28 Days Later

Dir: Danny Boyle, Netherlands/UK/USA, 2002

A review by Elizabeth Rosen, University College London, UK

Given the rightfully vicious response to their last project, *The Beach* (2000), one would think that director Danny Boyle and writer Alex Garland would hesitate before working together again. Fortunately, they didn't, and the result, *28 Days Later*, is one of the best horror films to come out in years. This is not to say that the film doesn't have glitches; it does. But *28 Days Later* is an ambitious film which, like the best of its genre, leaves its audience thinking as well as cowering.

The film opens with a montage of violent riot footage culled from television newscasts. When the camera pulls back to reveal a chimpanzee strapped down and forced to watch these scenes repeatedly as part of a scientific experiment, the viewer may find himself squirming, not merely because of the ethics of the science, but also because *he* is the chimpanzee, as well. This subtle moment of self-reference resurfaces later in the form of questions about man's "animal" nature and Darwinian notions of survival, but here it serves first as background. The chimps in this lab are infected with a highly contagious virus called "Rage", and when well meaning animal activists free one of the infected animals, all hell breaks loose.

Twenty-eight days later, bike courier Jim (Cillian Murphy) wakes from a coma to discover that the virus has wiped out the population of England, and seemingly the world. Or almost wiped out. As Jim soon learns, there are a few survivors, but these are in an ongoing scrabble to elude the "Infected". The rabid Infected are fast, violent and fatal to encounter. Soon, Jim is part of a small band of survivors, including stony Selena (Naomie Harris), affable Frank (Brendan Gleeson) and Frank's teenage daughter Hannah (Megan Burns). Together they set out to find the source of a mysterious radio broadcast which promises "the answer to infection" and the protection of the army.

When they do finally reach their destination, they discover that the "army" is a group of eight soldiers under the command of Major Henry West (Christopher Eccleston) who have commandeered an estate and rigged it against the persistent Infected. But this is the beginning of a whole different problem: the Major, in an effort to keep his men from committing suicide, has promised them women to perpetuate the species, and now Jim must somehow rescue the two women from the predicament.

This seeming change of focus from the "zombie" film to an altogether more "realistic" genre is the film's most potentially problematic move, but also one of the most interesting. In order to rescue Selena and Hannah, Jim must descend into the kind of violence and gore associated up until that moment with the Infected, a point iterated when both women attack Jim thinking he is one of the Infected. But the physical and attitudinal violence of the soldiers which

precipitates the bloody rescue suggests that Boyle wants us to believe that the only real difference between the soldiers and the Infected is a uniform.

In one of the emblematic scenes of the film, a pensive sergeant muses how the infection, in wiping out mankind, is returning the world to a natural, "normal" balance. In response, the Major says: "In the twenty-eight days since infection began, I've seen man killing man. In the twenty-eight days before that I saw man killing man. As far back as I can recall, this is what I've seen: man killing man. That suggests to me that this is normality."

It's not subtle, but it's provocative, and it plays nicely against the less overt opening sequence. The Major would like to convince Jim that the world is governed solely by Darwinian notions of survival, and that this justifies his use of the women as pacifiers for his randy men. But no amount of rational debate can erase the uncomfortable implications about war-time rape and selective breeding programmes. In a moment nearly as frightening as any involving the Infected, the Major tries to turn the distressing experience Jim has had killing an infected boy into a rational example of how the instinct to survive overcomes ethical considerations. Under the circumstances, it sounds reasonable, until we realise that it's the same logic that eugenicists have invoked for centuries.

To make the point clear, out in the courtyard of the estate house the Major has chained up one of his former soldiers, now infected. He's hoping to learn something about infection by watching how long it will take the Infected to starve to death, since they are otherwise "future-less". But since this infected soldier happens to be black, it's impossible not to read shades of a slavery past into the image, and we remember that this, too, was justified by rational sounding men.

If the diversion away from the more traditional horror film seems a bit unwieldy, we can perhaps forgive Boyle and Garland; they are, after all, trying to juggle a lot of different ideas. Not least of these is the notion of infection, a topic which is especially resonant right now with recent anthrax attacks in the U.S. and talk of biological warfare. In an interview Boyle revealed that the "Rage" infection was based in part on the fast moving Ebola virus which causes the same kind of haemorrhaging depicted in the film. Though the possibility of such a pandemic is absolutely the most terrifying aspect of the film, the use of the term "infected" to denominate those afflicted creatures should, perhaps, put us in mind of another pandemic sweeping the world currently: H.I.V.. In an early scene during which Jim discovers a makeshift bulletin board in Piccadilly Circus where people have posted notices to missing loved ones, the camera pushes in to linger on a photo of a young boy. Given the composition and juxtaposition of this photo against the notices reading "Infected!" and "Epidemic!", older viewers might recall a similar boy's image used in conjunction with infection, that of Ryan White.

The plight of the Infected is made especially poignant during the scene with the infected soldier in the Major's compound. Exhausted by his Rage/rage, the soldier falls panting to the ground in a pathetic heap. He reaches out his arms to Jim in a gesture of supplication, as a child reaching for comfort, and Jim, obviously moved by this still human gesture, starts to go to him before the rage takes hold again and he is forced to back away. This soldier is the only one of the Infected whom we see more than once in the film, and in his characterisation Boyle has managed a clever reversal à la Frankenstein. Without exception, each time the soldier is pictured alone, he is a figure of pathos and isolation, rather than an object of terror.

The final image of the stricken man howling into a storm, alone after having killed his "master", contains both literary and contemporary allusions.

Shot digitally, the film's grainy documentary style is extremely effective. The digital work allows for the unsettling, jerky jump cuts which characterise the movement of the Infected. The normal claustrophobic horror film shots are ditched in favour of more harrowing shots in which objects (Infected?) streak through the edges of the composition, and replicate that unnerving experience of spotting something not-quite-right out of the corner of one's eye. Boyle and his director of photography, Anthony Dod Mantle, have also crafted some haunting moments. Aside from the achievement of shooting locations such as Leicester Square and Piccadilly Circus as empty, echoing vistas, two particular stand-out moments are a scene in which the beleaguered survivors stop to watch a family of horses galloping up and down a pastoral riverside, and a truly disquieting scene of the same group watching Manchester burning on the distant horizon. When Jim says in disbelief, "The whole of Manchester?", Selena sadly replies, "No fire crews to put it out", and as the camera pans up to show the engulfed city, one can't help but remember that a mere sixty years ago this was the stuff not of science fiction, but reality.

Such moments lend a gravity and lyricism to *28 Days Later* that raise it above merely an updated zombie film. The holes in the plot, such as the unanswered question of where all the millions of corpses have gone, are not so large as to undermine the larger themes, while the ideas driving the film are frightening enough to compensate for the extra bit of suspended disbelief which the director asks of his audience. Horror fans who like substance to their scares will enjoy *28 Days Later*.

Australian Science Fiction Film Festival, May/June 2002

A review by Polona Petek, University of Melbourne, Australia

The inaugural Australian Science Fiction Film Festival, with consecutive screenings at the Dendy Opera Quays in Sydney (9-15 May 2002) and Kino Cinemas in Melbourne (13-19 June 2002), was described by its organisers as the celebration of one hundred years of science fiction cinema. Fittingly, the festival opened with Georges Méliès' silent classic *La Voyage Dans La Lune* (France, 1902), generally considered the first science fiction film, followed by the Australian premiere of one of the most recent ventures within the genre, Cory McAbee's sci-fi comedy *The American Astronaut* (USA, 2001), which was enthusiastically received by the audiences at the 2001 Sundance Film Festival.

In the following six days, the festival offered a broad, but somewhat random selection of older and more recent science fiction aficionados' favourites. The prolific 1950s were represented by a sole film, Fred Wilcox's *Forbidden Planet* (USA, 1956). We saw Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove* (UK, 1964), but not his equally, if not more, pertinent to the genre *2001: A Space Odyssey* (UK/USA, 1968). Kaufman's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (USA, 1978) was screened; not so the original, Don Siegel's 1956 classic of the same name. The *Star Trek* and the *New Generation* fans had the opportunity to see *Star Trek: Generations* (David Carson, USA, 1994), the film that links the two TV series. On the other hand, there was no time devoted to one of the most influential, popular and widely discussed science fiction films of all time, George Lucas' *Star Wars* (USA, 1977), and its sequels. The *Alien* tetralogy was represented by the first film, Ridley Scott's *Alien* (UK/USA, 1979). The year's Short Circuit short film competition featured eight entries by local filmmakers: *Clone Alone* (Myles Conti), *Dark Age Of Light* (Tom Taylor), *Darklands* (Jamie Marshall), *Harbirth* (Martin Thorne), *Harvey* (Peter McDonald), *Headspace* (Joshua Holliday), *Suburban Knight* (Dean White) and *Winter Harvest* (David Blumenthal).

Filmmakers, film critics and academics joined the event in two panel sessions. "How to Build a Rocket" provided an opportunity to discuss nuts and bolts of sci-fi filmmaking with John Tatoulis, the director of *Zone 39* (Australia, 1996), the local filmmaker Pete Ford, and Robert Sutherland, the director of the closing night feature *The Inside Story* (Australia, 2002). The "Science Fiction Designs the Future" forum with the academic Dr Angela Ndalianis and two Melbourne based film critics, Paul Harris and Megan Spencer, offered a different, non-industry view of the genre, its origins in art and science, its development, the most memorable moments and current prospects. The session also included the screening of a short lecture by one of the genre's literary gurus, Isaac Asimov, on science fiction literature and magazines.

The choice of films in the festival programme certainly seemed arbitrary. The fact, however, is hardly surprising if one considers the immense body of films that comprise the science fiction genre (the Internet Movie Database search, for instance, returns 4,354 film and

television series titles matching the description), and even less so if one takes into account the absence of a consensus among film scholars as to what exactly the defining elements and the limits of the genre might be. Rather than insisting on one of the more or less reductionist definitions of science fiction, the festival highlighted the fact that cinema audiences represent an important element in discussions of genre: science fiction fans are quite willing to attribute the label to a range of rather diverse films.

There is, however, another interesting and potentially more productive insight, brought into focus by the selectors of the festival and implied in the name of the event itself. Genre as a theoretical concept was first embraced by film theorists to make possible a non-auteurist approach to cinema and to facilitate discussions of cinema as a popular medium. Later, particularly with the postmodern breakdown of the distinction between high art and popular culture, genre and authorship studies became more easily reconcilable. What has so far attracted a lot less interest in the discipline, however, is the possibility of fruitfully combining the genre criticism approach with the study of a national cinema. As one might expect, of course, there are studies of the science fiction genre within American cinema (Sobchack, 1999; Seed, 1999). The Australian take on the genre, on the other hand, is still waiting to undergo a serious and extensive study. This year's festival catered particularly to all those science fiction devotees with a taste for Anglo-Saxon science fiction. Nonetheless, one could spot a pronounced ambition to bring into focus Australian (Anglo-Saxon) science fiction films; that is, films produced by Australians, made in Australia and/or by Australian filmmakers.

The films that were introduced as Australian in this year's programme included *Epsilon* (Rolf de Heer, 1995), *Zone 39* (John Tatoulis, 1997), *Dark City* (Alex Proyas, 1998), *The Matrix* (Wachowski Brothers, 1999), two new features, *Neophytes and Neon Lights* (Shane Hall, 2001) and *The Inside Story* (Robert Sutherland, 2002), and three short films, *The Thief Of Sydney* (Toby Zoates, 1984), *Broken Allegiance* (Nick Hallam, 2002), and *Sev Trek: Pus In Boots* (John Cook, 2002). Particularly the last two, Hallam's homage to *Star Wars* and Cook's hilarious animated variation on the TV series *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994, created by Gene Roddenberry), were warmly greeted by the festival audience.

The narrative of *The Inside Story* revolves around a book that functions as a portal between parallel realities, or at least between different modes of reality: between the past, the present and the future as well as between the realms of everyday life, fantasy and creative imagination. Through a chain of fantastic events, which are never logically -- or shall we rather say *scientifically*? -- explained, and which deny the audiences any point of reference, these realms lose their initial ontological status irretrievably. Although the film features fascinating special effects and one of its protagonists is a scientist -- an astrophysicist to be quite precise -- it came as rather a surprise to see the film included in the programme of a science fiction festival. Vivian Sobchack has argued that 'it seems not enough to say that the horror film is about magic and religion and that the SF film is about science…both genres involve *interaction* between magic, science, and religion -- and the only thing which really separates the genres is the dominant emphasis' (op. cit.: 58) given to one of these discourses. In *The Inside Story*, the discourse of science is not even equal to, let alone privileged over, religion, occultism, magic or artistic expression, and the film's classification as horror (or horror comedy) rather than science fiction seems a more obvious choice.

Dark City and *The Matrix* present a different problem. While no doubt prominent examples of science fiction, their designation as Australian is to some extent problematic. *Dark City*

was written and directed by Alex Proyas, who was born in Egypt and moved to Sydney at the age of three. Except for his early shorts and first feature *Spirits of the Air*, *Gremlins of the Clouds* (1989), each of his subsequent films (including *The Crow* [1994] and *Garage Days* [2002]) was at least in part produced by American studios, *Dark City* by Mystery Clock Cinema and New Line Cinema. With its digital special effects designed by the Australian DFILM Services, filming locations in Los Angeles and Sydney, and the cast including British, American and Australian actors, the film is rather an excellent example of the globalised nature of the current film industry. The same holds true for *The Matrix* (1999), written and directed by the American-born Wachowski Brothers (who made their directorial debut with the provocative post-*noir Bound* in 1996). Its international cast, crew and company credits indeed include several Australian actors and companies -- production company Village Roadshow Productions, special-effects designers at the DFILM Services and the Makeup Effects Group Studio among others -- and most of the filming was carried out in studios and on locations in New South Wales, Australia. Yet, *The Matrix* should rather be viewed as an outstanding *international* cinematic achievement.

Epsilon (1995, written and directed by the Dutch-born filmmaker Rolf de Heer), *Zone 39* (1997, directed by the Melbourne based filmmaker John Tatoulis and written by the renowned Australian TV writer Deborah Parsons) and *Neophytes and Neon Lights* (2001, the debut feature by the Australian director and writer Shane Hall) were shot entirely in Australia and funded predominantly by Australian production companies. More importantly, and although their plots and even settings might seem rather different at first sight, these films share an element one is tempted to call a distinctly (although not exclusively) Australian feature within the science fiction genre film, namely, their deployment or at least evocation of landscape. (From this perspective, the absence of George Miller's *Mad Max* trilogy at this year's festival becomes even more obvious.) John Baxter observes the "familiar elements" of Australian science fiction cinema: "a limitless desert, part prison colony, part Aboriginal reservation, part redneck backwater, part abandoned firing range but mostly toxic dump, roamed by a population of black visionaries and white criminals or crazies…a polluted factory site, outback desolation, Big Brother regime" (Baxter, 1998: 31, 34). Baxter carefully adds that this employment of Australian landscape corresponds to the image of Australia in the European cultural imagination, whereas, in my view, it actually exemplifies the white Australian perception of the land.

Acknowledging contributions to the study of science fiction made by Susan Sontag (2001), Vivian Sobchack (op. cit.), Barbara Creed (1993) and others, and drawing on Baudrillard's (1983) notion of simulacrum, J.P. Telotte argues that science fiction "has focused its attention on the problematic nature of human being and the difficult task of being human" (Telotte, 1995: 2). He does not object to the commonly identified iconographic and narrative elements of sci-fi cinema, such as robots, deep-sea exploration, interdimensional, intradimensional and space travel, interplanetary wars, invasions from outer space and/or encounters with aliens, and environmental salvation or destruction. However, Telotte recognises the principal and defining theme of the science fiction genre in (American) cinema in dealing with the precarious boundary between human and non-human.

Interestingly, Telotte's argument lends itself easily to readings of American-Australian productions, such as *Dark City* (a story about a man struggling with disturbing and somehow unfamiliar memories of his past in a world controlled by non-human beings with telekinetic powers, who are gradually taking possession of the souls of humans) and *The Matrix* (a story about a man learning that the world around him is a computer simulation created by superior

artificial intelligence beings, who exploit humans and are able to take on the human form whenever required). When taken up in discussion of Australian films screened at this year's festival, Telotte's account, while no doubt still legitimate, appears less helpful. The three films do stage an encounter with a non-human living form, yet there seems to be no uncertainty with regard to the boundary between human and non-human. The uncertainty is rather projected onto man's [sic] encounter with his environment, with landscape. Film reviewers usually observe that landscape takes on an ambivalent role in Australian cinema in general: breathtakingly beautiful and vast, yet also wild, untamed and hostile. In my view, its role in science fiction is even more significant: often, the footage of landscape all but completely supplants the effects achieved by special effects in big budget American and international sci-fi productions. Substituting artificially created settings, props and characters, this employment of landscape also confirms Sobchack's argument that sci-fi iconography "evoke[s] the genre, but [is] -- specifically and physically -- not *essential* to it" (op. cit., 65).

Of the three remaining films, *Neophytes and Neon Lights* is perhaps least supportive of this argument, since the entire plot of the film takes place indoors, at Sydney's Teleport Station located on an island. When a group of opportunists steal a stranger's suitcase and the police put psychokinetic transfer on hold, thus leaving everyone stranded at the teleport, the crooks have to resort to old-fashioned ways of leaving the scene. The film features no shots of landscape whatsoever, yet, its plot -- through the characters' desire to flee the confined space of the teleport -- strongly evokes the usual connotations of Australian landscape: its vastness, tamelessness, affinity with outcasts; in short, its otherness.

Zone 39 and *Epsilon* are more straightforward, though quite different manifestations of the use of landscape in Australian science fiction. Andrew L. Urban stated about *Zone 39* that "the science fiction tag is a tad misleading" (Urban, n.yr.), while Jayne Margetts described the film as "a nightmarish Orwellian tale that is not at the mercy of special effects" (Margetts, 1997). Both reviewers felt that the film's claim to classification as science fiction is highly questionable, and preferred to call it a political or psychological thriller. While certainly displaying strong undertones of the two subgenres, I believe *Zone 39*, with its dystopian vision of the near future as our scientific development might shape it, still requires consideration within science fiction. More importantly, anxiety about this not-yet-known future is conveyed less through visions created by special effects than by means of the film's representation of Australian landscape as deserted, isolated and utterly threatening.

Epsilon is perhaps an even better example of the tendency to render the land a prominent feature in Australian science fiction cinema. Jim Gay, whose overall critique of the film is less than flattering, observes that "the Australian landscape has seldom looked so beautiful" (Gay, n. yr.). More significantly, I believe the setting in *Epsilon* is more than just an eye-catching backdrop to the film's fairly uncomplicated plot. In the course of the development of the relationship between the "gregarious every-Aussie and Earth's representative" the Man and the beautiful and intellectually superior alien She, the landscape -- in contrast to *Zone 39* -- acquires the status of a silent, helpless, vulnerable and ultimately invaluable protagonist.

One of the possible ways of interpreting science fiction is to view it as a genre that gives expression to human anxiety about the enigma with which the future presents us, an expression articulated largely through discourses of science and pseudoscience. From this perspective, Australian science fiction certainly seems to inscribe this anxiety (along with its optimistic, utopian and dystopian manifestations) in what the country most obviously abounds with, namely its vast and mostly unpopulated territory, which responds to human

technological advances either by slowly fading away or by natural disasters that humans tend to interpret as nature's hostility.

The first Australian science fiction festival was indeed primarily a celebration of this prolific and diverse genre, and a great opportunity to see older classics again on the big screen and a handful of more recent films that did not receive a nation-wide release in Australia. Viewed from another perspective, the festival also highlighted the fact that science fiction might not be the strongest line of development in Australian filmmaking, yet an interesting and quite specific one. Hopefully, this event will bring about a steady new addition to Melbourne's rich film festival scene, as well as be appreciated as a much welcome initiative for a comprehensive study of Australian science fiction cinema.

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Bloody Sunday

Dir: Paul Greengrass, UK/Ireland, 2002

A review by Michael Keating, MIT, USA

Bloody Sunday, the *faux* documentary on the events of 30 January 1972 in Derry, Northern Ireland, is a gut-wrenching, innovative piece of film-making. It is shot, for the most part, with a hand-held intensity that allows the viewer instant and urgent access to all the major players in a political drama that has had soul-searching consequences for the British people.

The storyline is brief and tragic. In response to the policy of internment and the growing aspirations of the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland, the leaders of that movement in Derry decided to organise a one-day, peaceful march of protest. In response, the British government declared the march illegal and the army was sent in to contain the march and to deal with the "hooligans". Things break down when elements of the march refuse to break off the original route which was to have ended at the Derry Guild Hall, and proceed to engage in stone-throwing against the army checkpoints. On the army side, a squad of Paratroopers, on its last mission in Ireland, is let loose on the crowd with live ammunition and stomachs full of animosity towards the "yobos". The result: thirteen dead, fourteen wounded.

In order to dramatise these events the Director, Paul Greengrass, fixes his *cinéma vérité* on the MP for Derry, Ivan Cooper, played magnificently by James Nesbitt. The camera follows Cooper around as he glad-hands his constituents and even sweet talks his long-suffering girlfriend on the morning of the march, urging one and all to participate and to show the Brits what a peaceful civil rights movement can achieve.

The character of Cooper is critical here. Despite several pronounced signals from the environment that he should call the march off, the politician in him simply will not admit defeat. Even after sinister warnings from the IRA and his close contacts in the police, and despite his inability to directly communicate with British forces, Cooper pushes the crowd forward. It is only after the murders that his face of breezy *bonhomie* cracks, and we are able to look into the eyes of a man who realises he has just done something awful.

One reading of Cooper is as a classic hero: a hard-working idealist who references Gandhi and Martin Luther King in a cheerful but rather dubious self-serving identification. Nevertheless, he sounds sincere and certainly walks his talk. Another reading, however, might view him as simply arrogant, with a Shakespearian inclination to persist in his vainglorious adventure, despite all evidence of ensuing chaos.

In the character of RUC Chief Supt. Lagan, Cooper has a direct line into the den of lions. Lagan, a Catholic, meets with the senior British army commanders on the morning of the march and pragmatically urges them to lift the ban. To say he was given the brush-off is an understatement, but it could not have been entirely unexpected. The army was obviously there looking to teach the "yobos" a lesson. To see him get the same brush-off from Cooper, however, suggests that the citizens of Derry were not only brutalised by the "paras" on that

day, but also, in effect, duped by their own leadership. The shooting of civilians by the British was not implausible, given what had been going on in Derry during the preceding weeks. According to Tony Geraghty, 2,656 shots had been fired at Crown forces between August 1971 and February 1972. (Geraghty, 2000: 55) One grizzly question the film asks is whether Cooper soft-pedalled the threat in the name of a "higher" good.

In effect, the whole Civil Rights house of cards came crashing down on Bloody Sunday, and the dogs of war on both sides snarled into the breach. Politicians like Cooper became an instant anomaly, and the Dirty War picked up a full head of steam. The grim history of the outcome is well known.

Bloody Sunday, the movie, has been lauded because it purportedly tells the "truth". In some magnificent ways it does, and in some ways it doesn't. If you visit the Bloody Sunday Museum in Derry, you can see actual newsreel footage of the day that looks eerily like it was lifted right from Greengrass' movie. For the behaviour of the army, and the paras in particular, there are thousands of pages of testimony from the official inquiries, as well as countless eye-witness and personal accounts. The same holds true for what the IRA may or may not have been doing on that day. You have the feeling that Greengrass has read it all.

Yet something isn't right here. There is something about Ivan Strasburg's jitterbug camerawork that is unfulfilling, and even troubling. So much is happening on the periphery once the killing begins that we want to slow things down and ask some questions. What had started out as a political rally has suddenly turned into a crime scene, but we are hooked up with a paparazzi rather than a detective. That kid with the gun there: is he IRA or just having some fun? That specific soldier firing into the crowd: did he possibly see something threatening, or was he just out to murder? Paradoxically, by choosing the documentary format, Greengrass, perhaps inadvertently, masks some of the truths he'd like to reveal, more than if he had told the story in more cinematically conventional terms. In literary terms, our narrator is "unreliable" and certainly not omniscient. Additionally, as is often the case, the burden of guilt falls on those at the bottom of the power rung (i.e. the British squaddies), rather than their overseers back in Stormont and London.

Another problem is that Greengrass seems to neglect the Irish. He is very comfortable with the British army character set, and certainly with the Protestant Irish Cooper. When it comes to the "Paddies", however, his characterisations are mere sketches. Also, by allowing the Irish actors to speak in a virtually impregnable "accent", Greengrass is, in effect, submerging their stories and their characters into a bog of incomprehension. Perhaps subtitles would have been insulting, but it certainly would have been interesting (and more respectful) to know what the people of Derry were saying to each other before they died.

As a retelling of the past, and as a monument to the people who died, *Bloody Sunday* is a moving tribute. If that is its ambition, then it has certainly achieved it. If it is attempting the "truth", then perhaps we need to ask more of it. Here is the French critic Debord:

> The spectacle manifests itself as an enormous positivity, out of reach and beyond dispute. All it says is: "Everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear". The attitude that it demands in principle is the same passive acceptance that it has already secured by means of its seeming incontrovertibility, and indeed by its monopolisation of the realm of appearances. (Debord, 1994: 15)

It is ironic that Greengrass has been praised rather than questioned for his use of documentary techniques to tell a "real" story. Unlike the Pontecorvo classic, *Battle of Algiers* (1965) (to which Bloody Sunday has been justly compared), where an essential "fiction" was made to appear real through technique, in *Bloody Sunday* we have the opposite in that the "real" is fictionalised. Nothing is necessarily lost in representational values, but the urge to say "wait a minute!" is hard to suppress. Greengrass gets the emotional pay-off of street theatre, without having had to pay the price of actually being there (and so do we). This isn't a sin, but it would have been appropriate to have at least formally acknowledged the documentarians who were there, since they obviously contributed enormously to the look and feel of *Bloody Sunday*.

One assumes that Greengrass identifies with Cooper, as Cooper was chosen among all the players of the day to represent the struggle. At the end of the film, however, the only response that the heartbroken Cooper is able to make is to throw up his hands and declare that the Brits are going to reap what they have just sown on the streets of Derry. This may be a fine bit of *mea culpa* for frustrated "peaceniks", but for others it simply isn't sufficient to explain "what happened". There are darker truths about perfidy and brutality in pre-1972 Ireland, but perhaps it is asking too much of Greengrass to carry the whole load, just as it is difficult to believe that Ivan Cooper was as "in charge" of the day as the film has led us to believe. As a Protestant and as an elected British civil servant, it is not hard to imagine that in the period of January 1972 Cooper was held in much lower esteem by the Catholic community of Derry than the film shows. But every tragedy needs its hero, and Cooper is probably as good as this one gets.

In the words of Eamonn McCann, an Irish nationalist and author : "It is often said that Irish people pay too much attention to history. This is not true. Irish people pay very little attention to history. Some Irish people (however) pay attention to a mixture of half-truths and folk mythology about the past." (McCann, 1993: 173) Greengrass, in *Bloody Sunday*, has made the latest contribution, and despite the questions it raises, it is one of the best political films ever made.

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The Bourne Identity

Dir: Doug Liman, USA/Czech Republic/Germany, 2002

A review by Ross Thompson, University of Dundee, UK

During the past few months, regular filmgoers will no doubt have spied attempts by numerous movie franchises-in-waiting to usurp James Bond as cinema's most popular international superspy. Austin Powers, the brainchild of Canadian comic Mike Myers, is an inspired caricature of the Bond persona, and the films in which he "stars" succeed because they both parody and pay homage to the Bond legend. Most recently, Rob Cohen's "Summer Event" movie *xXx* (2002) tries (and fails) to place a hip, fresh spin on the spy genre, blind to the fact that Bond films are appreciated for their retro feel, self-parodying humour and, most importantly, their sense of irony. *xXx*, on the other hand, takes itself far too seriously and expects its viewers to do so too. Such bravado would be excusable if it were backed up by an intelligent, involving script and exciting action sequences, but Cohen's film struggles to deliver in either of these departments. There was a time, during the early 1980s, when three Xs stamped boldly on the box of a "video nasty" warned renters of the inclusion of extreme material, but this picture struggles to deliver a whimper let alone a bang -- or a "kiss kiss bang bang", to borrow Bond's alternate title.

With all of this in mind, I sat down to watch Doug Liman's *The Bourne Identity* with a sizeable degree of caution. I had greatly enjoyed Liman's previous two independent efforts -- the charming, bittersweet comedy *Swingers* (1996) and the energetic, creative *Go* (1999) -- but how would the director fare in the big league? Hollywood has a knack for smothering talented directors from the independent stable with swollen budgets and more famous stars. Secondly, how successfully would Liman tackle the spy genre, so dominated by the aforementioned Mr Bond? Liman had proved that he can make offbeat movies that thrum with energy and wit, but how would he handle a script reliant upon suspense and intrigue?

Perhaps I was correct to be suspicious. After all, the original television adaptation of Robert Ludlum's novel starred the then housewife's actor of choice, Richard Chamberlain. How good could a second attempt be? However, I was relieved to learn that watching *The Bourne Identity* is a very rewarding experience indeed. Whereas *xXx* is a hollow Trojan horse of a film, a piñata that does not contain any goodies, Liman's film is riveting from start to finish. Visually, *The Bourne Identity* is stunning. Liman's cinematographers bathe the locations of Paris and Prague in a chilly blue glow reminiscent of the Michael Douglas sections of *Traffic* (2000), but colour the important items in red, such as a phone box or a getaway car. Secondly, Liman deftly captures the tension necessary for an enjoyable thriller. From the moment that a bullet-ridden amnesiac (Matt Damon) is pulled out of the stormy Mediterranean Ocean by a fishing trawler, the viewer is complicit in that character's situation. This lost soul cannot remember his name, where he is from or how exactly he came to be floating face down in the water, but he quickly discovers that he has a natural talent for quick thinking and close combat fisticuffs. There is no dramatic irony here, for much of the edge-of-the-seat thrills in *The Bourne Identity* stem from the character's search to discover his true identity. The viewer rarely learns details before he does, a clever narrative structure that

establishes a bond between character and audience that builds throughout the course of the film.

However, when the man arrives in Paris we soon learn that his name is Jason Bourne, that he is an errant CIA agent, and that he has done something to seriously upset his superiors (Brian Cox and Chris Cooper). Before Bourne has time to process this new information, he is set on the run by government officials, security guards and shady CIA hitmen. The moment where Bourne disarms a pair of policemen without even thinking is hilarious and chilling at the same time. The tense chase through a Customs Building culminates in a rooftop predicament that alludes to Alfred Hitchcock's seminal thriller *Vertigo* (1958). The reason that these set pieces work, apart from Liman's clever use of camera angles and rhythmic editing, is that Liman persuades the viewer to actually care about the characters, a rare achievement in an action film of this kind. In particular, the death of hitman "The Professor" is a genuinely affecting moment, uncharacteristic of the genre.

Evidently, Liman's previous experience in independent cinema has taught him the importance of strong characterisation and a well-crafted script. Initially, critics baulked at the prospect of Matt Damon in such a physical role. The actor is best known for off-kilter roles in movies such as *Rounders* (1999), *The Talented Mister Ripley* (1999) and the recent *Ocean's Eleven* (2001). In each of these films Damon is cast as an expert of some kind: a whizzkid poker player, a master of deception or a confidence trickster. In *The Bourne Identity* Damon again plays an expert, one who uses his cat-like instincts to survive and outwit his pursuers, but this is a superficial similarity. Bourne's strength lies in the fact that he is continually underestimated. He is able to slip in and out of hotels and cafés unnoticed because he looks like a regular guy, albeit one who is able to disable an assailant with a pen.

Not that Damon falls short in the physical department. Bourne may not have the same steely suaveness of James Bond, or (thankfully) the overly muscular physique of *xXx*'s Xander Cage (Vin Diesel), but this is a good thing. Bourne is an interesting and believable character because he is essentially human, and therefore his dilemma is all the more affecting. And Bourne's situation is essentially a human one. His quest to find his true identity is a refreshing antidote to the bullets and explosions blueprint that most other directors employ when making a film of this kind.

Liman augments this question of what it means to be human by visually and metaphorically punning on the film's title. At the beginning of the movie Bourne is found bobbing in the sea, as if in the womb, but it is not until he learns his real name that he is truly *born*. At this point, Bourne also meets Marie (Franka Potente, so striking in Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run*, [1998]), his romantic foil and companion for the rest of the film. Bourne has been taught how to deceive and kill with precision and skill, but for once he is forced to rely upon someone else for comfort and help. The sexual tension between the characters in these scenes is palpable, particularly when Bourne washes and cuts Marie's hair for a new disguise. James Bond is infamous for his ability to woo beautiful women (before they are conveniently bumped off), a misogynistic streak that was significantly watered down from Ian Flemming's original novels. In contrast, the relationship between Bourne and Marie is genuinely affectionate and is fuelled by a tangible erotic charge. Potente is in a different league to the anodyne and easily disposable actresses whom Bond seduces and then forgets. Her on screen presence is appealing because she does not conform to the tired Hollywood formula of what is and what is not beautiful. In financial terms, Liman is taking a risk by basing the Bourne story around such actors, but his bravery and artistic integrity pay off.

Yes, *The Bourne Identity* has its faults. Most of the hitmen disappear about halfway through the movie, and Julia Stiles is underused as a computer expert, though one assumes that she will have a more complete role in the inevitable sequel. The plausibility of Bourne's situation would need to be questioned if the film itself were not so enjoyable, and at least the viewer is not distracted by far fetched gadgetry such as exploding chewing gum and submersible cars. However, this is picking holes purely for the sake of it, a practice that is undoubtedly influenced by the memory of suffering the likes of *xXx*. For the most part, *The Bourne Identity* keeps the viewer too entertained to notice the gaps in the cat-and-mouse plot or the flaws in its cat logic. In this instance, a sequel would be more than welcome.

Cinema du Reel: The 24th International Festival of Ethnographic and Sociologic Films, 18 March 2002

A review by Ruth and Archie Perlmutter, Temple University, Philadelphia, USA

Established one year after the inauguration of the Pompidou Centre in Paris, the Cinema du Reel, dedicated to the documentary form as art and ethnography, has become a significant annual event at the increasingly popular cultural museum. With each year, the films selected by the festival track social changes, endangered cultures, growing diasporas and the challenges to humanity that have left much of the world marginal or in exile.

A grand prize winner, Ying Ning's *The Railroad of Hope* (China, 2002) is typical. In forceful images it relates the journeys made each summer by thousands of farm workers who travel for three days and nights on overcrowded trains to harvest cotton fields. Despite the annual disruption, arduous conditions, minimal wages and limited physical resources, they seem almost blithely carefree about the anonymous forces that propel them each year on an odyssey of hope.

Gaza, The Prison (Israel/France) by Ram Loevy is a protest film made by a joint Israeli/Palestinian crew, and it is partisan in its view of the embattled Middle East, with its succession of peace accords and discords. Bitterness at economic dependence is reflected in the long lines and painstaking surveillance of Gaza citizens trying to get work in Israel. Arguments between peaceniks and hard-liners at checkpoints are interspersed with shots (to garner sympathy) of Arab children playing in urban ruins. Israeli occupational policies get short shrift in this portrait of Gaza's plight.

Encroaching Eurocentrism is discredited in Julia Bertucelli's *A Merged World* (France), a documentary about alienated workers and the effects of corporate globalisation. The film concentrates on the major players in a merger of three European steel giants. "Planetary monopoly" is the name Bertucelli gives for the game they play, manipulating production facilities behind closed doors -- opaque, secretive and corrosive in its consequences.

Each year, the festival chooses a different region of concentration, and spans different periods in its documentary history. This year, the focus was on Czech and Slovak documentaries, from the 1920s through the 1950s' "Czech Film Miracle", and then on to the sad state censorship of the Communist years. While no two films were alike, there was one consistent technique -- an accumulation of images and photos that testified to what went wrong in the late 20th Century in the Central European Czech pressure cooker. Otakar Vavra's *We Live in Prague* (1934) interweaves poetic interludes and penetrating social critique to evoke the city's memorable sites and the small dramas of its eccentric citizens. *Legends of Ladomirova* by Peter Kerekes (1998) takes place in a Ruthenian village in East Slovakia with an array of villagers recalling both the Nazi invasion and their resistance to Socialist regimentation. One

man who has survived six regimes and two wars claims that he cannot get the bad memories out of his head. Another describes the eighteen wagonloads of innocent Jews being hauled away. At one point there are images of a makeshift cemetery -- a field of helmeted stakes and scarecrows arching overhead -- while a woman, whose father was arrested by the Germans as a partisan, grieves without knowing where he was buried. The film ends with two vodka-drinking pals recounting how they were miraculously saved by different factions -- Germans, guerillas, Hungarians -- and were therefore reborn a number of times. In *Images of the Old World* (1972) famed director, Dusan Hanak, deals with the core moral values of simple Slovak peasants whom he calls "our forgotten ancestors". For Hanak, the beauty of living in nature, and the tradition of perseverance in the face of harsh reality, have all been lost in the false pursuit of so-called civilisation. In *I Came from Far* (1988) by Michael Suchy, a lost village and the decimation of a whole gypsy culture are the concerns behind the strong visual images of poverty and degradation in the lives of a people without hope.

Some of the other documentaries had different concerns: memorials to lost ways of life; inspirational responses to adversity; attempts at showing a slice of life in an exotic world, or hard facts research into a current technological phenomenon. In *Photos to Send* (USA, 2002) Deirdre Lynch, a Californian, follows the trail of the famous American photographer, Dorothea Lange, who in 1954 shot over 2000 photos of the people of County Clare, a declining rural region of Ireland. Lynch intercuts these photos with Lange's documentation of American rural life, an accompanying film showing Lange forming close associations with her subjects, and Lynch's own present-day interviews with the same cast of characters. They prove to be a diverse group, some of whom choose to stay despite the hardships of climate and economic deterioration, while many were forced to emigrate. Those who remain claim that, if given the chance, they would do it all over in exactly the same way -- working the farm, living in the places where their "ancestors walked before them". Lange describes the "visual flood" of "small things" that characterises Ireland for her, like "the moods of the weather in a face". Her dedication to images that bespeak unity of person and place is exemplified in a series of successive photos of a man walking down the road as if "made out of that wet limey soil". Her narration becomes eloquent as she proclaims that she "can hear their voices ring like a good coin". It is no wonder that Lynch calls her film a "double love poem -- a love poem to a love poem about Ireland".

A different encomium is invoked by Mireille Abramovici's *Dor de Tine* (France), a memoir of the filmmaker's parents, Isaac Abramovici and Sylvia Wisner, Romanian Jews and musicians who lived in Paris. When they were separated during the Holocaust, they wrote to each other voluminously over a short period of time until Isaac died ten days before Mireille was born. In 2001 Mireille decided to visit the places mentioned in their letters. The title, *Dor de Tine*, is a quote from Isaac's vast correspondence to Sylvia, and it means "I ache for you" in Romanian..

Cool and Crazy (Norway, 2001) by Knut Erik Jensen emphasises a positive response to adverse circumstances. An extraordinary thirty member male choir and their wheelchair-ridden maestro perform outdoors, facing the ferocious Barent Sea, in the windy snow-covered northerly regions of Norway. Despite complete dependence on capricious fisheries, they rise above adversity and unemployment by chanting to the awesome power of the ocean and the midnight sun.

Jean Lydall and Kaira Strecker's *Duka's Dilemma* (Germany) provides a valuable visual ethnographic insight into the domestic concerns of the Southern Ethiopian Hamar tribe.

Tribal life is personalised by a bold portrayal of the jealousy of one woman, Duka, for her husband's second (and younger) wife, Boro. Many ritualised aspects are examined: the public display of Boro squatting to give birth; scarification; taboos surrounding the relationship of the father to a newborn; woven baskets used as material for house construction. In a parting interview, Duka, who has set aside her rivalry to take care of Boro, hopes that by seeing their way of life, Western audiences will understand and like them better.

Finally, *The Tube* (Switzerland/Belgium) by TV journalist Peter Entell is a film noir-like probe of the deleterious effects of television. With private eye tactics, Entell seeks out experts everywhere, and their research reveals that TV images produce the same results as brainwashing. Although accused of opening up a Pandora's box, Entell forges on, demonstrating how habits of television viewing develop "the strongest form of passivity" and vulnerability to manipulation, especially in children.

This year, the Cinema du Reel festival reinforced its tradition of raising controversial issues. Although nowadays documentaries must compete with the immediacy of daily disasters, they are charged with the responsibility of reporting on the neglected and disenfranchised of the world's diverse cultures. Behind the harsh realities they expose lie dreams of decency and justice.

In the present ethos of terrorism, festivals like the Cinema du Reel are even more important for their mission of presenting works that incorporate ethnography with art, counter the indifference of globalisation, and call attention to cultural and humanistic values.

Eight Legged Freaks

Dir: Ellory Elkayem, USA, 2002

A review by Fergus Cooper, University of Cardiff, Uk

On paper, director Ellory Elkayem's *Eight Legged Freaks* should sit nicely alongside the likes of *The Birds* (1963), *Gremlins* (1984) and *Tremors* (1990) in the "Creature Feature" section of the horror genre. Indeed, it has all the right ingredients. A hip, young cast fulfil the classic B-movie roles: rugged hero (David Arquette), crooked mayor (Leon Rippey), sceptical law enforcement officer (Kari Wuhrer) and rebellious teen (Scarlett Johansson) are all present. The plot is also sufficiently "B", involving radioactive waste, a remote country village and spiders the size of houses. It seems strange, then, that *Eight Legged Freaks*, while undoubtedly fun, is somewhat awkward. Awkward in the sense that it is difficult to settle into the film and enjoy it. Everything about the film is satisfying enough, but there is a niggling sense that something is not right. There are actually two problems with *Eight Legged Freaks*. The first is the deliberate inclusion of irony. The second is a problem which most movies would take as a compliment; the film is too polished. Both these problems arise simply because of the nature of the B-movie, but serve to highlight interesting problems with making a "genre" movie.

Eight Legged Freaks suffers firstly, as many current horror films do, from being produced in the wake of Wes Craven's "postmodern horror" *Scream* (1996). *Scream* used postmodern irony to both expose and exploit the conventions of its own genre. At the time, this seemed like a welcome respite from lazy "stalk-n-slash" films, and was undoubtedly a much needed injection of originality into the horror genre. Yet viewing *Scream*'s successors, such as *Eight Legged Freaks*, suggests that it may have been a move from which the genre will not be able to recover. *Scream*'s success resulted in modern horror films feeling obliged to be ironic. The nature of the B-movie, however, is to be ironic when viewed externally, and not to give a knowing wink to the audience. So in the case of *Eight Legged Freaks*, highlighting "irony" removes the streak of fun from, and subsequently diminishes the enjoyment of, the film.

The jovial nature of *Eight Legged Freaks* suggests, however, that it wants to forget all about irony, postmodernity and *Scream* by returning to its B-movie routes. Sadly, the appeal of these B-movies was that they didn't "want" to be anything. B-movies were made with the intention of being second-rate features. They were well aware of their limits, and had no need to actively reference them. Tim Burton tried to return to this B-movie ethic with *Mars Attacks!* (1996). To some extent the film worked, but it was widely criticised for being too trashy. Elkayem doesn't have the courage (or, to be fair, studio sway) of Burton and, instead of going all out trash, *Eight Legged Freaks* attempts to keep all camps happy. As such, we are presented with a monster movie containing apologetic in-jokes. For example, the funny yet scary monsters (as seen in *Gremlins*, *Critters* [1986], *Tremors*, etc), the knowing references to previous horror films (there are homages to films such as *The Birds* and *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers* [1956]), and the obligatory horror veteran cameo (here it is Tom Noonan of *Manhunter* [1986] fame). These are all "clever" gags, but have appeared in so many horror movies that they simply seem tired.

Postmodernism's desire to deconstruct and expose (as displayed in *Scream*) is interesting in conception, but it is also in such deconstructing that postmodern irony fails. It is a joke which is only funny once, and once the joke has been made, you can't pretend you didn't hear it the first time. Filmmaking is an illusion, a distortion of reality. Once this distortion is revealed, how can it continue to be enjoyed? Audiences know that films are not real, and so it is not their workings which are deconstructed. Rather, it is the suspension of disbelief which is jeopardised. To have someone watch a horror film within a horror film reminds the audience that they too are simply watching a film. So, *Eight Legged Freaks*' little boy, who knows that he won't be listened to because they "never listen to the kid in the movies", didn't amuse me; he simply reminded me that I was cognitively watching, and consequently not being allowed to simply enjoy, a film. More than that, he also reminded me that *Eight Legged Freaks* was nothing new, but that it felt it needed to be.

It would be unfair to criticise *Eight Legged Freaks* too much for something which has been forced upon it by its own genre, but I feel that the film missed the punch-line of the joke which it is exploiting. The actors play their roles extremely straight, but with a knowing smile. The audience is then forced to laugh with, and not at, the film. One visual gag (a cat's face imprinted on a wall as an arachnid attacker drags it to its doom) is executed so well that you almost feel cheated by the good effects. The joke would have been twice as funny if it had been badly executed, as well as being a good visual gag. The film almost feels lazy because it is so finely polished. With current cinema technology, one imagines that this kind of "glossy" film is easy to churn out. I suggest it would have been harder to make a good film look purposely bad.

Ultimately, *Eight Legged Freaks* is an interesting example of a straightforward movie which is laden down by its genre's baggage. If only it had accepted its place in movie history (i.e. "post-*Scream*") and was content to be a simple B-movie. It is a shame because this is a film which is begging to be liked, but there are only so many "in-jokes" one can take before wanting "out". As demonstrated by *The Sixth Sense* (1999), the future of the horror film lies in a return to "the modern" and the courage to play it straight. I applaud *Eight Legged Freaks*'s attempt to resurrect the B-movie, as it is a much missed sub-genre. I fear, however, that the film demonstrates that in the digital age the B-movie will be lost forever. If only Hollywood would lose its preoccupation with being perfect. Imperfection shows humanity and surely that is the integral appeal of watching any film.

Insomnia

Dir: Christopher Nolan, USA, 2002

A review by Jerome De Groot, University College Dublin, Ireland

From the opening sweeping shot of a boat plane passing across an Alaskan glacier, to the final anodyne peak of the score accompanying a sweeping shot of a remote lakeside cabin, *Insomnia* declares itself explicitly to be a movie by numbers, lacking imagination, pace, a half-decent script, robust acting and any semblance of a point. The piece is one in a long line of Hollywood thrillers that simply pass you by; even the tagline is tired and designed for portentous trailer voice-over ("A Tough Cop. A Brilliant Killer. An Unspeakable Crime"). I'd like to add here that a) Al Pacino gets kicked around rather a lot for a Tough Cop, b) Robin Williams is pretty rubbish as a killer, his brilliance being that he wiped the body for fingerprints and owns a gun, and c) the crime is horrific but not, in the pantheon of movie killers, particularly unspeakable -- being beaten and suffocated hardly compares with, say, falling into acid or being eaten. The film would argue that this is verisimilitude, and comparisons to other, more excessive films show the reality of the scenes, but I know what I'd rather watch and think about.

A rumpled genius cop from Los Angeles (Al Pacino) is posted to a lonely Alaskan town to help the locals out in a particularly nasty murder. However, it turns out early on that he is also fleeing an Internal Affairs investigation into his maverick methods, which include browbeating witnesses and fabricating evidence. Due to the midnight sun, he finds it difficult to get much sleep, and, after (possibly) mistakenly shooting his turncoat partner, he ends up a little strung out. His killing of his friend (are there really L.A. cops called "Hap"?) is witnessed by the real killer, who uses the knowledge to provoke Pacino into a relationship that will get him off the hook for a murder he claims was an "accident" too. The killer hounds Pacino, shares his insomnia, shadows him and generally messes with his mind. The paralleling of the cop/killer is poorly played, and the various scenes between them serve only to remind us of the times that James Ellroy, Thomas Harris, or even Pacino (in *Heat* [1995]) have done this better. Furthermore, the big town policeman laying bare the secrets of a claustrophobic mountain community unfortunately brings to mind *Twin Peaks*, and all the clichés which that series/film lampooned are here played completely straight. You wait for someone to compliment the coffee, smell the air, or get told that "this isn't Los Angeles you know" -- and sure enough, it comes along just on cue. As a result, the film unwittingly leans toward self-parody, rather than the sharp and original thriller it strains to be.

The film is a standard issue procedural thriller-cum-Alaskan tourist board promo that wastes the talent invested in it. Al Pacino sleepwalks -- often quite literally -- his way through another career low, whilst Hilary Swank reminds us of her uncanny ability to seem to grin even when being hit over the head. Both are clearly treading water, and the film is the poorer for this. Pacino's role, particularly, could have brought a much needed obsessive edge and intensity to the movie, but he simply yawns and lets the film swim around him unanchored. He is an actor who needs very strong direction, and here his undoubted passion and ability to

invest characters with drive and emotional complexity is wasted. Swank is given little to do, and this lack of a challenge sadly allows her flat, immobile features to show the dull flipside to the banal gothic she reflected/projected in *Boys Don't Cry* (1999). The character she is given is criminally underdeveloped, barely sketched, yet another of Hollywood's token women investigators, ignored until saved at the necessarily anxious denouement.

Christopher Nolan, acclaimed director of *Memento* (2000) (a film that had more ideas in its little finger than this) throws in a few psychological flashes to illustrate Pacino's insomnia, yet even these effects are poor in comparison with the energy and wit that David Fincher brought to the syndrome in *Fight Club* (1999). The montage of shots illustrating Pacino's inability to sleep looks like a poor drama school improvised workshop of irked expressions and body language, all sighs and hunched shoulders. *Insomnia* also marks the attempted resurrection of Robin Williams' reputation, in tandem with the more interesting *One Hour Photo* (2002), as an actor of some ability. Struggling with a poorly defined role, Williams is creepy enough to be a small town killer, but it is difficult not to remember that he was far more unsettling -- albeit unintentionally -- in *Patch Adams* (1998) and *What Dreams May Come* (1998). Williams is trying very hard to reposition himself as a credible psychopath, but ends up looking generally glum and tired.

What is disappointing about this film, and makes it stand out rather sadly from all the rest of the fairly uninspired crop, is that so much was expected of it. The involvement of Nolan, in particular, lured a lot of viewers to the movie theatre expecting another unique take on a genre movie, an offbeat exploration of identity and motive. Whilst there are certain themes and concepts lurking unexpressed in the film -- what happens to our sense of self under extreme physical stress and pressure, relationships between older men and adoring women, where our moral lines are drawn and (a particular *leitmotif* for Nolan, but not really considered in any depth here) how we define "truth" and "justice" -- they seem to be included more through luck than judgement. Indeed, I wondered whether I was attempting to make the film better than it was by looking for things that actually were not there, giving Nolan the benefit of reasonable doubt. However, the clunkiness of the final showdown -- a dying Pacino telling Swank not to "lose her way" after Williams' body sinks slowly into the lake, a horribly determined closure -- just annoyed me. The best things that I can say are really that the scenery looks nice and the lighting is well done; damning with faint praise, really. Bereft of anything interesting, and not even particularly good within its own limited ambitions, *Insomnia* is just one that is better left unremembered.

Minority Report

Dir: Stephen Spielberg, USA, 2002

A review by Keith McDonald, Birkbeck College, University of London, UK

Minority Report is the twenty-third film from Steven Spielberg and his sixth exploration into science fiction, a list which includes the recent *A.I.* (2001), the first two films in the *Jurassic Park* (1993, 1997) franchise, *E.T.* (1982) and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977). His science fiction films represent his most personal and arguably best work (*Close Encounters of The Third Kind* changed the genre and introduced an approach to science fiction based on realism), and his most commercial and impersonal work (*Jurassic Park: The Lost World* is a mess, and his chapter of *Twilight Zone: The Movie* [1983] is dreadful). *Minority Report* derives from solid source material: a story by Philip K Dick, who wrote *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, filmed as *Blade Runner* (1982) by Ridley Scott, and *We Can Remember it For You Wholesale*, filmed as *Total Recall* (1990) by Paul Verhoven. Both these films are commendable efforts and marry stylish visuals with interesting moral and ethical concepts. Like *Total Recall* and *Blade Runner*, *Minority Report* is based upon a moral quandary, namely, if a crime can be predicted by means of ESP, is it ethical to arrest and imprison the would-be murderer before the fatal act, and is the process to be deemed flawless and uninterrogated because crime rates are affected?

The hero, Chief John Anderton (played by Tom Cruise), heads a division of the Justice Department of Washington D.C. in the year 2054. Three psychics, or pre-cogs, kept in a semi-vegetative, suspended state and connected to a computer, pick up disturbing visions and share them with Anderton by means of a bizarre lottery/bingo machine. Anderton and his crack team can then track down the would-be perpetrator before he or she gets a chance to kill, the result being a massive fall in the murder count of America's capital. All of this is explained in an excellent opening set piece, which manages to set up the premise in an economical and hugely exciting way. The division is under investigation from a rival investigator (played by Colin Farrell), who questions the ethics of the process and the efficiency of the pre-cogs. The system is presented as brutal yet efficient, with the would-be murderers put into a coma-like state for crimes they have not actually yet committed. Anderton is not a typical Hollywood clean-cut hero. Devastated by the death of his son, he is a drug user, a violent man and is estranged from his wife. His unquestioning belief in the pre-cog system is rocked when he is implicated as the cold-blooded killer of a man whom he has never met. Assuming that the rival inspector is framing him, he goes on the run, attempting to uncover the mystery and remain anonymous in a city now dominated by surveillance techniques and state and corporate control.

The film is at its most interesting and arresting in this mid-section, mainly due to the representation of the futuristic American city. Science fiction films are often at their best when presenting the city as an extended metaphor for the modern human condition. Fritz Lang's impressive *Metropolis* (1927) began this filmic trend, creating a city that was akin to a kind of hyper-commodified machine in which the inhabitants are mere fuel. Other, more

recent examples of impressive cityscapes include the much lauded *Blade Runner* and the underrated *Dark City* (1998). Spielberg spent some time consulting with futurists and speculators about changes that will occur in western culture, and has a clearly designed and executed idea of a potential cityscape that is a worthy addition to science fiction lore. Visually, this can be seen as a partner piece to *A.I.* which has the same design aesthetic and coldness. The palette of the film uses grainy blues and greys in order to portray a landscape that is at once functional and clinical, and also grimy and tainted. The opening of the film takes place at early morning. However, the muted colouring and lighting give the impression of late in the day.

This aesthetic mode impressively reflects the themes and content of the film, where the ruthless efficiency of the enforcement agencies is considered as flawed and corrupt, and humanity is presented as rather cynical and tired. The city Spielberg presents us with is a kind of urban machine designed for commerce. To move across the city involves getting into one of the many automated pods that run along a variety of rails. This involves practically no interaction with the other inhabitants of the city, and once Anderton tries to break the "flow" of the automated city experience, he realises the limited movement available for anybody attempting to control their environment. There is a tension created through juxtaposing anonymity with a lack of personal freedom. As long as citizens conform, their existence is a largely comfortable one, albeit in a controlled and sterile environment. However, moments after being identified as deviant, Anderton's image is visually transmitted across the city on terminals, billboards and newspapers which show holograms. This search for anonymity is a well worn device in crime fiction, used to tense effect in films like *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1935, 1959 and 1978). However, the sheer velocity of this media experience takes this tension to another level, and can also be seen as a comment on the saturation of media images in our culture.

In *Minority Report* the state is fundamentally paranoid. The whole notion of the pre-cogs rests upon the fact that the government does not allow for even the possibility for wrong in its citizens, whose free will is deemed dangerous, so that a "safer" society is created by its removal. This is where Stanley Kubrick's influence can be clearly seen. In *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) he creates a world in which the free will of a killer is taken away and replaced with an artificial morality. Ultimately, the symptoms of crime rather than the causes are deterred, creating a safer, yet somehow hollow culture. Here, the potential for evil is removed and replaced with a populace terrified of its own passion and possibly violent desire, and placated by vast consumerism and the mundane.

What is interesting about this film is that the murder rate has dramatically dropped since the state has become more totalitarian, just as the violent urges of Alex in *A Clockwork Orange* are stopped (in act alone) after the Ludivico technique is performed upon him. In *Minority Report* the police are presented as menacing and ruthlessly efficient. They swoop down upon their suspects in jet propelled packs at an alarming rate, and this adds to the action. However, the notion of jet propelled packs used by police seems rather unrealistic and derives from a more fantastic notion of science fiction, which in some ways destabilises the very real possibility of other features of the film. Only the police have the ability to travel as they wish, and the general public is easily accessible through retinal identification, at every entrance, be it to a shop or subway, as devices scan the eyes and locate the person's identity. This device allows the authorities to monitor the activities and location of the public, which is done by terrifying, spider-like robots who infest an area, sedate the populace and conduct a forced retinal scan.

Again, there is a tension between anonymity and exposure. The people of the city are largely faceless, homogenous and bland to look at. At one point Anderton escapes detection by finding shelter in the vast array of umbrellas used by businessmen. However, the personal details of every citizen are stored and available to the authorities. These details are logged so that the whereabouts and social status of each person are constantly monitored, not automatically for evidence of deviance, but evidence of bovine conformity. Retinal scans also allow automated shops and storefronts to welcome shoppers individually, and attempt to sell them their products, so that when shoppers walk into GAP stores their shopping records are accessed and a virtual sales pitch begins. There is a kind of sickening complicity between the authoritarian state and commerce here. The city seems designed to totalise the movements and activities of the inhabitants, and get as much money out of their checking accounts by having them buy current, controlled fashions. This is made all the more powerful by the fact that the shops and malls look remarkably similar to present day places. In not overly "futurising" the shopping centres, which dominate the landscape, Spielberg is able to comment upon the enormous rise in shopping malls, and thus commercialisation. This makes the future disturbing precisely because it is *our future*, rather than the escapist and fantastic future of a galaxy far, far away.

Although visually stunning, the film's narrative closure is a disappointment. After a series of interesting twists, all the narrative strands are comfortably tied up, and a saccharine happy ending is achieved, which deviates from Dick's bleaker closure. This kind of manufactured Hollywood "closure" is typical of Spielberg, and more broadly of mainstream American cinema. It fits perfectly in a product such as *E.T.* because the simplicity of the characters' story is made more pleasing by a sweetened end. It also works in a film such as *Jaws* (1975), where the clarity of the problem faced by the protagonists needs a similarly simplistic resolution. However, the complex moral questions raised by Philip K Dick cannot, and perhaps should not be fully answered in this kind of film. Rather than opting for an open-ended and ambiguous narrative closure as used by Scott in *Blade Runner*, Spielberg has chosen a narrative closure that is frustrating rather than satisfying in what is nevertheless a fascinating visual experience.

My Voyage in Italy (Il mio viaggio in Italia)

Dir: Martin Scorsese, USA/Italy, 2001

A review by David Martin-Jones, University of Northumbria, UK

Scorsese's four hour film is an introduction to post-war Italian cinema for the uninitiated. There can be little doubt that Scorsese's aim, as self-appointed archivist/educator on cinema's past, is admirable in its intention. Few directors have the kudos to attract a brand new audience to a national cinema just on their say so, and, in this respect, the use of his name to brand this product should be praised. The problem that arises, however, is the effect of Scorsese himself on the formation of this particular "history" of a national cinema.

Scorsese's definition of Italian cinema is incredibly limited. For Scorsese, Italian cinema begins in the early 1940s with neorealism. It was a cinema created by auteurs, whose personal visions effected their creation of unique styles, which are themselves seen to be the major defining factor in understanding their films. Whilst this establishment of a false origin can be forgiven to a certain degree -- as this is Scorsese's own personal experience of Italian cinema, beginning with his childhood exposure to neorealism on American television -- we are immediately aware that what we are about to receive is straight out of the internationally accepted annals of what constitutes "art" cinema.

For the next four hours we are guided through the plots of several films by Rossellini, De Sica, Visconti, Antonioni and Fellini, the major post-war auteurs to emerge out of the neorealist movement. This journey takes the form of edited portions of the films which condense their narratives, whilst Scorsese's all-knowing voiceover occasionally prompts us as to exactly how we should be reacting to the images we are watching. The films described in this rather agonisingly descriptive four hours, however, do not stretch beyond the early 1960s. The overall impression given by the film is that Italian cinema (or, perhaps, Italian cinema of any worth) somehow ends at this point. It is as if Scorsese is prescribing the films worth watching, the time when it all happened, and exactly how we should understand them.

In many respects, it is Scorsese's veneration of the auteur that is to blame for this prescriptive aesthetic. The over-riding principle in Scorsese's choice of film seems to be the need to explain the Italian, auteur-based films which influenced the French New Wave in the '60s. It is for this reason that his history of cinema ends when it does, the point at which this movement is taken up in France. As the French auteurs of the *nouvelle vague* then greatly influenced the American Independent Film movement of the '70s, what we are really seeing is, in effect, the films which give you the keys to unlock these American films. Indeed, on one or two occasions, Scorsese directly points out the scenes to which he paid homage in his early films, in particular the shots from Fellini's *I Vitelloni* (1953) which recur in *Mean Streets* (1973). In its defence, then, *Il mio voyaggio in Italia* is exactly what Scorsese says it is; it is *his* journey through Italian cinema. It is *not*, however, a history of Italian cinema. For the new audience that Scorsese hopes to reach, therefore, this film has a number of drawbacks.

Firstly, positing neorealism as the start of Italian cinema is simply not acceptable any more. Although there was an undoubted aesthetic shift in Italian cinema at this point, neorealism itself was but one strand of several which existed in Italian cinema at that time. This type of originating formula completely fails to take into account the genres which existed prior to the war, many of which had arguably as big an impact on the cinema of the post-war period. Leaving aside the fact that many neorealist films were unpopular with post-war Italian audiences (a fact which itself questions their very "Italian-ness"), even auteur films like Fellini's *Amarcord* (1973) - which is conveniently ignored by Scorsese, as it falls outside of his privileged twenty year time period - were undoubtedly influenced by the White Telephone and Grand Hotel films of the 1930s.

Secondly, perpetuating the binary of the art over the popular necessitates some acrobatic argumentation when it comes to defining exactly what constitutes neorealism. For Scorsese, Visconti's *Ossessione* (1942) cannot be classified as the first neorealist film because, Scorsese warns us, if we pay close attention, we will see that it is but a stylised melodrama. Rossellini's *Roma Città Aperta* (1945), however, causes Scorsese no such problems. This film, for Scorsese, is the one that began it all. Despite having just shown us the now famous images of the heavily pregnant Pina (Anna Magnani) being brutally machine-gunned to death by the Nazis, the torture and martyrdom of the heroic Manfredi (Marcello Pagliaro), and the evocative execution of the priest Don Pietro (Aldo Fabrizi), complete with innocent child witnesses, somehow this film escapes the status of melodrama! Leaving aside the fact that Scorsese conveniently interprets the films in ways that suit his own particular ends, more important perhaps is the way in which his judgement conforms exactly to the western privileging of narrative realism as the standard by which to measure what is "art". The widespread acceptance of the melodramatic form in many other cultures and cinemas is thus denigrated to the popular, and the excessive. It is not deemed worthy of the status of serious cinema.

Moreover, Scorsese's discussion of the auteur leaves a lot to be desired. Whilst content to draw upon Visconti's aristocratic background and his paradoxical conviction to Marxism to explain the narrative and style of *Senso* (1954), Scorsese stops short of discussing his sexuality as an influence that could give a very different interpretation to his films. Instead of discussing Visonti's films' implicit critique of heterosexuality, we instead move swiftly on, noticeably into the safe-haven of the great hetero-auteur, Fellini. It is not by accident that Scorsese starts this section with images of the beauty pageant in *I Vitelloni*, before moving on to discuss the disillusionment caused to the characters by the preying homosexual thespian.

Thirdly, Scorsese's work determines exactly what is Italian cinema by standards set outside of Italy. With a particularly telling liberal humanist bias which often, and unapologetically, slips into Catholicism, Scorsese describes films like *Roma Città Aperta* as the apparently objective depiction of the lives of ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances. It is no coincidence that this description sounds so similar to the clichéd promotional tag-line of the recent *Pearl Harbour* (2001), which concerns wartime events from an American perspective. Scorsese valorises, after all, films like Rossellini's *Paisà* (1946), which represent the Italian resistance during the war. If there was ever an element of revisionism in neorealism, it is undoubtedly this emphasis on the resistance which speaks so strongly to the post-war Italian-American diaspora represented by Scorsese's film. Whilst this emphasis may have helped raise neorealism to its international art cinema status, these films were not (as Scorsese does point out) popular in Italy at the time. His history of Italian cinema says more about the international reception of Italian cinema than it does about Italian cinema itself.

In fact, by stopping in the mid '60s, Scorsese's journey avoids all the inconvenient directions away from "art" and the "auteur" which occurred in the '70s. For this reason alone, Scorsese can avoid discussing such factors as the impact of television on the Italian film industry in the '70s. In fact, Scorsese avoids all recourse to the industrial context into which this auteur cinema emerged, as indeed he avoids all reference to the changes taking place in the economic and cultural context of Italy during the years leading up to *Il boom*. By sticking to a basic plot synopsis structure, any formal analysis of what makes neorealism neorealism is also side-stepped. Additionally, by stopping before the '70s, Scorsese's version of Italian cinema is able to retain its art status, a status which the internationally famous popular genres which emerged in the '70s would undoubtedly have questioned. Even working within the auteur framework chosen by Scorsese, the pan-European co-productions of the spaghetti western could at least have been approached through Sergio Leone, as indeed could the horror films of Dario Argento, or the comedies of Lina Wertmüller.

The major irony involved with this auteur based conception of Italian cinema is that it is the formula least likely to attract a new audience. For most contemporary audiences, viewing Scorsese's film would undoubtedly feel like four hours badly spent. Scorsese has missed an opportunity to provide a more comprehensive overview of Italian cinema as it emerged in the last century. As an archivist, his choice of texts from which to construct a history of Italian cinema is strikingly reactionary, but this in itself could have been forgiven to a degree if he had only taken a faster pace, and shown contemporary audiences some schlock, some horror, some comedy that was a little less whimsical than Rossellini's Franciscan monks getting dizzy and falling over, some sex, and perhaps the odd Morricone-accompanied Mexican stand-off. What audience is this neorealist/auteur fodder likely to educate and entertain, after all, if it is not the ageing art-house cinema crowd, already immersed in the theory of auteurship and the veneration of realist art cinema?

The Piano Teacher (La Pianiste)

Dir: Michael Haneke, France/Austria, 2001

A review by Christopher R. Trogan, City University of New York, USA

In the defining scene of Michael Haneke's *The Piano Teacher*, Professor Erika Kohut (Isabelle Huppert) sits naked at the edge of a bathtub, mutilating herself with a razor until lines of blood stain the stark white porcelain. In the background, her neurotic mother calls her to the dinner table. A collision of masochistic ecstasy with the utterly banal, the scene is emblematic of Haneke's shockingly beautiful film, one which explores the slippery slope between sanity and madness, reason and feeling, sound and silence.

The Vienna Conservatory is the nucleus of Erika Kohut's world. Having sacrificed everything for her work, she has become a highly respected teacher of Schubert's piano repertoire. As her students take lessons, the esteemed teacher sits aloof at a window, barking corrections intended as insults. And it is no accident that Professor Kohut is an expert in the music of Schubert. Like the tortured professor, the music of this archetype of German Romantics is seductive on the surface but seethes in its depths. Erika Kohut believes that life, like art, is about extremes, not gradations: "Schubert's dynamics range from scream to whisper, not loud to soft", she comments during a lesson. If music functions as a means of expression for her unspeakable pain, the conservatory is the place of its affliction. Professor Kohut's calling is to destroy the young musicians, but in the process she must also destroy herself. This is the price she pays for her unique understanding of Schubert. In the process of this "understanding", the music itself is reinterpreted, not as the bourgeois surface under which emotions boil, but as the symbolic expression of Erika's own furious pain and vulnerability. Haneke's direction keeps us off balance: we catch glimpses of Erika's vulnerability which foreshadow her (and potentially our own?) catastrophic downfall.

Haneke's film insists that Erika's actions are not merely part of a conventional power reversal. Instead, they are fraught with a dangerous, and ultimately tragic, tension. This begins to crystallise when she meets Walter (Benoit Magimel), a handsome young man who becomes her most prized student and with whom she begins an illicit and complicated affair designed to play out her most perverse fantasies. Her torment of Walter is significant, and much different from that of other students, in that it is aimed at turning him into a lover who will humiliate and abuse her.

With the introduction of Walter, there is a movement beyond simple sadism in order that Professor Kohut may be included in the pain she has heretofore inflicted only on others. In the process, she discovers that Walter's tenderness ensnares her in ways she had never imagined. An internal struggle ensues, one that pits Professor Kohut, the disinterested observer of torture and incidental object of its affliction, against Erika, the needy subject who vies for the compassion and attention of her lover. She cannot be one without the other, and gets caught in a trap which prevents her from becoming or maintaining either one of these on its own. While one might argue that there could be nothing more clichéd, or more fatuous,

than a youthful man's *amour fou* with an older woman, Haneke is offering quite a bit more. Erika's loneliness and desperation are disclosed not merely in her chaotic, unsatisfactory encounters with Walter, but in her obsessive, needy, desperate arguments with her mother.

Erika is a middle-aged spinster living in a claustrophobic apartment with her hysterical mother (Annie Giradot) who keeps track of her every move. The two have terrific arguments, which sometimes become violent, only to end the day curled up in bed like lovers. After class at the prestigious conservatory, Professor Kohut sneaks off to a seedy porn theatre, or watches couples having sex at a drive-in cinema. All the while, one must remember that this debauchery occurs in Vienna, the elegant cultural centre of great music, literature and (not of minor relevance to this film) psychoanalytic theory. Moreover, Haneke's Vienna is a fantastic, schizo-linguistic creation, where only French is spoken but German hovers at the margins in street signs, the poetry of music and gravity of ideas. Again and again, Haneke presents these jarring dichotomies and inconsistencies. What you see is not what you get: character, language and image are consistent with each other, but the action of the film sticks out sorely and leaves us unsteady, confused, agitated. Haneke deliberately presents more questions than answers. At the 2001 Regus London Film Festival, Haneke admitted, "I don't want to explain to the audience how to watch this movie. *The Piano Teacher* raises many questions. It's up to the audience to find the answers." Like Professor Kohut's students, we are forced to embrace a new (and confusing) epistemology of action which is inconsistent, irrational, but so real: to teach is to destroy, to help is to hurt, to love is to hate. This is really disturbing, Haneke implies (and Professor Erika Kohut confirms), because it is not just art, but life.

Based on the 1982 novel by the Austrian writer Elfriede Jelinek, the film brings to life a character who could have been lifted right out of Freud's sketches on neurosis but is undoubtedly a remarkable, dramatic (and frighteningly human) creation. There is no fluff, no sensationalism, no melodrama. *The Piano Teacher* is not a film that allows even a moment of comedy in the traditional sense. Still, it may elicit laughter from the audience in response to its presentation of humanity at its most sexually base. During the Regus Festival, Haneke remarked as much: "There is a lot of humor in this film. I know some people will be surprised to hear that. But I can understand that part of the audience laughs when they watch the film…it shows that people feel uncomfortable with the intensity of the film."

It is not a film for the faint-hearted (and indeed the final three scenes are almost unbearable), or for those who are squeamish at the sight of blood, but it is hugely provocative, often mysterious, and certainly one which lingers in the mind long after the closing credits. When Isabelle Huppert was in London to support the film at the 2001 Regus London Film Festival, she commented on working with the controversial director: "Michael Haneke is a director who asks the right questions. What can be shown in a movie? What can't be shown? You can't make a great film if you don't ask yourself questions about cinema. What is the purpose of cinema? How should we use cinema? My character rejects the traditional male domination of women. Erika decides to change the rules. Instead of being watched, of being an object, she's going to be the one who's watching."

The impact of the film is due mostly to Haneke's compositional brilliance and poise. The narrative framework and characterisation are classically simple. Haneke's cinematic approach and typical shot is clear, calm, controlled. The theatrical intensity of Isabelle Huppert mirrors this cinematic approach in her statuesque and eerily symmetrical persona. Holding high her mast-like face, she is often shown ruminating on her own perversions. In one scene, during

which Erika decides to ruin the career of one of her pupils by sticking glass in her pocket (this inevitably maiming her hand), Haneke -- in a stroke of brilliance -- spends well over a minute lingering on the professor's back while she ponders her decision. Focused on this most elegant and controlled façade, we observe her in this most private of moments, confronting the chaotic world of suffering, repression and sexual hypocrisy with no more, and no less, than a flicker of consciousness. Admittedly, the film is long and quite painful to watch, but the payoff is a sophisticated examination of the full range of human experience and emotion. *The Piano Teacher* focuses on the extremes -- the "screams" and "whispers" of existence -- but stops, albeit momentarily, at virtually every gradation in between.

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Red Dragon

Dir: Brett Ratner, USA/Germany, 2002

A review by Kendall Phillips, Syracuse University, USA

There is a poignant moment in Thomas Harris' novel *Red Dragon* where the manhunt for the serial killer known as the "Tooth Fairy" grinds to a frustrating halt: "When heavily manned investigations have little to feed on, they tend to turn upon themselves, covering the same ground over and over, beating it flat. They take on the circular shape of a hurricane or a zero." (Harris, 1981: 242) And, in a way, this is not a bad description of Brett Ratner's adaptation of Harris' novel. While the filmic *Red Dragon* has some strengths, namely Emily Watson's Reba and Ralph Fiennes' monstrous killer Francis Dolarhyde, it feels largely hollow. Covering the exact same ground as Michael Mann's *Manhunter* (1986), and generally the same territory as Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and Scott's *Hannibal* (2000), Ratner's addition to the "Lecter Trilogy" feels like a story that's been told too often, and to better effect.

While Ratner's film will be profitable, it looks likely to be less successful than either *Silence* or *Hannibal*. It will probably just break the $100 million mark in domestic gross, and has received a largely lukewarm reception from popular critics. So, what is there to be learned from this adequate, though not successful film? Quite a bit, I think. In particular, this film is a good example of the complex factors that influence the production and consumption of contemporary films, and specifically the interrelations between sequelisation and adaptation.

Red Dragon tells the story of FBI investigator and psychological profiler Will Graham, who is coaxed back out of retirement to pursue the "Tooth Fairy". Graham's early retirement was prompted by an encounter with Hannibal Lecter who, in Ratner's telling, was a colleague working as a forensic psychologist. Their confrontation, occurring in the first few minutes of the film, comes when Graham serendipitously looks into one of Lecter's cookbooks and realises Lecter is the killer. Of course, he realises too late, and in the struggle both Lecter and Graham are severely wounded.

The back-story opener is followed by a more mundane police procedural: Graham, the reluctant hero who returns to hunt the new killer; must go to Lecter for help; Lecter, just as in *Silence*, somehow knows the killer's identity and offers just enough clues to lead to a final, fatal confrontation between investigator Graham and killer Dolarhyde.

One of the reasons this broad set-up feels so familiar is that, at least since *Silence*, the general formula has been established: two killers; the reluctant profiler; the personal danger to investigator/investigator's family, etc. As Philip Simpson has noted, Thomas Harris' three novels and their adaptations into film have "for all practical purposes created the formula for the mainstream serial killer fiction" (Simpson, 2000: 70). So, if Ratner's version seems redundant, there is good reason.

In a way, Ratner is caught in a common problem within Hollywood's increasingly franchise driven economy -- originality sacrificed in the name of a pre-packaged, pre-marketed product. There can be no doubt that the success of *Silence* and *Hannibal* led to the remaking of *Red Dragon*. However, Ratner is unable to escape from the shadow of his predecessors. *Red Dragon* looks like *Silence*, using the same production designer (Kristi Zea), many of the same sets, some of the same character actors (e.g., Anthony Heald, Frankie Faison), and even the same font for expository titles. Indeed, the degree to which Ratner's film is explicitly beholden to Demme's previous film is driven home in the film's hokey postscript ending in which Chilton comes to tell Lecter of a female FBI agent who wants to ask him a few questions.

Of course, the most dramatic "borrowed" element is the use of Anthony Hopkins, who plays Lecter in both *Silence* and *Hannibal*. For the most part, this Lecter appears in the same environs as in *Silence*. However, the Hannibal Lecter of *Red Dragon* is not the malevolent, though ultimately human, caged manipulator of *Silence*. This Lecter is much more akin to the wise-cracking, omniscient demi-god of Ridley Scott's *Hannibal*. He puts on funny voices, he cracks cheap jokes, he snaps his teeth at Investigator Graham, and he provides cheap startle effects.

More importantly, Lecter knows everything. Without explanation of any kind, Lecter somehow knows not only the deeper motivation of the "Tooth Fairy" (a William Blake painting), but the specific method he uses to find his victims (home videos sent to his plant for editing and repackaging). Of course, there is no need to explain how, imprisoned in a cell in Baltimore and receiving only one vague correspondence from the other killer, Lecter knows. He knows simply because he is Lecter (and, presumably, the main switchboard operator at "Serial Killer Central").

The strange entanglement of *Silence* and *Hannibal* with their prequel is indicative of the difficulty in many contemporary sequels. Hollywood's desire to develop pre-marketed products has driven the sequel market beyond its capacity for extending the story, and in the desire to offer audiences new dimensions of familiar narratives has increasingly turned back on itself. Thus, the prequel is becoming the next stage in the sequel trend. In this way, *Red Dragon* takes its place alongside George Lucas' *Phantom Menace* (1999) and *Attack of the Clones* (2002), and, like those films, is able to be simultaneously successful and unsatisfying. Lecter's fate, like that of Anakin Skywalker, is predetermined. Their every action is, the audience knows, just another step towards their inevitable fate. The characters and their narrative development turn back on themselves like pretzels, future events predetermining the past.

This criticism of the prequel is not to suggest that the narrative of *Red Dragon* is in some way deficient. Indeed, Harris' novel, his second, is easily his best, and Ratner's adaptation of the novel runs very close to the novel's crucial plot points. But something is missing from this telling, a hole in its centre: tragedy. Put simply, in Ratner's telling there is no price to be paid. In the source novel, Graham's decision to return to duty imperils not just his family's physical safety, but threatens their harmony and his sanity. These dangers are not present in Ratner's version. Graham is in no mental peril since he does not attain resonance with the killer's sick mindset. It is Lecter who has all the answers. Graham may be in physical danger from Lecter's evil machinations, but his sanity is never in question.

Indeed, while the danger to Graham's family is clear, its harmonious existence is never questioned. Graham's decision to return to active service is made without a moment's hesitation; his wife's concern lasts only seconds. When the family is forced into hiding because of the threat of the killer, there are no recriminations towards Will Graham. Not even when Graham humiliates his own son, loudly shouting at him while the boy is held hostage by the Tooth Fairy, is there a cost. After taunting the boy for his fear, re-creating the Fairy's own abused childhood, Graham turns to the boy and with a quick "you OK?" and a wink, all is forgiven. Throughout the film, Will Graham, as played by Ed Norton, rarely stops smirking. Even Michael Mann's overly stylised *Manhunter* managed to weave in these tragic elements before its sunny seaside ending. Ratner goes straight to the sunshine.

Thus, Ratner captures the superficial details while losing the narrative's essential element. Graham risks nothing in his return to service. He is in no danger of becoming ensnared in the killer's mindset, nor does he risk losing the love and harmony of his family. Instead, Graham becomes a stand-in for Clarice Starling: a pawn in Lecter's wicked game.

This is not to suggest that there is no tragedy in the film. Indeed, the plot line that embodies the tragic flaws of humanity and their consequences is by far the more poignant half: the story of Francis and Reba. The failed, perhaps impossible, relationship between the blind co-worker who wants someone who doesn't pity her, and the mentally scarred serial killer who begins to have genuine feelings towards her, is filled with deeply moving moments. And, in this way, it is unfortunate that this tragic love story is spliced together with the over-the-top to the point of self-parodic police procedural. Here again, Ratner fails to weave together a uniquely singular and satisfying story but, rather, cobbles together two discordant tales, the tired old slapstick of Lecter and Graham and the poignant tragedy of Reba and Francis.

All the elements of a gripping and intriguing story are here, but they never coalesce into anything coherent, sacrificing menace for wit and tragedy for familiarity. Harris' source novel pulls this off with both Graham and Dolarhyde caught in the tragic consequences of their own scars and frailty. But Ratner is beholden to other masters here -- Demme's visual aura and Scott's macabre wit -- and cannot be bothered to find the heart of this tale. In the end, the few fine moments in this film cannot fill the emptiness at its core.

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The Road to Perdition

Dir: Sam Mendes, USA, 2002

A review by Pamela Ezell, Chapman University, California, USA

As befits a film with a biblical metaphor for a title, *The Road to Perdition* is an American fable about the relationship between fathers and sons. Set during the winter of 1931, against the mythic vistas of the long gone Midwestern heartland, *The Road to Perdition* features one of America's best loved stars, the convivial Tom Hanks, in an atypical role. Hanks is Mike Sullivan, a laconic assassin employed by a powerful Irish bootlegger, John Rooney, played by Paul Newman. Rooney is a surrogate father to Sullivan, someone who helped out his "ma" when his father died years ago. The film shows the journey taken by Sullivan and his young son, Michael Jr. (Tyler Hoechlin) after they are forced to flee their home town and head for Perdition, Kansas.

This is British director Sam Mendes' second film -- he won the Oscar for his debut feature, *American Beauty* (1999) -- and if that film is a revelation of the desperation below the surface in a picture-perfect American suburb, *The Road to Perdition* is a rhapsody to the crime and violence of Prohibition. There is no particular moral imperative driving this film, and no important new insight into the hearts and minds of professional killers. It is a well made, slick, big budget movie, based on a smarter, edgier graphic novel by Max Allan Collins and Richard Piers Rayner (1998).

Contemporary film audiences already know that gangsters are real people with conflicting feelings about their lives of crime. Beginning in 1972, *The Godfather* trilogy educated filmgoers about the inner workings of organised crime, and the human capital required to hold a dominant position in the underworld. HBO's popular series, *The Sopranos*, brings the everyday lives of its mobsters into sharp focus. On this topic of gangsters as "plain folk", most of the available ground has been covered.

The Road to Perdition makes a slight detour on this well travelled path: its characters are Irish-American, not Italian-American. Too bad the Coen brothers already created this same milieu with substantially stronger intrigue and treachery in *Miller's Crossing* (1990). Plus, *Perdition* is full of Hollywood's stereotypical Irishness, with every bit of cinematic cultural shorthand except "Danny Boy": there is a wake, a mass, a communion, a jig, even a soulful Irish melody on the piano.

At the core of this film is the heartbreak of father-loss, as evidenced in a trio of failed father-son relationships. First, there is the relationship between Sullivan and Michael, the primary relationship of the film. Michael is the narrator for the film, and it is through his eyes that the story unfolds. During the journey to Perdition, Michael comes of age, and, as is typical in the parent-child paradigm, as he sees his father more clearly and in human terms, his feelings for the man intensify. And yet, although they become partners on the journey, Sullivan and Michael remain locked behind their unspoken emotions. There is no release for these

characters, no redemption. They are unable to break through their isolation, and the potential for their relationship remains unrealised.

Next is the relationship between Sullivan and his surrogate father, Rooney. Regardless of all Sullivan's loyalty and service to Rooney, and Rooney's longstanding generosity to Sullivan and his family, both men are able to sever the relationship in an instant in order to preserve the lives of their biological sons. Blood is thicker than water, even when, in this instance, choosing the biological son over the surrogate is bad for business. And so, after a lifetime spent committing the most serious crimes on Rooney's behalf, all in pursuit of his love and respect, when Sullivan needs Rooney's protection most, he is betrayed by his "father", abandoned to his enemies.

Finally, there is the relationship between Rooney and his son Connor (Daniel Craig), the most authentic relationship in the film. Connor is evil and corrupt and desperate for his father's approval, which Rooney withholds in favour of humiliating and hitting him. Perhaps Rooney's guilt is what motivates him to protect Connor, no matter what the cost personally or professionally. But again, this relationship is unresolved and, ultimately, unsuccessful. Connor is unable to grow beyond his limitations, and Rooney is unable to save his son from the consequences of his actions.

The moments that foreground the competing relationship between Sullivan and Connor for Rooney's affection are the scenes when Mendes' direction and cinematographer Conrad L. Hall's photography are at their best. Mendes choreographs a series of triangular movements, when Sullivan and Rooney are closely aligned and Connor is nearly out of the frame, clearly cut off from his father. There is another scene when Connor is placed between Sullivan and Rooney, foreshadowing Connor's secret plan to break apart the relationship that threatens his own paternal bond. The viewer can see Connor's disaffected scowl, but Sullivan and Rooney are oblivious to the trouble brewing within him.

If the film places a strong emphasis on fatherlessness and male bonding, it does so at the expense of all female relationships. There are only six women in the movie with speaking parts: a prostitute, two waitresses, a secretary, a farmer's wife and Jennifer Jason Leigh as the Sullivan wife and mother, Annie. All of these women, including Leigh, have five lines or less in the film. In fact, Leigh's part is so small, and her demeanour so self-effacing, it may not be immediately clear if she is the wife and mother or the maid in the Sullivan house.

Some of this absence of femaleness may be connected to the gangster genre which features male-heavy casts and women as nearly interchangeable appendages. The original graphic novel centres on Sullivan and Michael's father-son relationship, but manages to do so without trivialising the mother-son relationship. In the novel, Annie is a well rounded character and a strong presence in her son's life. David Self, who also wrote the nearly all-male *Thirteen Days* (2000), added the surrogate father and son relationship between Rooney and Sullivan, and the competition for Rooney's attention between Connor and Sullivan, while depleting every ounce of vigour from the only leading female character in the film.

Many critics have praised Hanks for playing against type in *Perdition*. Hanks' career and persona have been likened to James Stewart, who, after several notable performances in romantic comedies and Frank Capra's feel-good films, sought to extend his range by starring in darker fare, such as Otto Preminger's *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959) and Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958).

Unfortunately, without the use of his affable smile and signature mannerisms, Hanks seems out of his depth. Sullivan is a complex character: a cold-blooded killer who is a devoted, if distant father and husband; a Prohibition-era gunslinger, with an existential code of behaviour, able to make life and death decisions in a split second. Hanks' performance is so low-key, Sullivan seems to be sleepwalking through most of the film. Betrayal, profound loss, and the sacrifice of all his hopes for the future are endured with an empty stoicism.

On a technical level, this means that Hanks' co-stars can easily upstage him, and they do on numerous occasions, especially Newman. Newman's Rooney is contradictory and lifelike, by turns benevolent and abusive. Newman's power as an actor enables him to make the "big speeches" of the film with convincing authority.

Near the conclusion of the movie, Sullivan confronts Rooney. This meeting occurs in the bowels of a Catholic church, the place that serves communion to the biggest sinner in town. Once they are face to face and alone, Rooney tells Sullivan, "There are only murderers in this room. This is the life we chose, the life we lead, and there is only one guarantee: we will none of us see heaven." In moments like these, Newman is the star of the film and Hanks is nearly invisible.

The other layered character played with credibility is Hoechlin's Michael Jr. Michael is a good boy, but slightly askew. He steals candy, he smokes a pipe, and he fights at school. He is also a loving boy who manages to emerge from his surroundings unspoiled by the sadness and violence he experiences. Hoechlin communicates a range of emotions, despite being forced to play off Hanks' vacuity.

The grandest moments in *The Road to Perdition* are when it paints its beautiful pictures: stark roadside diners and lonely farms, bustling cityscapes and cozy homes, crowded train stations and deserted street corners. Many of the scenes are violent, lyrical and in slow motion, or blood-splattering and gruesome. But ultimately, these images are hollow, and the story they tell lacks a visceral resonance. They are like postcards, sent back from a long past trip. We might wish to know more about these people and this journey, but perhaps there is nothing else to tell.

Secret Ballot (Raye Makhfi)

Dir: Babak Payami, Italy/Canada/Switzerland/Iran, 2001

A review by Lina Khatib, University of Leicester, UK

Darkness. The sound of waves splashing on the shore….It is dawn on the horizon. An airplane appears in the sky, dropping an object on a parachute onto an arid island. *Secret Ballot*'s surreal opening sequence recalls the images of artificial limbs on parachutes in *Kandahar* (2001). It is not the only familiar scene in the film. For those accustomed to Iranian cinema, *Secret Ballot* does not bring many surprises. Like several other Iranian films (for example, *The Circle* [2001] and, more recently, *Ten* [2002]), the film succeeds in sending a strong political message. Not only does the film criticise the autocratic Iranian regime and its sexism, but also the blind "feeding" of foreign (Western?) principles. Democracy is the principle of choice in the film, shown to fail in a country where the needs of individual citizens are overlooked in favour of wholesale imported ideals.

The film revolves around a day in the life of an unnamed island, where the parachute turns out to carry a ballot box. A nameless woman arrives shortly after and announces that it is election day. She summons a sceptical coastguard to drive her around the island to collect people's votes. Underlying the narrative of the film is a pessimism directed at both democracy itself and the people it is supposed to be serving. In a place marked by apathy, democracy becomes an alien concept, viewed sceptically by some, totally rejected by others. The film begins with the female agent believing that democracy is the solution to all people's problems. However, as time goes by, and as she encounters more indifferent island residents, democracy is unveiled as a dubious "foreign" idea.

Democracy in the film is at the same time ambiguous, failing and absurd. The film does not present any proof of the agent's professional credibility. It also does not explain what elections are taking place, not just to the viewer, but also to the residents of the island. Democracy becomes something to be taken at face value. Democracy, as embodied by the agent, promises people change, guarantees them a choice of candidates who understand their problems. Yet the fact remains that the agent, as the island residents point out, is not from the island. Democracy is foreign, so how can it understand their problems?

The agent embarks on a long journey across the island pursuing people to get their votes. The more people she meets, the more she is convinced of her own failure. From the start, the agent engages in a monologue about how "no one is forced to vote", but how people will "be better off" if they do; how elections are the solution to all problems. We hear her repeat the same message at every occasion, whether the people are willing to listen or not. Soon we, as viewers, tire of her message too. However, as time goes by, we find that her monologue is challenged by people with their minds fixed on something else, like the old man who declares his disbelief in the power of human beings over others' fates, and thus would only vote for God, the fishermen who refuse to interrupt their fishing to vote because "voting does not catch fish", or the group of women who would not vote because their men are away. Towards the end of the film, the agent is finally audibly silenced as she visits a building site to get one

builder's vote, and is forced to stop talking by the loud roaring of building machinery. At last, the viewers' longing for the monologue to stop actually happens. Payami succeeds in transforming democracy from something we believe in to something quite unbearable.

The film also resorts to humour in highlighting the absurdity of democracy. One of the film's strongest moments is a hilarious scene where the agent instructs her guard to chase after a man running in the desert to get his vote. Scared of being followed by an army jeep driven by a man with a gun, the man tries to flee. After a series of manoeuvres by the jeep across the desert, the man is finally "caught" by the agent, and wonders what he has done wrong.

The film presents another critical message: the condition of women. The film highlights the various ways in which women are oppressed in a patriarchal society. The interlinking of this theme with that of democracy is strengthened by the choice of a woman to be the election agent. In other words, democracy itself is figuratively female. But this also means that while the film at face value attempts to offer empathy to women, it ends up marginalising them even further.

The film's second theme is revealed from the beginning. When the agent arrives on the island, she is greeted by the guard who says a letter he found in the parachuted box "said an agent will come, not a woman". The film is punctuated by various examples of different "types" of female oppression that are encountered along the agent's journey: a man wanting to vote on behalf of a group of women because he knows "who they should vote for"; a woman wondering why her twelve-year-old daughter can marry at that age but not vote; and a bride-to-be caught and returned "home" before she elopes to marry a foreigner. What begins as an act of giving people freedom thus ends up having the opposite effect. This point marks the realisation of the agent that democracy is not the solution to everything. To the guard's surprise, she does not ask the girl to vote, saying the girl has enough problems of her own already. Even democracy itself, so it seems, is contradictory.

However, the film lacks political subtlety, and thus leaves your expectations unfulfilled. In its presentation of the failure of democracy and the oppression of women, the film seems too involved with squeezing in as many examples as possible to illustrate its point to give its characters a chance to develop. Thus they remain one-dimensional, and fail to generate audience empathy. Despite its success in highlighting the absurd in a static, *Waiting for Godot* way, *Secret Ballot* remains monotonous, not helped by an uninvolving script that seems overwhelmed by the film's political messages.

The film's surreal landscape, with its glistening sea and barren land, often portrayed through wide angle shots that make the characters look comparatively small, works as a backdrop for the absurdity of the condition of being. But compared with predecessors like *Kandahar*, it looks too familiar. The agent's search and travel all over the island with its encounters of different sorts of people also mirrors the journey of Nafas in *Kandahar*. Yet while *Kandahar* succeeds in delicately portraying the humanity of the people Nafas encounters, Payami's people remain cardboard stock characters, compartmentalised in their various roles. The only character who stirs some emotion in the viewer is the sceptical guard, who finds himself in a situation he cannot understand, and who is baffled by the contradictions of the agent and the democracy she represents. It is the dynamics of the interaction between the guard and the agent that saves the film and adds an element of empathy. Towards the end of the film, while driving in what seems like the middle of nowhere, he stops the car at the sight of a single red traffic light planted in the middle of a large plain of sand, with not even a road marked

around it. The agent, who had been encouraging people to follow the law all day, asks the guard to ignore the traffic light. To his amazement, she says, "this is the desert; the law means nothing". It took the agent most of the film to come to that conclusion, but for the viewer, with one example after the other emphasising people's indifference towards the elections, the message had been made clear a long time ago. The film thus becomes a parody of itself. Predictably, the film ends with the agent leaving, and with the guard returning to his position at the coast. The film forms a full circle, with the sunset mirroring dawn, and with nothing changing. Democracy has failed, and, with it, the film has failed the women in it. As for the viewer, we are apparently left to come to our own conclusions about what happens next. But after being fed such a large dose of apathy, even our imagination becomes predictable.

Signs

Dir: M. Night Shyamalan, USA, 2002

A review by Jonathan Cullum, Auburn University, Alabama, USA

Following David Fincher's *Panic Room* (2002), M. Night Shyamalan's *Signs* is the second film in a year to evoke visceral fear in its audience through the theme of home invasion. So similar are the films that they even share scenes in which predatory fingers are wounded in or under doors, and others in which we feel a parent's helplessness as a sick child is trapped without medicine.

Signs, however, is the superior film. It functions as both genuinely frightening entertainment and insightful cultural commentary. With a few notable exceptions in recent years (like *Independence Day* [1996], *The Arrival* [1996], and *The X-Files* [1998]), most of the extraterrestrial visitor movies of the last quarter century have been about benevolent aliens (think *Starman* [1984], Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* [1977] and *E.T.* [1982], etc.). America had little collective fear of external invasion until the 1990s, when such attacks as the initial bombing of the World Trade Center began breeding concern that our shores were not the impenetrable fortress once imagined. Following the subsequent attacks of September 11, 2001, a return to narratives dealing with external threats seemed inevitable. If *Signs* is a harbinger of anything, it is that more of the same will follow.

The film opens on a bucolic corn farm outside Philadelphia, where we learn that Mel Gibson's character, Graham Hess, until recently an Episcopalian minister, is trying to hold his family together in the wake of his wife's death just months earlier. His younger brother, played by Joaquin Phoenix, has moved in to help out with the farm and the two precocious children -- an asthmatic boy who reads a lot (Rory Culkin) and his little moppet of a sister (Abigail Breslin), who deems the family's drinking water "contaminated". Crop circles emerge in the family's cornfield one night, and Gibson thinks he's the victim of local pranksters, until the TV news starts reporting the same phenomena in other countries. Are aliens invading the world?

Shyamalan answers that question for us slowly, deliberately, methodically. And skillfully, I might add. Alfred Hitchcock once told François Truffaut that there was nothing more suspenseful than showing the audience a bomb strapped under a table and leaving them to wonder just when it might go off. Shyamalan understands audience expectations and how to manipulate them effectively without being cheap about it. Like David Lynch, he is adept at evoking dread of suspected, hidden horrors. (Compare the first dumpster scene behind the diner in Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* [2001] with Shyamalan's spiral staircase sequence in *The Sixth Sense* [1999].) A few shots in *Signs* are even taken from ground level to give the family home an ominous appearance and to diminish us as viewers as the threat of an attack from the skies becomes increasingly possible.

But our diminution seems trifling compared to that of Gibson's character in the film. Numerous scholars (Vivian Sobchack, Neil Rattigan and Thomas P. McManus, Marsha Kinder, etc.) have been talking about the manifestation of "patriarchal crisis" in popular entertainment during the past two or three decades, and Hess is squarely in the middle of such a crisis in *Signs*. Not only does he go around asking people to stop calling him "Father", since he's no longer a minister, but Shyamalan's script and direction also diminish Hess as a father. At times, the wise-beyond-their-years children seem to be running things, gently (but unmistakably) giving directives to dad. (In one scene featured among the still photos in the film's press materials Culkin physically turns Gibson's head to redirect his gaze, and in another he asks for money in such a way that dad seems more like an ATM than an authority figure.) Then there's a shot in which Shyamalan's camera is placed in the dead mother's sewing room, and we see Gibson from a great distance through a crack in the barely opened door, as if the memory of his wife were about to push him right out of the film. There are strong similarities between this film and *Dragonfly* (2002) from earlier in the year. In particular, the fathers in both films have their patriarchal privileges restored to them after their dead wives make contact with them from beyond the grave -- literally, in the case of *Dragonfly*.

This is especially interesting, given that Mel Gibson is, in real life, a Catholic father of many children. Suffice it to say that the spiritual and patriarchal struggles suggested in the movie are resolved in a way that must have made the project that much more appealing to Gibson. Just as Kevin Costner is reunited with his dead father in *Field of Dreams* (1989) when he plows a baseball diamond into his cornfield, so is Gibson revived as a father -- and Father -- when his field gets marred. If you think of the film as a direct commentary on September 11, its themes of restored faith and conservative values seem consistent with reported trends in American culture and politics during the months since the attacks.

But in addition to being insightful, the film is also scary -- genuinely, impressively, thoughtfully frightening. Shyamalan has a keen sense of what really disturbs people, for example, you're trapped in a basement and your one source of light gets smashed. And he doesn't skimp or cheat. My only question concerning the film's logic is that if there really were aliens with the weakness described in the film, and they were smart enough to get to Earth, wouldn't they also be smart enough to know how vulnerable they would be here? The film delivers what it promises, and just when you think he might have written himself into a corner and you're wondering how he could possibly provide a satisfactory way out of a scene, Shyamalan throws in even greater complications and still finds his way through.

Some have maligned Shyamalan's finale as a disappointment, but what he delivers offers all the requisite dramatic heft for which the thoughtful viewer could reasonably ask. Those worried about being let down by the film's promise of terror need only remember one lesson borne out in the work of Hitchcock, as they view the film and share in the characters' dread fear: the fact that you're paranoid doesn't mean that no one is out to get you. More than that I will refrain from saying.

The Wedding Planner

Dir: Adam Shankman, USA/Germany, 2001

A review by Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, New South Wales, Australia

In this throwback to the romantic comedies of the '40s and '50s, director Adam Shankman offers us a plot as insubstantial as a store-bought meringue, yet one that also tries to engage with the old-fashioned issue of whether to marry out of duty or for passion, in a film that is set in a springtime San Francisco that is heaving with multiculturalism. *The Wedding Planner* is a movie about coming to America, and the issues involved with entering a new society, and a new social caste. The contradictions between these types of focus make for a movie that is ultimately unsuccessful, but unsuccessful in interesting ways.

First, the plot. Mary Fiore (Jennifer Lopez), the daughter of Italian immigrants, is on the cusp of attaining a partnership in San Francisco's most successful wedding planning business. A polished perfectionist, committed to ensuring that each happy couple will have their perfect day, she is, nevertheless, cynical about the possibility of true love. She predicts with accuracy the length of each bride and groom's union, based on the song they choose to dance to ("I Honestly Love You" equals nine months). And at night she vacuums her curtains, eats her TV dinner, and watches *Antiques Roadshow* all alone. Clearly, she's ripe to fall for that special and unpredictable someone who'll sweep her off her feet and shake up her orderly and rather sterile life.

That someone is Steve Edison (Matthew McConaughey), aka Eddie, a paediatrician who rescues her from a runaway dumpster hurtling straight at her down a precipitous San Francisco street, whilst she struggles to release the heel of her designer shoe from a grating. It's a flimsy contrivance that gets our leads together, and, as expert readers of the conventions of romantic fiction, we are not surprised when Eddie turns out to be the fiancé of Francine Donnelly (Brigitte Wilson-Sampras), the new-money bride of the year, whom Mary has worked hard to snare as a client. The stage is set for a series of awkward encounters between Mary and Eddie, as they tour the area with Francine and her unsuspecting family, scouting for wedding locations.

Meanwhile, Mary's Italian father, Salvatore (Alex Rocco), is worried about his daughter's single state, and sets her up with Massimo (Justin Chambers), a recent immigrant from Sicily, believing that an arranged marriage is as good a chance at happiness as any (it had worked for him).

In grand romantic comedy tradition, complications abound. Mary and Eddie dance in and out of the realm of possibility, until they both seem to have given up altogether on the passionate life: Eddie to marry Francine, out of a sense of habit; Mary to wed Massimo, on the rebound from Eddie, and out of a desire to please her father. Of course they both see the error of their ways in the nick of time. Salvatore prevents Mary from going ahead with her cynical act, and Francine and Eddie realise that they don't want to marry each other. Mary and Eddie are

reunited at the park where they had their first tentative date, where movies are screened outdoors at sunset.

The Wedding Planner is one of those romantic comedies that doesn't quite work, though not for lack of effort, and, watching it, I felt rather detached and distanced from it, though I wanted it to succeed. Part of my problem with the movie was Jennifer Lopez, whose rather tinny performance may have been meant to emphasise the rigid control with which her character, Mary, operates. It didn't indicate to me much depth or capacity for passion -- in great contrast to her performance as Karen in *Out of Sight* (1998), also a control freak, but one with great depth of feeling. The rest of my problem was with the contrived plot, and the haphazard tone and style of the film, which veers clumsily from sophistication to slapstick, and mismanages both. The scene where Mary and Eddie are selecting statuary for his wedding to Francine, and the penis of a statue that Mary knocks over breaks off, then becomes superglued to Eddie's hand as they frantically try to put it back, is a case in point. It had the potential of a really great gag, but was underplayed criminally. I was too often left wondering what the director wanted me to do -- laugh, sigh, or look away.

Nevertheless, and this is the reason that I wanted to write a review of *The Wedding Planner*, the movie displays compassion for its characters, and tries to be mature about the choices that Mary and Eddie have to make. For instance, Francine, played with great gusto by Brigitte Wilson-Sampras, may be the clichéd Hollywood opposite of Jennifer Lopez, being a sharp-jawed, angular blonde, as well as the competitor for Eddie's affections, but she's reasonably realistic. She has anxieties and fears, like the rest of us, and her and Eddie's relationship is real, as are their reasons for getting all the way to the altar. It's out of habit, laziness, and the fear of the unknown that they decide to marry, not because Francine has misled or manipulated Eddie. Similarly, Massimo is often buffoonish, which makes it very hard for us to understand how Mary could even contemplate a union with him, but he is also played with some sweetness by Justin Chambers, and the movie makes us see that Mary's decision is influenced by her love for her father, as well as from a sense that traditional ways of marriage can't be rejected out of hand.

Indeed, this attempt at complexity in *The Wedding Planner* is what made me decide that, although I didn't think it a successful or convincing movie, I found it interesting. That complexity extended to the setting, a San Francisco that is still raw, in terms of its makeup. Nearly everyone in this film is in the process of "becoming", in some way. Mary and her father are Sicilian immigrants; Massimo has just arrived in the U.S.; Francine's family has rocketed from the working classes into the seriously rich after making it big with a range of gourmet sausages. A host of other details emphasise America's dependence on new blood, and the ability to cross social boundaries. The judge who officiates at Mary and Massimo's City Hall wedding ceremony has a New Zealand accent; the taxi-driver who knocks into the dumpster that sets the whole chain of events in motion is Asian; Mary works with Pierre, whose boss tells him, "I love you, but if you use another carnation in my bouquet, I will deport you". Mary and Eddie discover who each other really is at tango lessons at the Basil Saint Mosley School of Dance, and we see Mary organising a range of weddings, including ones with traditional Greek and Moroccan themes.

It seems to me, then, that *The Wedding Planner* is as much a film about immigration and becoming American, whatever that means, as it is about finding true love. It may then be significant that the grand prize, the object of desire in this movie, is the firmly WASPy Eddie (Edison -- geddit?), whose profession (paediatrician) and hobbies (golf) proclaim him to be

firmly upper middle-class, and who is burnished to a golden hue, and played with languid self-assurance by Matthew McConaughey. Indeed, he seems to be the only relaxed character in the film. Eddie doesn't need to become: he already is. He is, however, to be enhanced by the addition of new immigrant energy in the shape of "The Right Woman".

This paradox (America is complete, but enhanced by additions) may be part of what's problematic about *The Wedding Planner*. Shankman says on the movie's promotional website that "I wanted to take the clichés away from the city and make it look more European. That way the romance of the city would shine through." This kind of comment indicates what we in New Zealand and Australia call "cultural cringe": the anxiety of a new country about its credentials, and, in fact, it's symptomatic of the whole wedding planning industry, an industry that feeds on its clients' desire for perfection, and delivers a product that this jaded reviewer feels lacks individuality or heart. And that's something that the movie doesn't acknowledge. It's so tied up with being the perfect romantic comedy, with packaging romance in the perfect, pre-planned way, that there's no spontaneity or magic touch.

In explaining the message he hopes to leave his audience with (and, of course, there has to be a message), Shankman says: "In a relationship it's important to take care of yourself and be honest with your partner. Keep the lines of communication open because things can get messed up when you don't." To this rather clichéd statement, he adds: "I also think that women will walk away thinking they're insane if they don't use a wedding planner!". To be honest, I walked away thinking that I'd be insane if I did.

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http://www.sonypictures.com/movies/weddingplanner/ (accessed 28 November 2002)