which the heroes, who include Iron Man, Captain America,

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Thor, and the Hulk, assemble. The conflict, the central theme of this part of the film, grows out of the differing personalities of the characters and the ways in which they wish to reclaim the stolen object. The film progresses to its second act when those tensions erupt into overt hostility, making the heroes vulnerable to scheming of the villain. Eventually the heroes realize that they must work together to win, and the film subsequently enters its destructive climax in Manhattan where the Avengers suffer through an enormous onslaught, but ultimately win the day.

As this brief synopsis demonstrates, much of the film focuses on the *disunity* of the heroes, rather than the larger alien threat. This plot structure suggests that the revision of 9/11 in the film is not based on the fear of terror, but instead is informed by the dire partisanship which has marked both the Bush and Obama presidencies. Yet even as the film espouses a post-partisan rhetoric that mends the post-9/11 political divide, it also communicates regressive notions that undermine the progressive post-partisan ideas it advocates. To understand the ways in which *The Avengers* does this, it is useful to first consider how the theme of partisanship is established not just in the first two acts of the film, but in the franchise itself.

Each of the main heroes of *The Avengers* has already starred in a film solely devoted to them. This began in 2008 with the releases of *Iron Man* and *The Incredible Hulk*, continued in 2010 with *Iron Man 2*, and finished in 2011 with the *Thor* and *Captain America: The First Avenger*. Although *The Avengers* clearly works hard to ensure that viewers need not have seen any of those five movies to know what is happening, the characterizations of the heroes in those films inform the conflict of its first two acts.

This is evident when the swaggering Iron Man crafted in his two films is almost immediately pitted against the duty-bound World War II veteran *Captain America* introduced. Yet the positioning of *The Avengers* as a simultaneous sequel to five films elevates the film from a simple conflict about characters who disagree to one that is enmeshed with the partisan division in the contemporary United States. The film dramatizes these political positions through its depiction of American exceptionalism. Each of the films that preceded *The Avengers* was part of a cycle of superhero films that became prominent after 9/11. Films in this cycle function to showcase American exceptionalism (Dittmer 2011: 115-117), the idea that the United States has a global duty and destiny to spread its

democracy-based ideology. *Superman Returns* (2006), for example, presents American exceptionalism which parallels the “religiously themed notions of manifest destiny” (Dittmer 2011: 121), and *Iron Man* shows “an icon of American technological innovation and the hierarchies of domination it permits” (Dittmer 2011: 122).

In all of the films which preceded *The Avengers*, different types of American exceptionalism were on display from the stubborn resilience of the Incredible Hulk to selfless heroism of Thor. The first two acts of *The Avengers* emphasize that although America is exceptional in many ways, its exceptionalism can be the cause of disunity, rather than its solution. The narrative that emerges, then, is one where the divided Avengers realize that their strength comes through unity and that they can only win the day when they move to a post-partisan state. This realization comes at the end of the second act, after their infighting causes the death of a friend and nearly costs the Avengers their own lives. Confronted with their loss, they commandeer vehicles and travel immediately to New York City as a group. This transformation to post-partisanship is emphasized through dialogue between Iron Man and Loki where the maverick Iron Man self-identifies as part of the team. Once the film permits this re-entry into New York, they are able to defend both the physical city, and the ideals it represents. Importantly, this position of acceptance makes the boundaries of exceptionalism permeable, enabling each hero to adopt the qualities of the other heroes. Hulk, for instance, takes on the humanitarianism of Thor, and Iron Man assumes the more messianic persona of Captain America by putting the safety of the city above his own. The post-partisan ideals attached to the American exceptionalism in the film are, however, undermined through the use of divisive stereotypes.

Susan Jeffords argues that 1980s action films featured white male protagonists with hard bodies which “enveloped strength, labor, determination, loyalty and courage” (Jeffords 1994: 24). It is these bodies which are on explicit display in the final act of the film. While the bodies in the film do deviate somewhat from that model—Thor is not American, Iron Man has an exoskeleton, and Black Widow is a female—the implication of their victory is that the qualities of the hard bodies of the film are symbols of a post-partisan United States. This link is strengthened through the contrast of these hard bodies with the body of Loki which is slender, lithe, and even able to create illusionary duplicates, emphasizing its insubstantial nature. While the film avoids labeling him as

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a queer character, though going so far as to call him a “diva,” the dichotomy between the bodies of the heroes and Loki is emphasized when they confront one another in the final act. Although Loki is able to resist the blows of the heroes remarkably well, his bodily difference is made clear when he attempts to forego physical exertion to reason with the Hulk, who proceeds to use his own hard body to smash the soft body of the other.

This is a problematic representation of bodies for any film, but especially for one that focuses on a post-partisan nation because the heroic hard body on display is one which has been linked very closely to the conservative policies and ideology of the Reagan administration as well as Ronald Reagan himself (Jeffords 1994: 24-28). Since those policies have become the source of a partisan debate in the contemporary US culture, the film communicates a very mixed message regarding bodies, evident in its use of race and gender in its second and third acts.

Racial discourse is an integral part of the United States, and it is unsurprising that the film negotiates issues of racial difference. However, the one prominent black character in the film, Nick Fury, is not the character through which the film explores these issues. Instead it is through the green skin of the Hulk. As seen in films such as *Little Shop of Horrors* (1986), *Shrek* (2001), and *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (2000), to name just a few, the use of green to mark racial difference is a strategy which is frequently used. In *The Avengers*, the green Hulk resembles racist depictions of black characters, most notably the black brute which has been defined as “a barbaric black out to raise havoc” (Bogle 1989: 13). This stereotype becomes even more pronounced when the film itself mobilizes it as a plot device. Specifically, the plan Loki has to destroy the Avengers in act two involves nothing more than unleashing the Hulk so his natural rage will destroy the non-green (i.e. white) Avengers. What ultimately saves the Hulk and transforms him from threat to hero is that his white self, Bruce Banner, learns to control his inner Other. In essence, the racially marked character gains a white master. What is more, the prize for the triumphant Hulk is that he can remain white at the end of the film. While this treatment of race is quite problematic and casts strong doubt on the nature of the post-partisan state the film reaches at its conclusion, the film does manage to be more inclusive in terms of gender.

Black Widow is the main female Avenger, though not the only female character in the film. While the curves of her body are emphasized, its

hardness is too. When she is introduced she is being tortured by men, but it is quickly revealed that she was merely doing this to retrieve information from them and, once she has completed her mission, proceeds to defeat them all in physical combat. While the film often draws upon her rhetorical skills instead of her physical skills, her body is still subjected to the physical onslaught the male heroes face in the conclusion. The fact that her body is not superpowered does mean that the assaults on her body are not as brutal as they are on the primary male heroes. The same holds true for her non-superpowered male counterpart, Hawkeye. The result is that the film disrupts the gender binary of the hard body of the 1980s of hard men and soft women. So even as the film reinforces masculine stereotypes, it does move away from the gender divided action films of the past. This effectively supports the notion of post-partisanship the film cultivates in a way that its representation of race does not.

Yet neither of these elements exists in a vacuum of fantasy. As noted earlier, the film mobilizes them to more deeply explore the recent history of the United States, specifically the events of 9/11 and the War on Terror that followed. This is due to the fact that all of the heroes in the film are effectively agents of an organization called SHIELD. SHIELD is an espionage group that functions in the film as a more secretive and superpowered version of the CIA. It is clearly grounded in the post-9/11 United States as the acronym departs from the comic book version, most recently standing for Strategic Hazard Intervention Espionage Logistics Directorate, but in the film standing for Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division. Further connecting it to the War on Terror is its utilization of procedures which are similar to methods used by the Bush administration. For instance, when attempting to locate Loki in act one, a character notes that they are using a process which turns all wireless electronics into monitoring devices so that they can have a worldwide tracking network.

This is very clearly a parallel of the warrantless wiretapping authorized by the Bush administration, and is presented as a strategic advantage rather than a constitutionally questionable tactic. A more noteworthy corollary appears at the end of act two, and serves as the event which catalyzes the transformation of the Avengers from partisan individuals to post-partisan heroes.

After Loki unleashes the Hulk and nearly destroys the Avengers, the group is in shambles. Rather than an exceptional group, they are a



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collection of exceptional, but separate individuals. To show the group what they are fighting for, Nick Fury presents a stack of Captain America trading cards. These cards, Fury tells them, were found in the possession of one of the SHIELD agents Loki killed. The trading cards are covered in blood and Fury explicitly states that they represent the faith that citizens of the United States have in the people who embody American exceptionalism since those exceptional individuals fight the fights that the average citizens cannot. In this way, the film directly connects American exceptionalism with the War on Terror, suggesting that the former is necessary to defend it from enemies foreign and abroad. It underscores this by having the Avengers finally realize their higher calling and assemble to repel the invasion.

After they depart, however, the film reveals that Fury manufactured this evidence. In so doing, it endorses the position that the ends of patriotic defense of the homeland justify the fabrication of cause to do so. This is the very tactic used by the Bush administration in the lead up to the Iraq invasion when it presented forged documents and exaggerated evidence regarding Saddam Hussein and his supposed attempts to acquire materials of mass destruction. This parallel strengthens the connection between the film and the War on Terror even further, effectively shaping the climactic fight with the history of the post-9/11 United States. However, by setting the entire climax of the film in a Manhattan under alien attack, everything becomes indelibly linked to the events of September 11. Unlike the real 9/11, though, where heroism emerged in the aftermath of the attacks, the heroics of the Avengers, as in a film like *Spider-Man*, take place during the attacks and successfully protect the city. This revision to the actual events is most evident in the architecture of the city.

The post-9/11 skyline of New York City is marked by the absence of the World Trade Center towers, but the skyline of the city in the film is noteworthy for the unexpected presence of the digitally inserted Stark Tower, the fictional headquarters of Iron Man. Although it is only a single building and not as tall as the Twin Towers, the connection between those and Stark Tower is strengthened through its role in the climax of the film. This is because Stark Tower is the focal point of the attacks on the city in the film, just as the World Trade Center buildings were on 9/11. Unlike the World Trade Centers, though, Stark Tower does not fall. The heroic intervention of the Avengers keeps it standing tall. What is more, while it was once emblazoned with the name "Stark," symbolizing the self-centered and partisan nature of Iron Man at the beginning of the film, the

attacks destroy all parts of the sign save for the letter A, which simultaneously stands for Avengers and America, suggesting that the two are the same. That the film closes on the image of the building underscores its message that a post-partisan United States, while unable to *avert* an attack, could instead *protect* the country and its citizens.

The power of American exceptionalism to defend and heal has been a standard trope in superhero films since 9/11, and it continues to meet with box-office success. However, as films become further removed from the events of 9/11 and the War on Terror, they must find new ways to remain relevant. *The Avengers* has seemingly solved this problem for itself by focusing on the partisanship which has become a prominent part of culture and politics in the United States. By dramatizing the shift to a post-partisan United States, where exceptional individuals work together for the benefit of the many, the film presents a vision of a more perfect union. Yet unlike the aisle crossing in real life which would involve voices from left, right, and center, the film skews its own message to the right, emphasizing policies and procedures which came into effect after 9/11 during the War on Terror and which often reinforced divisive partisanship. The result is a film which itself fails to cross the aisle.

Yet this failure still reveals much about the current culture in the United States and the rhetorical power the themes of American exceptionalism hold, particularly when they are used as a lens through which history can be viewed. The final comments made by Nick Fury speak to this point, as he frames the Avengers not as a statement of the power of the United States, but a promise to the world and potential aggressors that, as the name of the group and the film suggest, the nation will be avenged. In essence, Fury points to the War on Terror. Since the five planned sequels to the film will build upon *The Avengers*, just as it did with the five films which preceded it, these films will very likely play out that promise and see the Avengers not just revise 9/11, but the culturally divisive War on Terror. For that reason the films and the franchise as a whole will continue to have great relevance to understanding contemporary culture in the United States.

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## ***A Dangerous Method***

Dir: David Cronenberg, 2011

### **A Review by Charles Andrews, Whitworth University, USA**

In the filmic landscape of 1980s horror, amid the glut of *Halloween* offspring and imitators, David Cronenberg's cinema bursting with icky, revolting imagery conceived to horrify rather than merely jolt was a welcome variation for movie gorehounds. Carol J. Clover's discussion of Cronenberg in her slasher film study *Men, Women, and Chain Saws* concludes that the ruptured bodies of his movies conform to horror's generic conventions by "incorporating its spectators as 'feminine' and then violating that body—which recoils, shudders, cries out collectively—in ways otherwise imaginable, for males, only in nightmare" (Clover, 1992: 64). Clover identified in Cronenberg's brand of horror a feminizing of male bodies to which may be added a failure among his characters for rational minds to control and contain bodies in revolt.

That Cronenberg has persistently explored the horrors of minds at war with bodies would seem to make him the perfect director for *A Dangerous Method* which dramatizes the relationships among Carl Jung (Michael Fassbender), Sigmund Freud (Viggo Mortenson), and their patient-turned-colleague Sabina Spielrein (Keira Knightley). Spielrein suffers from intense social anxiety that manifests in physical contortions and paroxysms of shame. To assist her, Jung begins a regimen of his newly formulated "talking cure," which not only heals her disorder but ultimately leads her to become a formidable psychoanalyst in her own right. Freud maintains a complex role in both Jung and Spielrein's lives as earnest mentor and jealous rival. Circulating through the conversations among these characters is the contentious history of psychoanalysis as well as the division between Jews and Gentiles that profoundly affected the lives of Freud and Spielrein during the rise of the Third Reich.

Many critics have regarded *A Dangerous Method* as lacklustre due to its scarcity of explosive violence and sexuality. Keith Phipps registers the typical complaint when he observes that the film "keeps a measured, observational distance from its characters" and though "the approach suits the subject, [it] proves dramatically frustrating, favoring hushed

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pops over fireworks.” Similarly, Scott Bowles opines “The film is well-acted and tightly written. But given its subject matter, *Method* could use a dollop of heat.”

These reservations may have more to do with our expectations about and perceptions of Cronenberg’s work than about the film itself. A recurring theme in the discussions of *A Dangerous Method* is its supposedly exceptional position in Cronenberg’s overall oeuvre. More chattering than splattery, this film shows its roots as a stage play and lacks the signature shock moments that stand out in a “typical” Cronenberg picture. However, it would be a mistake to see *A Dangerous Method* as a total departure from Cronenberg’s recurrent interests as they have appeared throughout his career. Not an aberrant exception, this film distils several of Cronenberg’s key traits and fits into a small but growing strain in his body of work.

There are three traits that stand out in Cronenberg’s films and mark him as an auteur in the classic sense which made Howard Hawks’ seemingly disparate output fit a single directorial vision. The first trait is a persistent exploration of bodies in revolt against themselves, a theme that has made him the prime example of the sub-genre known as “body horror.” The second trait is the attention that he gives to language in his films and their immersion in references to literature both classic and current. Jonathan Rosenbaum has said of this often overlooked quality that it “anchors him as a filmmaker much as Method acting can anchor some performers.” And the third is his moralizing which turns even the most horrific of his films into parables of modern life.

All of these traits can be found in *A Dangerous Method*. Though less grisly than other Cronenberg movies, this latest film is not entirely without revolting bodies (in both senses of the phrase). The opening scene is perhaps the film’s most kinetic with a racing carriage ride transporting a shrieking, jaw-thrusting Keira Knightly to Jung’s treatment centre. The scenes of Sabina Spielrein’s various humiliations en route to her eventual cure revel in the gruesomeness of bodily functions amid early twentieth-century decorum. That masochism is Spielrein’s shame-inducing desire leads to several scenes of sexual humiliation, all of which are considerably chaster than their rough equivalents in Cronenberg’s sex-and-auto-wrecks opus *Crash*, but which still generate thrills by exhibiting private, lustful desires.

Cronenberg’s typical erudition is displayed in the debates among his characters about their psychoanalytical methods and their speculations

about the future of this new therapy. Much of the dramatic tension in the latter half of the film derives from the history of psychoanalysis itself as Freud grows increasingly anxious over the corruption of his methods by Jung's exploration of a collective unconscious. This erudition emerges partly from the several sources Cronenberg adapts. The screenplay by Christopher Hampton was based on his play *The Talking Cure* which was itself based on John Kerr's popular historical study *A Most Dangerous Method*. The film exhibits another kind of focus on language as well through its constant attention to writing, story-telling, and interpretation. Letters exchanged by Speilrein, Freud, Jung, and Jung's wife become the source of disputes that propel each of their relationships. A great deal of the conflict between Jung and Freud is expressed through their combative interpretations of each others' dreams. In the end, the attention to language and the moralizing of *A Dangerous Method* coalesce as the unwillingness or inability of the characters to compromise and collaborate on their scientific project leads to the destruction of their relationships. As a parable about several men seeking to control the bodies and life stories of others, Cronenberg's latest work is remarkably consistent with his earlier studies of bizarre obsession.

*A Dangerous Method* clearly demonstrates that the stereotypical Cronenberg film full of splatter and revulsion is only one branch of a three part oeuvre. To the casual film-goer, and perhaps to certain types of fan, the "Cronenberg film" means the organic and venereal horror movie with its rupturing bodies and bursting viscera. In the 1970s and 1980s Cronenberg specialized in this kind of movie, earning the moniker "Baron of Blood." Notable examples of this type include *Shivers*, *Rabid*, *Scanners*, *Videodrome*, *The Brood*, and *The Fly*. In all of these films the body is an uncontrollable site of betrayal that no amount of virtue or right-thinking can restrain. Heads explode, abdomens erupt into vaginal VCRs, flesh grows black and oozing, and on and on in a litany of unforgettable images that explore the limits of creative make-up and effects as well as the outer realms of human fears about illness, corruption, and sanity. The moralizing in these films is sometimes quite clear, as in the STD allegory *Shivers*, and sometimes more opaque, as in the female hysteria of *The Brood*. The erudition of this first Cronenberg style may not always be as apparent, but a standout in this vein is *Naked Lunch*, his adaptation of William S. Burroughs's stories which employs the body horror of his other movies in an examination of Beat drug culture.

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The second style is directly related to the first, and has been the mode of his more recent films, though its roots go back at least as far as the 1980s. It is like a bridge between overt body horror and the comparably more restrained *A Dangerous Method*. This second style has less splatter but is equally surreal and focuses much more on the mind's relation to the body, the ways in which mental warping can manifest in struggles with physical control. This category would include *The Dead Zone*, *Dead Ringers*, *A History of Violence*, and perhaps *Eastern Promises*, which makes the cut for its handful of shocker scenes but lacks the full-blown surreality of the other films in this list. The payoff for Cronenberg fans who relish the first of his styles is still possible in these films with their gruesome moments like bizarre gynecological devices, squishy gunshot wounds, and all-nude knife fights. However, the focus of these movies is not those extreme moments, but rather the mental states that make those moments possible. All the main characters in these films attempt to live different lives more fully wholesome than the ones their disordered personalities gravitate toward. The moralizing in these movies seems, perhaps, more social, since it is society that produces the split personalities of the main characters.

*A Dangerous Method* is a leading example of Cronenberg's third style which is often overlooked or disparaged. In these films, the grisliness is all but eliminated in favor of an examination of minds that are struggling with themselves and the demands of bodies. This type of film would include obscure works, such as his racecar movie *Fast Company* and his adaptation of David Henry Hwang's play *M. Butterfly*, as well as his higher-profile, schizophrenia thriller *Spider*. Each of these films has been seen as a kind of deviation from what Cronenberg does, or at least what he does best, and many of them have been panned. The more staid tone of *A Dangerous Method* has led to a widespread critical view that the new film is dull and stagey, content to showcase downplayed performances of actors in lush sitting rooms dialoguing. However, this effect works to Cronenberg's advantage by keeping a certain wary intensity simmering throughout the film since viewers may expect everything to go haywire at any time. This expectation is part of the film's point, since the competing demands of the characters' desires combine with their impulses toward repression and expression to create the frothy stew that psychoanalysis serves. All of these sitting-room conversations reveal subtle pains, drives, and exaltations roiling in the unconscious but barely acknowledged on the surface. In this context, we do not need a splattered body when a cigar flick and a stifled grimace will do.



If *A Dangerous Method* has a limitation, it is not its lack of the shocker elements beloved by Cronenberg fans. Rather, it is its overly stylized structure that pits several psychoanalytic tropes against one another without letting the characters breathe quite enough to become full and complex. One of the highlights of the movie is Vincent Cassel as Otto Gross, a struggling psychoanalyst who comes to Jung for assistance but manages instead to convince his therapist that sex with fragile female clients is perfectly acceptable. Gross is all about gratification without regard for others, and as such he is little more than Id personified, stealing his pleasures and theorizing this hedonism. Contrasted with Cassel is Viggo Mortenson's delicious, layered performance as Freud, constantly relishing his cheroots and sternly, jealously admonishing Jung. From behind smoke clouds savored in ways that make the viewer wonder if indeed a cigar is "just" a cigar, Freud proffers guidance to his protégé which Jung tries but fails to accept. This version of Freud as a Yahweh in a pillar of smoke fits neatly—too neatly, perhaps—into the unconscious triad as the Superego, placing strict commands upon the Ego, who is manifest as the Jung character. Michael Fassbender's Jung is a brilliantly restrained, quietly tortured figure battered by his attractions to the Id and pricked by the demands of the Superego. As a structuring device on paper, this is all somewhat interesting, but as rendered in the film, it accentuates the staginess and the contrivances of Christopher Hampton's stage-play upon which the screen-play is based.

The character who escapes this Freudian triad is Miss Spielrein, whose virtual disappearance presents the other problem with the film's structure. Of course, Hampton is sticking fairly closely to the historical record in having her become involved with Jung and then flourish elsewhere as a therapist married to another man. But this development in filmic terms means that Jung remains far and away the central figure of the film, the one whose ideas about therapy sound the least self-interested, the most plausible, and whose actions, though occasionally sorrowful, are never really interrogated. Jung comes off a bit too clean in the end, and Spielrein is essentially written out and left as an example of a road not taken rather than given much of a personality at the conclusion. Similarly, Freud is petty, narrow, obsessive, and altogether unable to consider other peoples' views. Again, this version of the man may accord with the historical record, but in the film the shallowness of Freud undercuts the dramatic tension in scenes where he and Jung argue about their differing beliefs. Jung is too much the hero and Freud's views are not given enough nuance to seem plausible.

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Apart from these complaints, *A Dangerous Method* is engaging as an expansion of David Cronenberg's often-overlooked, more subtle style. There may be some dissatisfaction with this film among horror devotees wishing for a blood feast, but there are enough of Cronenberg's signature elements here to appease the completist surveying his full oeuvre. Whether Cronenberg will continue in the path forged here of developing his third style is a point for speculation, but all signs indicate more elaboration of this restrained mode. His next film, slated to appear in August 2012, is an adaptation of Don DeLillo's psychologically-gripping fable *Cosmopolis*, which would suggest that he will continue his erudite, moralistic explorations of the mind at war with the body.

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## ***The Shore***

Dir: Terry George, UK, 2010

### **A Review by Andrea Grunert, Protestant University of Applied Sciences, Germany**

Terry George's Academy Award winning thirty-one minute film *The Shore* focuses on two friends, separated by the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Returning to Belfast after twenty-five years, Jim (Ciarán Hinds) has to face broken friendships. He fears the confrontation with his childhood friend Paddy (Conleth Hill) and with Mary (Maggie Cronin), his former fiancée, whom he had left behind in his native town. *The Shore* is the story of two middle-aged men, narrated with straightforward realism and in a series of sequences that focus on everyday situations. Subtle allusions to a broad historical, political and cultural context are enough to explore the complexities of human behaviour behind individual decisions and motivations. The narrative subtleties and mise-en-scène strategies, supported by highly nuanced performances make this short film a surprisingly rich picture of a region, its inhabitants and of human behaviour.

This homecoming story could be the starting point for another cinematic tale about the conflict in Ulster as visualised in a series of films such as *Angel* (Ireland/UK, 1982, Neil Jordan), *Resurrection Man* (UK, 1998, Marc Evans), *Mickybo and Me* (UK, 2004, Terry Loane) and *Five Minutes of Heaven* (UK/Ireland, 2009, Oliver Hirschbiegel), which explore the Troubles as intestinal war. Not unlike the protagonists of *Mickybo and Me*, Jim and Paddy were blood-brothers, closer to each other than real siblings, as Jim puts it. While Terry Loane's film deals with two ten-year olds, one Protestant, one Catholic during the height of the Troubles, George's film avoids categorisations and direct verbal references to religion and faiths, suggesting, however, that the two protagonists are from the same background.

The reasons for their motivations and remorse hark back to a love story and a series of misunderstandings. Jim fears the meeting with Paddy as he thinks of how he betrayed him and Mary; Paddy is convinced of having stolen Jim's fiancée, whom he married after Jim's escape to the United States in the seventies. George explores human behaviour and psychological motivations through dialogue and strong acting. Jim's

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hidden past is disclosed in a long dialogue sequence with his daughter. Ciarán Hinds's facial and bodily expressions make the protagonist's strong emotions tangible. His attention to detail underlines the character's inner turmoil, revealing its remorse and the fear resulting from it. Performance becomes the signifier of the protagonist's state of mind and his inner feelings, endowing the foregrounding realist texture with unexpected depth.

Humour is very clearly utilised to enrich the characters, exploring the psychological dimension in an entertaining way. Throughout the film Paddy is shown to be a witty man who cannot resist an ironic remark at the social security office when he is asked if he has worked during the last few months. The scene with the horse rider is the most vivid and hilarious moment in the film. Its slapstick-like comedy changes the film's pace unexpectedly after the highly emotional scene between Mary and Jim. Moreover, the humour contributes to the portrayal of a specific landscape - the County Down countryside (most of the filming was done in the village of Killough) - and the people who inhabit it.

Terry George's protagonists are warm-hearted, hospitable and quick-witted people who like to sing and make merry as at Jim's homecoming party, for example, and in the last sequence when Jim, Paddy and their friends and family are happily reunited. The glimpses of everyday life and the humoristic moments counterbalance the idea of terror and oppression related to Northern Ireland over a long period and present more light-hearted visions of the six counties and of the social or ethical themes (e.g. unemployment, guilt) dealt with in the film. What could have been a tragic moment - the reunion of the two friends - dissolves into laughter and gives way to a new beginning. The unexpected twist avoids sentimentality and suggests that sometimes problems could be resolved easily if people are willing to talk and that misunderstandings, once revealed, can be overcome. *The Shore* is not a nostalgic vision of Northern Ireland like the coming-of-age films *Titanic Town* (UK, 1998, Roger Michell) and *Mickybo and Me* with which it shares a similar sense of humour. The humour and the realism, highlighting human behaviour, prevent George's short film from generic conventions.

If the real tragedy lies in the gap created between the two protagonists as a result of very personal decisions they themselves have taken, the Troubles are not absent from the story. Unlike *Wild About Harry* (UK/Ireland/Germany, 2000, Declan Lowney) in which the civil unrest is

erased from the amnesiac protagonist's memory, *The Shore* refers to the Troubles, revealing through dialogue how much they have impacted on the lives of the two friends: Jim had to leave his home town because of his involvement in the Troubles; Paddy lost an arm. If politics had not intruded into everyone's life, they would not have been separated and life would have taken another turn.

The film's story is not set in the period of the Troubles, but subtle allusions make this short cinematic narrative a highly symbolic discourse on the specific Northern Irish context. A black and white photograph of the two teenage boys cross-fades to a general view of Belfast, connecting the private with the political, the individual with the general, the past with the present. The long dialogue between Jim and his daughter is shot on top of a hill, with the two characters sitting on a bench overlooking the city below. It is another peaceful image; two individuals sharing a moment of privacy. This is the point when, surrounded by the beauty of nature, Jim starts confronting his past, talking for the first time about his Belfast childhood. The shot is very different from the standardised impressions of the Northern Irish city repeated in many films about the Troubles and reproduced in recent productions such as *Five Minutes of Heaven* and *Fifty Dead Men Walking* (UK/Canada, 2009, Kari Skogland). There are none of the usual rows of (rundown) brick buildings or stretches of wasteland. The natural setting literally becomes a scene of liminality in which the present takes over the past and the universal is connected with cultural connotations. The general shot of the landscape with Belfast in the background reveals in the most discreet way the omnipresent socio-cultural context of which the individual is part.

One subtle allusion to the politics underpinning everyday life in a story which is less mundane than it first appears is made in the hilarious sequence with the rider. Seeing the horse coming towards him, Paddy's one thought is to run away. Out of breath, he soon has to give up and, on his knees and with his one hand in the air, sighs: "I surrender!" In the context of (Northern) Ireland, this exclamation has more profound implications, ironically evoking its opposite, the no-surrender motto of Ulster Protestants (Bruce, 1994: 63). Intransigence was not restricted to the loyalists however, as Marc Mulholland recalls it: "Ulster is remarkable for the tenacity of its communal divide." (2002: 1) In *The Shore*, the "I surrender!" is playfully used as another comic allusion implying several meanings with regard to political and personal reconciliation.

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The Troubles are an ideal subject for cinematic reflections on guilt and forgiveness, misunderstandings and the very notion of secrets, the lack of communication and the idea of a past one cannot come to terms with. The refusal to talk and hardened positions on both sides made a political solution impossible for many years. George has already dramatised this situation in *Some Mother's Son* (UK/Ireland, 1996), which deals with the IRA prisoners' hunger strike in the Maze prison in 1981, denouncing both the intransigent attitude of British government representatives and Sinn Féin's opportunism. *The Shore* questions the very notion of truth, showing that truth may not be the same for everybody. Jim fails to tell his vision of the truth to Paddy who in turn needs to confess what he believes the truth to be. The very notion of truth as fragile and undetermined creates another link with the political situation in Northern Ireland, reminding us how each group involved in the conflict claimed to be the guardian of the one and only truth. In contrast, *The Shore's* protagonists are able to resolve conflict through dialogue. It is through dialogue that Jim and Paddy escape the vicious circle of silence which separates them. Although it is Pat, the representative of a younger generation, on her first visit to Belfast, who convinces her reluctant father to face his deep-rooted fears after twenty-five years of silence and misunderstandings.

In addition, *The Shore* refers to social issues such as unemployment. The question of daily survival is very real for Paddy and his three friends who are less afraid of violence than they are of the law. The men's lives are very frustrating because the daily catch is far from satisfying as Paddy complains when coming home. It is clear that Paddy's difficult economic situation is a direct consequence of the Troubles which have made him their innocent victim. Jim remembers young Paddy as an excellent apprentice carpenter who was shot and lost his arm when he was an innocent bystander.

The terror topic is still looming large in the British and Irish consciousness as shown by productions such as *Omagh* (Ireland/UK, 2004, Pete Travis) or *Mickybo and Me* and more recently in *Five Minutes of Heaven*, *Hunger* (UK, 2008, Steve McQueen) and *Fifty Dead Men Walking*. The mere evocation of Belfast still recalls the troubled past of the province, with sectarian violence as the thematic concern as opposed to the romanticised vision of Ireland, the bucolic Emerald Isle. George's film alludes to stereotypes in order then to depart from them in a story full of subtle turns, revealing multiple layers of meaning. The documentary style of the filming and the naturalistic acting make it a very real experience,

rooting *The Shore* in its regional culture where festivals and music are predominant patterns and at the same time giving it universal appeal. This also applies to the scene where Jim, looking at the landscape from a car, sighs: "You forget how green it is. [...] So green." Hinds puts so much emotion in this exclamation that cliché is avoided and all his characters' homesickness is revealed, and we are reminded of the beauty of the landscape and its colours.

The link to the filmmaker's own biography creates another subtext connecting *The Shore* with the region and its people. According to the filmmaker, the story was inspired by the experience of a relative. George himself, after being arrested in 1975, served a six-year prison sentence for INLA (Irish National Liberation Army) activism in the Maze prison. His emigration to the United States after the end of his prison term seems a life-saving choice, which could be compared to Jim's departure to America and the emigration of much of the Irish population over the centuries for political or economic reasons. In addition, George himself appears in the pub sequence. The photomontage of portraits of the adolescent Hinds and Hill, both born in Northern Ireland, adds a wink to a reality beyond the silver screen. It supports the realist approach and reveals how several realities fuse into each other to inspire the narrative's cultural and humanist aspirations.

Their recurrence and the humour, understandable outside Northern Ireland, contribute to the international appeal of *The Shore* and are perhaps reasons for the film's award-winning success. George's short film confirms tendencies in the Irish cinema since the late eighties to be dominated by filmmakers inclined towards narration rather than aesthetical innovation. This is true for the full-length feature films George was involved in as a writer or director (such as *The Boxer*, directed by Jim Sheridan, [Ireland/UK, 1998], *Hotel Ruanda* [USA/UK/Italy/RSA, 2004] and *Reservation Road*, USA, 2007]). *The Shore's* clever dialogues and pace underline once again the Irish fascination with storytelling. However, if short film productions often tend towards more experimental forms of expression, its realist approach fits in perfectly with a European cinema preoccupied with social and ethical concerns, ranging from Ken Loach's films to Susanne Bier's *In a Better World* (Denmark/Sweden, 2011). The film's rootedness in a specific regional culture is paralleled by the exploration of universal themes (e.g. friendship, guilt, reconciliation), which give rise to a dimension of globalism as a current production strategy of small countries. In terms of content, narration and production



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*The Shore* could be considered a quintessential film about Northern Ireland.

Within the realist frame of the narration and mise-en-scène, George manages to create a multi-layered tale embracing individual fate and collective history, psychological and moral concerns. He challenges possible pre-existing viewer expectations by avoiding the focus on the Troubles which, however, continue to resonate in his film, where the political and the private remain inextricably intertwined. *The Shore* reveals how social and political factors, such as the Troubles, affect the protagonists' lives, but the circumstances which threatened to ruin Jim and Paddy's friendship are far more complex, involving personal and social factors, misconceptions and emotions.

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