

# 8 Mile

Dir: Curtis Hanson, USA/Germany, 2002

## A review by Charlene Keeler, California State University, USA

Despite mediocre acting and a bromidic plot, *8 Mile* forced its way and cussed its way into mainstream America and cultural significance with the same familiar grit and frustrated realism that Eminem radiates. Long before its release in November of 2002, rumours began circulating that it was the story of Eminem's life. Teenagers began calling it "the Eminem Movie" and waited anxiously for its debut, so that they could finally learn who their idol and object of affection truly is. The film's website suggested that Universal Pictures owned the rights to Eminem's life story, and that this particular project would culminate in some supposed artistic rendition. Suddenly, several weeks before the opening, the rhetoric had changed to reports of "semi-autobiographical", and then director Curtis Hanson made a few statements in *Rolling Stone* suggesting that the film was simply a story of the difficulties of urban youth in Detroit. The last statement by Hanson was incorporated into the production comments on the DVD (released 18 March 2003), that "Eminem was not interested in doing an Eminem movie", and that parts of it only coincidentally resemble his life.

Such seemingly trite remarks are only significant when one realises the connection between identity and pop culture iconography, between image and action, and between postmodern culture and the ironic obsessive search to find an essence in entertainers. It is no secret in Hollywood that stardom is quite easily achieved by media attention, but superstardom can only be achieved by keeping the fans guessing. Madonna soared to the top quickly, but only achieved iconic status by keeping her identity fluid. No one still knows who she really is -- whore, material girl, serious actress, mother? One must be a postmodern antihero without really trying -- without knowing what that means. Eminem fulfilled the paradox of identity that Middle America craved. He became an unholy trinity of unidentified structure: Marshall Mathers, the misunderstood but brilliant artist, Eminem, the stage presence who knows no limits, and last but not least, Slim Shady, the antisocial doppelganger who murders and hates gays and women. As we all waited for the *real* Marshall Mathers to stand up in *8 Mile*, as once promised, the artificial Jimmy "B-Rabbit" Smith, Jr. stood up and said too much.

The film's motto is a cliché: "every moment is another chance to turn it all around", and is an anomalous departure for the enraged rapper. An even stranger occurrence is the inspirational ruminations flowing out of Eminem's mouth throughout the theme song in lieu of the artfully constructed profanity and the metaphorical rape and murder that even the most prudish critic must admit was raw genius. The movie is basically a combination of picaresque and bildungsroman. In the midst of a failed relationship, a lack of a stable home, an alcoholic mother, and the responsibility of raising his younger sister, Jimmy must find a way to overcome his fear of failure (and success) by winning a freestyle rap battle after getting stage fright and "choking". The rest of the film is his preparation for the event, while the natural forces of the ghetto attempt to win their own battle over Jimmy through skirmishes with local

gangs, failed romances, and the fruitless attempt to protect a young child from the violence that surrounds her.

8 Mile is the road that separates poverty stricken whites from poverty stricken African Americans, and should also be reminiscent of the east coast/west coast rap rivalry that was so prevalent in the 90s. After all, this movie is supposed to be set in 1994. Symbolically, however, 8 Mile is the dividing line of definition, reification, acceptance and authenticity. It not only divides black from white, but deconstructs the traditional idea of darkness signifying evil and lightness signifying goodness. Authentic Hip-hop artistry is dominated and maintained by the black community, so a white rapper has a difficult, if not impossible task to break into it. Taking on the culture and attitudes -- "race-claiming" -- is the only way to achieve legitimacy. White means weakness, as Super MC states during one of the battles: "How y'all get whitey to battle the saviour. It's like Darth Vader battling Opie Taylor." Winning the battle (a metaphor for the battle of life) is not just a way to prove yourself; it means being accepted, having authenticity as a rap artist and, ultimately, becoming "real". The winner earns the hope that maybe he or she is good enough to someday escape the means streets of Detroit. Lose the battle, and you might as well kill yourself.

As much as this film attempts to be contemporary, with its lessons on Hip-hop culture, its acceptance of profanity as valid language of the streets, its attempts to begin language trends ("Yo, dawg"), and its commentary on urban problems, several parts seem contrived and suffer from the same inauthenticity that it attempts to extinguish. Where are the drugs and gang warfare? Are we to believe that all the gang bangers are too busy rapping? Most characters don't even smoke cigarettes, and they carry around the same beer throughout entire scenes. The only serious fights are between Jimmy and the Free World, an all black gang whose existence is dictated by being constant winners of weekly rap battles at The Shelter. The film's worst crime is its cast of colourless (no pun intended) and one-dimensional characters, which comes across as some flagrant fear of up-staging Eminem. Rabbit's friends include Future (Mekhi Phifer), the stereotypical cocky emcee who constantly tries to get Rabbit to perform, and Cheddar Bob (Evan Jones), the timid loser who is always looking to Rabbit for validity and support. And let's not forget the typical dysfunctional mother (Kim Basinger) and Alex (Brittany Murphy), the slut girlfriend who reminds the audience that love is neither elevating nor inspiring. In fact, Rabbit is the smartest character, the most caring character, the most moral character, the most tolerant character, and, of course, the most talented character. *8 Mile* truly crosses the line of taste when Rabbit unnecessarily defends a woman and a gay coworker during a lunch break rap battle -- a feeble and completely extraneous attempt at making a gratuitous statement to mainstream America. Did I mention that he would never hit a woman?

The real beauty of *8 Mile* is its realistic cinematography. Severe, gritty imagery of the darkness of the streets and the cold steel of industrialisation give it the validity it craves. All characters have the worn, weary look that only the daily fight for mere survival can produce. Even the most attractive women look used and drab. The only sex scene consists of a gritty, three minute animalistic pawing and pounding inside an automobile factory. Of course, Eminem as a stage presence never disappoints an audience. His remarkable vacillations between the icy, detached glare and the warm charm is a manifestation of residual rage vs present day success, but it keeps fans guessing as to his "true" character, which isn't revealed. Marshall Mathers can probably act, and he does exceptionally well in the comedic scenes, but playing an angry rapper from Detroit is not much of a stretch and not a sufficient means of assessing his acting ability. The actual freestyle battles at the end are worth the ninety-five

minute wait. The brilliantly composed hardcore rhyme schemes of anger and bellicosity are produced mainly by Eminem, and, except for Papa Doc, the competitors were chosen (through real rap battles) from Detroit's best untapped underground talent.

Although *8 Mile* was first compared to sports movies such as *Rocky* (1976), it would be more apropos to compare it to *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), because what *Saturday Night Fever* did for Disco, *8 Mile* does for Hip-hop, and this has been missing from the Hip-hop world for quite some time. Jimmy Smith, like Tony Manero, must overcome hardship to win a relatively small contest that represents a bigger, deeper, inner success. But although *Saturday Night Fever* made a statement about the 70s and an entire generation, *8 Mile* attempts only superficial statements about the generation and culture responsible for Hip-hop. It is far too busy making didactic remarks about how to succeed in an all black community while committing the least amount of crimes as possible. And this is a significant statement about how mainstream America wants the PG-13 version of an R-rated reality, so no one may ever truly understand the rage behind the rap world.

# Adaptation

Dir: Spike Jonze, USA, 2002

## A review by Charles Tryon, Georgia Institute of Technology, USA

The late 2002 film season has been marked by the release of two new films by screenwriter Charlie Kaufman, *Adaptation* and *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*. *Adaptation* (2002), his second collaboration with Spike Jonze after the 1999 cult hit, *Being John Malkovich* (1999), satirises the Hollywood celebrity culture, and deploys an ironic distance and narrative disruption in order to challenge conventional Hollywood narratives. At the same time, *Adaptation* playfully acknowledges the postmodern suspicion toward the boundaries between truth and fiction by incorporating "real" characters such as Charlie Kaufman, Susan Orlean and John LaRoche, as well as "fictional" characters such as Charlie's twin brother Donald. Ultimately, this blurring between real life and representation serves the film well. As the screenplay becomes increasingly self-referential, Charlie's "real life" actions are recognised as cinematic clichés. Like the bad films that cannot get beyond the conventional Hollywood narrative, Charlie's experiences themselves become subject to Hollywood cliché. While *Adaptation* gleefully plays with these Hollywood conventions, showing them to be hollow and artificial, I am suspicious of its ironic detachment, which seems to suggest that the filmmakers know well that the Hollywood formula is conventional and arbitrary, but deploy it anyway, due to the inability to imagine what an alternative narrative structure would look like. In other words, despite this recognition, the film cannot move beyond the cliché, but is instead content merely to parody it. In this sense, the film seems consistent with the "cynical reason" described by Slavoj Žižek in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*: "Even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, we are still doing them." (Žižek, 1989: 33) Even though the film distances itself from the Hollywood system through our identification with Charlie and through the technique of parody, ultimately, Jonze and Kaufman cannot get beyond the traditional Hollywood narrative.

While the film does not fit comfortably into any category, in many ways *Adaptation* most resembles the Hollywood satire genre. Charlie's agent (Ron Livingston) is presented as a sleazy pervert who fantasises about having sex with his female employees. The producer who commissioned Charlie to write the screenplay is also seen as passive aggressive, politely encouraging Charlie, but secretly pressuring Charlie's agent for a completed screenplay. The film, like Robert Altman's *The Player* (1992), is saturated with celebrity cameos (including several of the stars of *Being John Malkovich*). However, despite these images, the Hollywood mode of production hardly comes under criticism in the film.

*Adaptation* tells the story of self-loathing screenwriter Charlie Kaufman's (Nicolas Cage) attempts to adapt Susan Orlean's bestseller, *The Orchid Thief* (1998), to the big screen. Orlean's book, which focuses on the fascinating, competitive and sometimes malicious world of orchid breeding, grew out of her *New Yorker* article on John LaRoche (played by Chris Cooper as a charming, philosophical scoundrel), who was on trial for removing orchids from protected state parkland. Her book offers a sophisticated reflection on the nature of passion,

and Charlie quickly discovers that he is incapable of converting Orlean's meandering prose into a film, that he cannot produce a screenplay without doing violence to her book. He cannot understand her book without contextualising it against, first, the planet's evolutionary history, and then later, his own self-conscious efforts to adapt her book. Charlie therefore writes himself into the screenplay, opting to focus on his own inability to adapt Orlean's book. By focusing on Charlie's struggles, the film resembles Donald's girlfriend's tattoo; like the snake that consumes its own tail, *Adaptation* consumes itself, spiralling back on itself as the film we are watching seems to emerge from Charlie's struggles at the typewriter. In this sense, the film's title takes on several competing meanings: Charlie's difficulties in adapting a difficult book to the screen; Darwin's theories of evolution as adaptation, and the characters' abilities to adapt their personalities in order to "survive", specifically within a Hollywood system that rewards Donald for his shallow screenplay while Charlie struggles to produce a thoughtful adaptation of *The Orchid Thief*.

As the film opens, we hear Charlie, in voiceover during the credits, commenting on his physical shortcomings -- his baldness, his weight, his screenwriting talents. Standing on the set of *Being John Malkovich*, he even asks, "Do I have an original thought in my head?" Filmed in mock *cinema-verité* style, the scene establishes *Adaptation's* playful approach to the line between fact and fiction, between "reality" and "simulation". Standing on the crowded set, an overweight and balding Charlie is in the way, and eventually is kicked off the set of his own film. In a performance that has received numerous accolades, including an Academy Award nomination, Nicolas Cage's dual performance as the twins, Charlie and Donald Kaufman, is useful in guiding our interpretations of the characters, and the film itself. Cage plays Charlie as awkward and self-loathing; Cage's Charlie almost seems to shrink in relationship to other characters, his broad shoulders drawn inward to suggest his lack of confidence. Charlie is constantly framed by windows, squeezing into corners to emphasise his status as an outsider. By contrast, Charlie's twin, Donald, embraces his awkwardness, casually stretching across Charlie's floor, his body language conveying a comfort in the world that Charlie cannot share. Meanwhile, Donald's hubris allows him to quickly write a conventional, cliché-riddled psychological thriller, "The Three", that Charlie's agent soon sells for "six figures". The film also allows Meryl Streep to parody her persona as someone who acts in literary adaptations, as her character devolves from the urbane, bemused *New Yorker* writer to a dependent, violent drug addict, who chases Charlie and Donald through the Florida swamp where LaRoche poaches his orchids.

Commissioned to adapt Orlean's book, Charlie promises, "I don't want to cram in sex or guns or car chases or characters learning profound life lessons or growing or coming to like each other or overcome obstacles to succeed in the end. The book isn't like that, and life isn't like that. It just isn't." He insists that he wants to remain true to the spirit of the book "rather than be artificially plot-driven". As Charlie renounces all of the Hollywood clichés, the first half of the film struggles, lurching forward to represent Charlie's stalled thought processes. Shots of Charlie labouring over his typewriter and pacing across his nearly empty bedroom contrast with intercut shots of Susan gracefully producing her book. While Charlie struggles to adapt Orlean's book, his twin brother, Donald, embarks on a screenplay of his own, eagerly embracing the Hollywood conventions that his brother eschews, and cheerfully repeating the hollow suggestions that he learns at a screenwriting seminar, even taping a photocopied set of principles to the wall above Charlie's typewriter ("Thou shall not use voiceover..."). The references to Robert McKee's principles, of course, call attention to the distinction between the film we are watching and typical Hollywood narratives. Distraught at his inability to adapt Orlean's book, Charlie finally takes his twin brother's advice and attends a McKee

screenwriting seminar in New York, where he has gone to meet Orlean -- although his shyness prevents him from actually approaching her. At this point, the film takes a decisive, and much discussed, turn after Donald "takes over" the screenplay. Under Donald's influence, *Adaptation* takes on many of the Hollywood conventions that Charlie had rejected: a chase sequence through the Fakahatchee Swamp, a sex scene between Susan and LaRoche, and emotional bonding between Charlie and Donald. Charlie's self-loathing voiceover ceases, and we no longer see him struggling behind a typewriter. While the chase scene can be read as an illustration of Charlie's own fears about offending Orlean with his adaptation of the screenplay, it also reinforces the film's narcissistic tendencies. An adaptation of *The Orchid Thief* instead becomes a film about Charlie's inability to adapt.

By the end of the film, Charlie has completed the film and has become a more confident person, learning from his brother to accept himself; in short, Charlie adapts. We see Charlie driving out of a parking garage, his dress and demeanour illustrating his new found confidence while The Turtles' "Happy Together" plays on the soundtrack, reprising scenes earlier in the film that show Donald singing the song to Charlie. Through these images, this ending can be seen as contingent; the film's "happy ending" is artificial and hollow. However, in *Adaptation* these Hollywood conventions are not seen as the product of a Hollywood system as much as they are habits that the screenwriter will either accept or struggle against. In the end, Charlie conforms to these conventions, and his decision is regarded with some degree of disappointment. The completed film does not fulfil the aspirations he had at the beginning, which is reflected in the melancholic tone of the Turtles' "Happy Together", a song that is very much about unfulfilled expectations. Thus, in many ways *Adaptation* interrogates the limits of the Hollywood system, but rather than critiquing the system that prevents Charlie from producing something new, "a film about flowers", *Adaptation* cynically embraces conventional Hollywood techniques in the guise of parodying them.

## References:

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# Far From Heaven

Dir: Todd Haynes, USA/France, 2002

## A review by June Scudeler, University of Calgary, Canada

*Far From Heaven*, Todd Haynes' family drama set in late 1950s Hartford, Connecticut, is not simply about the past. Unfortunately, many critics and viewers see the film as safely set in a time upon which we can smugly look back, secure in the knowledge we have advanced from the characters' outmoded ways of thinking. While Haynes addresses the oppression that gays and African Americans faced (and still face), the focus is on suburban homemaker Cathy Whitaker's (Julianne Moore) struggle with the repressive structures that contain her. Haynes refuses, however, to limit the possibilities of interpretation by making his characters contradictory. Although Haynes is a gay man, Cathy's husband Frank (Dennis Quaid) is not a wholly sympathetic man because he is very much part of the patriarchy. Moore is superb in her subtlety, as Cathy tentatively steps out of her prescribed gender and race roles but lacks the vocabulary or the experiences needed to adequately deal with her transgressions. But Cathy also gets her African American maid Sybil to sign Cathy's name for her on the NAACP request for information form that two volunteers bring to Cathy's door. Cathy, oblivious to the irony of the situation, flies out the door.

On the surface, Cathy has the ideal 1950s suburban life. Her station wagon is sky blue and white, and her house is so immaculate that it seems no one inhabits it. Cathy is being interviewed for the local paper's society pages when she sees an African American man in the back garden, which causes panic in her white suburban world. She discovers that the man is Raymond Deagan (Dennis Haysbert), son of the former, now deceased gardener. Cathy instinctively puts her hand on his shoulder in condolence, leading the paper to indict Cathy who is "a woman as devoted to her family as she is kind to Negroes".

For Cathy is a liberal at a repressive time in US history. One of *Far From Heaven's* most memorable sequences pivots around Cathy's liberal leanings. Cathy is talking with three of her women friends in front of her house, part of an obviously fake indoor set. We learn that Cathy has always been a highly suspect woman because of her political leanings. Her supposed best friend Eleanor (Patricia Clarkson) declares, "[Cathy's] been called Red ever since she played summer stock with all those steamy Jewish boys." Cathy sports a lavender scarf, a symbol of her difference, which flies off when she quips, "Let's go inside before Joe McCarthy drives by", a line that is both humorous and serious. The wind and Cathy's scarf symbolise the disruptive nature of her political views.

Cathy discovers Frank kissing a man in his office, whom he picked up at a gay bar full of isolated men. When Frank comes home after this discovery, Cathy and Frank have no language with which to discuss Frank's sexuality. Quaid's performance is outstanding; he sways in shock and stammers about having had "problems", unable to form complete sentences. He goes to a psychiatrist where he adopts the medical discourse about homosexuality; he "wants to beat this thing, so help me, God." However, he is doomed to fail in his quest to suppress his queerness.

Cathy turns to Raymond for companionship and understanding. Unfortunately, Raymond is too optimistic in his belief that he and his eleven year old daughter Sarah can be part of the white world, a mistake exemplified by Sarah being hit on the head by rock throwing white boys. But African Americans throw rocks through the windows of Raymond's house for having a "white girlfriend". As Raymond sadly observes, outrage over Cathy and Raymond's relationship is the only thing upon which whites and African Americans agree. Raymond becomes aware of the reality of race relations in America and of his love for Cathy: "I've seen the spark flies, all kinds. I've learned my lesson about mixing with other colours." When Cathy talks to Raymond and his daughter at a modern art show frequented by society women, the looks of disapproval and disgust are painful to watch. Cathy earnestly tells Raymond that she and Frank support the NAACP, and it is to Raymond's credit that he graciously accepts Cathy's flustered assertion. Raymond is both bold enough and naïve enough to ask Cathy to the African American area of Hartford, where they go for lunch at a restaurant Raymond frequents. Cathy wants to go to the African American enclave in Hartford because she is curious to know what it is like "to be the only one in a room". The African American clientele is as disapproving as the whites about Cathy and Raymond's cross race relationship, another instance of Haynes' refusal to put people into neat categories.

By the end of *Far From Heaven*, Cathy is almost completely alone, except for her children and Sybil. Frank falls in love with a younger man while vacationing in Miami with Cathy. Back home in Hartford, Frank breaks down in the perfectly appointed living room, tearfully revealing that he has fallen in love with someone, a state which he has never before experienced. The two Whitaker children, a boy and a girl, as befitting the 1950s family ideal, start crying in fright as the family patriarch's veneer of invincibility is shattered. Frank can be with his lover, but Cathy will be a divorced single mother. Frank calls to arrange a time to meet to sign the divorce papers, but he cannot remember Cathy's car pool days. Cathy sums up Frank's non-participation in their marriage in two lines: "You never could remember my car pool days. They've always been the same."

Raymond tells Cathy he is moving to Baltimore, and she offers to visit, wanting a relationship with him. She plaintively tells him, "No one would know us there." Of course, Cathy's wish is inconceivable. But he covers Cathy's hand with his own, the only intermixing of colour they can experience, and asks her to promise him that she will have "a splendid life. Will you do that for me?", a moment of devastating honesty and irony at the same time. Cathy sees Raymond off at the train station, wearing her lavender scarf and red coat as badges of courage, their hands raised to each other in mute love and regret as his train leaves. The film then comes full circle, with Cathy driving the streets of Hartford, but a Hartford that is grittier and cloudier; gone are the optimistic blue skies of the opening sequence. Many avenues are closed to Cathy in 1950s Hartford, and with women, people of colour and gays and lesbians still fighting for their rights, *Far From Heaven* makes us examine how far we've really come since Cathy's time. Frank can live with his lover, and Raymond is free to start a new life working for his cousin. Cathy is single, female and ostracised; she is indeed far from heaven.



# Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets

Dir: Chris Columbus, USA/Germany, 2002

## A review by Alice Mills, University of Ballarat, Australia

The film of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* is even more faithful than the first *Harry Potter* (2001) film to the book from which it is derived. Among the changes introduced by the film's director, Chris Columbus, the multiplicity of incidents at Hogwarts is reduced, and the comic-pathetic scenes in the sadistic Dursley household compressed into two sequences. Harry and Ron's trip by enchanted car to Hogwarts is given a couple of added perils: the car is nearly run down by the Hogwarts train and then Harry falls out of the car and is just rescued by Ron. This scene of aerial acrobatics reverses the joke that Columbus adds to Harry's escape from the Dursley house: in the book, Mr Dursley ineffectually grabs at Harry's ankle, while in the film he clutches so hard that he is pulled down into the shrubbery. Rowling's novel ends with a reminder of the grimly unloving Dursley household to which Harry must return for the summer holidays. Columbus omits this hint of trouble to come, keeping the film's focus totally within the world of wizards.

Some of his omissions demonstrate Columbus' confidence that his audience will already be familiar with the characters, the story of Harry's first adventure and the overall pattern of the series of novels. Thus, at the film's end, the director feels no need to signal a return to the Dursleys, because very few viewers are unlikely to know that Harry will have more adventures next year after another unpleasant stay with his Muggle relatives. Similarly, Columbus omits the early scene where Rowling reintroduces Draco Malfoy, in full confidence that the great majority of viewers will have seen the first film and read the books, needing no help to place Draco as Harry's adversary. It is taken for granted that viewers will recognise Draco at first glimpse. The film makes no effort to recapitulate the story of Harry's scar or of his previous adventures at Hogwarts.

Having given a splendid performance as Snape in the first film, Alan Rickman is given few opportunities here to sneer and bully, but perhaps in compensation he is shown in close-up when the adult wizards gather at each new site of attack. As a group member, he has disappointingly little function except to stand staring vacantly on the periphery of action. Maggie Smith has a stronger role, and, as in the first film, she shines as the tart-tongued, loyal and loving Professor McGonagall. Richard Harris wheezes and gasps his way through the role of Professor Dumbledore with slightly more authority than his excessively twinkled-eyed performance in the first film. The fact that Harris died shortly after making *Chamber* intrudes uncomfortably, at least in my viewing experience (though child viewers may neither know nor care). The actor's physical frailty undermines Dumbledore's function as a strong and ever reliable source of wisdom and salvation. As Gilderoy Lockhart, the new Defence against the Dark Arts teacher, Kenneth Branagh excels, appearing to relish all his posturings and false bonhomie. As with Snape, Lockhart's scenes are considerably reduced from book to film. I particularly regretted the loss of the Valentine Day sequence. One other regrettable loss is the joyful grin of Rupert Grint as Ron, which regularly stole scenes from Daniel

Radcliffe as Harry in the first film. In *Chamber*, Grist's register of emotions is almost entirely confined to grimaces of terror.

Most of the translation from book to film is unproblematic, but one difficulty that *Chamber* does not resolve is the use of snake-language. In the book a clear distinction is drawn between Harry's experience of speaking and understanding snake-speech and others' experience of hearing incomprehensible hisses. In the film Columbus opts for English words when Harry hears the basilisk, but an invented parselmouth language when he speaks to a snake in the duelling match (to indicate the other wizards' incomprehension). This strategy is discarded, however, during the fight to the death in the Chamber of Secrets. Here, parselmouth words are followed by commands in English to the snake, and Columbus seems more concerned with keeping up the pitch of excitement than with consistency.

The fight to the death is exciting enough, and its setting impressive enough, for such inconsistencies to be forgotten, but it is less easy to gloss over the lameness of the means by which Harry solves the Chamber's mystery in both book and film. He visits the petrified Hermione and happens to notice a piece of torn paper in her hand, paper that discloses the monster's identity and whereabouts. In the book, he discovers this paper in her tightly clenched fist. It is unconvincing that the almost omniscient Dumbledore had not already checked her body for such clues (not to speak of the unlikeliness of a book lover like Hermione tearing a page from a library book and writing on it). Still less convincing is the film's version where Hermione's paper is held very loosely in her fingers.

Inconsistencies in the use of snake-language and implausibility in the solving of the mystery are trivial vexations when weighed against the film's many pleasures. Apart from Branagh's nicely judged posturings and prancings, the film's strongest moments all involve the transgression of physical boundaries between outside and inside. While the horror sequence involving giant spiders is competently (if stereotypically) rendered, it is far less viscerally powerful than the comic-disgusting moments when the unfortunate Ron vomits up gigantic slugs. In trying to curse Malfoy into eating slugs, Ron inflicts the spell on himself in reverse: what should be outside is disgustingly, vomit-inducingly inside and must be ejected.

Two jokes added by Columbus early in *Chamber* also exemplify the transgression of inside-outside boundaries. Mr Dursley not only fails to stop Harry from escaping through the window, as in the novel, but is himself dragged out and falls heavily into the garden. This joke takes the form of an attack on the wicked father-substitute, but young viewers are promptly reassured that he remains alive and uninjured. The equivalent attack on the wicked mother-substitute, Mrs Dursley, occurs indirectly, via her elaborate cream cake. Her dinner party is not only ruined by Dobby the house-elf's explosion of the cake, as in the book, but is also rendered more disgusting by Dobby's dropping of the cake onto the female guest's head and dress, smearing her with cream. In both jokes what should be inside (cake in stomach, Dursley in house) falls outside.

Harry's fall from the enchanted car provides a further example of moving violently outside where inside is far preferable, and, like Mr Dursley's fall, this accident involves a danger of death. For another example, while Harry and Ron's failure to cross the magical boundary to platform nine and three quarters is not life-threatening, it does result in pain, confusion and falling to the ground. My final instance in this series of outside-inside predicaments early in the film is the episode when the enchanted car ejects Harry, Ron and the owl from its interior (another example of falling out and down to the ground) and their luggage from its trunk. So

far, so faithful to Rowling's text, but Columbus adds a farting noise, giving an explicitly anal connotation to the act of expulsion.

In this context, Ron's vomiting up of slugs and the smearing of cream onto a human body during the Dursleys' dinner party, both gain anal connotations, as does the corpulent Mr Dursley's hapless departure from the aperture that he has tried to block. Anal imagery becomes yet more obvious when the children choose a girl's toilet as the best place to manufacture their potion. Not only does this choice breach a taboo on males entering a female toilet, it also brings them to the entry point for the Chamber of Secrets. "Chamber" carries overtones of "chamberpot", given the means of entry to its secrets via the school's waste water pipes. In the film, Harry and Ron's descent through the pipes is cleaner and dryer than in the novel, but disgusting detail has been added in an earlier sequence where Harry tracks the monster's path behind the wall, which here and here alone is a green colour redolent of decay. When the gigantic snake rears up from the Chamber's waters to menace Harry, it summons up early childhood terrors of something dreadful coming up through the toilet bowl, terrors treated a little more lightly in Moaning Myrtle's place of residence in a toilet's U-bend.

From the violent expulsion of a metaphoric "shit", Mr Dursley, from a blocked window, to Ron's vomiting up of semi-solid faeces-like slugs, and then to the passage of the enormous serpent through the Hogwarts waste water pipes, the main movement of the film can be read as anal-expulsive. And, of course, the threat to Harry and Hogwarts will recur in secret and eventually be resolved as inevitably as the human body's process of digestion, its need to eat, its secret inner movements, its eventual letting fall of faeces.

The film may not take many risks with its material, but, on the whole, its additions and subtractions to Rowling's material work well. Much of *Chamber's* success, in fact, derives from its range of anal allusions, from fart jokes to monster-killings. Like Branagh's antics, they lend extra exuberance to the much loved Harry Potter's second set of adventures.

# The Hours

Dir: Stephen Daldry, USA, 2002

## A review by Natalie Wilson Clift, Birkbeck College, University of London, UK

Though film adaptations are often viewed as "lesser versions" or truncated abridgements of the books on which they are based, *The Hours*, although it is an adaptation thrice removed (first from Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* [1924], second from Michael Cunningham's Pulitzer prize winning novel [1998]), bristles with literary allusion, biography and intertextuality. And, though it is adapted to the visual medium of film, each of the three narratives still manages to highlight the literary. From the focus on the acts of writing, editing and publishing in the narrative focusing on Woolf, to the critical placing of the book in Laura Brown's story and the ultimate revelation she left her family to become a librarian, to the elegy offered in honour of Richard's literary oeuvre, one of the film's larger messages seems to be the importance of narrative to daily life -- both in terms of the stories we live our daily lives by (whether as author, housewife, or New York socialite), and in terms of the wider narratives that sustain our collective consciousness (whether in relation to war, love and loss, sanity, illness, or death). Ticking clocks, alarms, buzzers and doorbells form a drum-like background that reverberates throughout this literary film, creating an unmistakable, methodic and entrancing rhythm. Using the "day in the life" structure that Woolf inaugurated in *Mrs Dalloway*, each story takes place in a single day of three different women living in three different time periods. Relying on minute physical details and facial expressions, as well as the interminable ticking away of clocks, the movie is like a finely tuned sonata. Or, perhaps, more fittingly, like a carefully crafted poem.

It begins quietly, with Virginia Woolf (Nicole Kidman) at the edge of a river deliberately searching for a stone. The solitude of this scene, the calculated suicide by drowning, is surprisingly subdued. There is no thrashing; there is hardly any motion or sound. Rather, Woolf's body is portrayed as gracefully descending to the deep, as caressed, rather than engulfed by water. Suicide is a dominant theme throughout the film, but, like the crescendo of a symphony, each attempted (or achieved) suicide increases in intensity and vividness. From the calm suicide of Woolf, to the more frantic images of drowning and suffocation associated with Laura Brown (Julianne Moore), to the tormented plummet of Richard (Ed Harris), the film builds on its deathly theme. However, it does not offer grand narratives of loss, but rather a picture of the persistent sorrows that lead each of three different characters to contemplate (and sometimes commit) suicide.

Although it punctuates the daily lives of three different women with the spectre of death, the film is not so much a lamentation as a commemoration of the many moods, feelings and life changing events that make up a day. As such, the movie (like the book) suggests life as a quasi-literary event -- as full of themes, characters, climax and denouement. This life as literature, or the literariness of life, is quietly celebrated rather than bemoaned. While all three of the main characters dread the day before them (beautifully conveyed by parallel imagery in which each woman awakes in her bed and is visibly dismayed and anxious about

# Jeanne et le Garçon Formidable

Dir: Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau, France, 1998

## A review by Florian Grandena, Nottingham Trent University, UK

"Unidentifiable." "Unclassifiable". It is in these terms that Jean-Pierre Jeancolas discusses *Jeanne et le Garçon Formidable* (Jeancolas, 1999: 24). Indeed, *Jeanne* is not easy to categorise: it is a musical about Aids with moments of exhilarating fantasy. It is also an atypical militant film that moves away from the often grainy realism of many 1990s French political films. A clever and uncompromising work that is a political statement in itself.

*Jeanne* is Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau's first film, and was inspired by Martineau's own experience as an Act Up activist. The film was conceived as a warning against the spread of Aids in a political context of general indifference. *Jeanne* tells the tragic love story between the eponymous character (Virginie Ledoyen) and Olivier (Mathieu Demy, son of French film director Jacques). Bubbly Jeanne works as a receptionist for a travel agency. Despite her relationship with Jean-Baptiste (Frederic Gorny), Jeanne cannot resign herself to monogamy and instead has multiple sexual encounters. One day she meets Olivier on the Parisian metro. The heroine thinks that she has finally met the man of her dreams and splits up with Jean-Baptiste. It emerges that Olivier is HIV positive, and, as the film develops, Olivier's disease takes over until he disappears from Jeanne's life and withdraws to die peacefully with his family.

Although it deals with a serious contemporary issue all too rarely addressed in French feature films, *Jeanne* refuses to wallow in the misery of the situation. On the contrary, Martineau and Ducastel aim to de-stereotype people living with HIV, and opt for an uplifting form of storytelling, the musical. Reminiscent of Jacques Demy's musicals such as *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* (1964) and *Trois places pour le 26* (1988), *Jeanne* combines sharp social and political comment with often light and sometimes bittersweet musical numbers. Not that all numbers necessarily have political undertones. Some aim to magnify the small pleasures of everyday life, counterbalancing the seriousness of the main subject matter. There are two memorable musical numbers of the kind that perfectly translate the characters' euphoric state of mind: when Jeanne announces to her sister Sophie (Valerie Bonneton) in a fancy Chinese cafeteria that she is in love with Olivier; and when a bookshop sales assistant (Emmanuelle Goize), with a soft spot for Olivier, advises him which book to offer to Jeanne. Magnifying the beauty of life also has the purpose of rendering the prospect of Olivier's death more horrible. However, unlike in Demy's musicals, Martineau et Ducastel choose not to have the entire dialogue sung and have recourse to different musical styles for each number, ranging from world music to jazz and popular waltz.

At first, the musical genre may not seem an obvious choice to address the issue of Aids in contemporary France. Since the 1970s, the musical has appeared only sporadically in French cinema, with five of the total of twelve directed by Jacques Demy. However, the musical genre allows Ducastel and Martineau to approach their subject matter in an original way. The

interest of the musical is two-fold: it is a genre that favours the presence of multiple themes and characters. Indeed, Ducastel and Martineau's film addresses various issues (for instance, the musical sequence with the company cleaners) and introduces characters (i.e. the bookshop sales assistant who takes a fancy to Olivier) that do not necessarily have an effect on the rest of the narrative. This is done without jeopardising the integrity of the film. Also, as the musical is less dependent on realist conventions such as spoken (as opposed to sung) speech and natural movements (as opposed to dance and choreography), the presence of disparate issues and characters is made easier and does not need to go through a justifying process.

As a musical, *Jeanne* attracts the viewer's attention to its formal means of expression and often flaunts its artificiality. Not unlike in Demy's *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg*, some sets subjectively reflect the psychological state of the characters or the theme of the scene. For instance, Jeanne tells her sister Sophie about her new found love in a Chinese cafeteria that looks like a luxury perfume shop. In the "Java du séropo" musical number, Olivier tells Jeanne that he is HIV positive. The dancers in the background all wear pastel costumes that translate the bittersweet tone of the sequence and Olivier's muted feelings. This choice of *mise-en-scène* also contrasts sharply with Olivier's speech and the possibility of his death (and makes it all the more terrible). However, when he sings "je ne suis pas encore mort" ("I am not dead yet"), he defiantly addresses himself at the camera. Towards the end of the film, Sophie and her husband Julien (Denis Podalydès) praise consumer credit in a humorous musical number. The scene takes place in their modern flat ridden with colourful furniture and useless gadgets. Whereas Paris is clearly visible through the window in the background, all the main monuments of the capital are fancifully present: the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, the Grande Arche de la Défense, the Obelisk on Place de la Concorde. The view of Paris purposely lacks depth and perspective, and with its mechanically flashing lights suggesting traffic, it looks like a theatre set in all its claimed fakeness.

The disparate characters and social issues, and the presence of musical numbers might suggest that *Jeanne* represents the antithesis of realism. However, the artificiality of the film is counterbalanced by the true to life dimension of the story and the characters. Despite the apparent fancy of the musical genre, Ducastel and Martineau aim to represent Jeanne truthfully, her life, her condition of working and living. The heroine works as a receptionist and earns little money. Hence, Jeanne's exiguous flat that does not seem to be able to accommodate more than a bed and a cabinet. The low key approach to some sets is a reaction against a tendency of middle-class cinema of the 1990s that tended to ignore and drift away from social reality. Martineau recalls: "I remember the weariness that many of us felt towards French cinema, in which people do not work, have existential problems and live in one hundred square metre flats. And we all were struggling, we were living in tiny flats. We were thinking: 'This is mad. What kind of *bourgeois* cinema is this ?' We were all laughing at these luxury squats. *Jeanne* was also a reaction against this." (Grandena, 2002) Martineau and Ducastel's yearning for authenticity also manifests itself in Jeanne's wardrobe: it contains only those garments that a young receptionist on low wages can realistically afford and easily alter (such as the red Chinese dress worn in the club scene).

*Jeanne* also remains fundamentally realist at the level of narrative and character development. Protagonists do not respond to specific generic conventions but mainly to psychological coherence. *Jeanne* is a love story between two individuals made for each other but torn apart by death. This would have been perfect material for a sentimental melodrama, but Ducastel and Martineau place themselves outside the canons of the romance genre. No compromise is made at the expense of realism. Here, the heroine remains polygamous, even

after she meets the man of her dreams. When Olivier's disease takes over, he suddenly withdraws and disappears from Jeanne's life (and the film). If Olivier discards Jeanne, it is because, as Martineau himself explains, people dying of Aids usually seek a strengthened intimacy with their close family (Grandena, 2002).

In their first film, Ducastel and Martineau have demonstrated an authentic talent for addressing a difficult contemporary issue without having recourse to easy sentimentalism and well tried archetypes. *Jeanne* is both symptomatic of the return of the political in 1990s French cinema and one of its most original contributions. *Jeanne* shows that political commitment is not necessarily synonymous with grainy realism or tautological naturalism.

*Jeanne et le Garçon Formidable* is not only unclassifiable. It is unique.

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# Neil Jordan Retrospective: Irish Film Theatre

**A review by Jerome de Groot, University College Dublin, Republic of Ireland**

Ever since (and before) Oscar Wilde made being Irish attractive (if not respectable) in England, cultural production from Dublin and beyond the pale has been bedevilled by questions of nationhood and identity. It is in this atmosphere of continuing post-colonial self-construction that Irish cinema should be read, according to Terry Byrne: "one should interpret the new indigenous cinema of Ireland ... as a means of national expression and as a tool for dialogue and address essential to the process of self-definition" (Byrne, 1997: vii). On this model, the new Irish cinema of the 1980s and 1990s is a crucial part of the ongoing search for a cultural definition of nation. This is certainly the case if one thinks of the high profile films emerging from the island in those decades. *In the Name of the Father* (1993), *The Crying Game* (1992), *Michael Collins* (1996) and *The Commitments* (1991) all had particular things to say about Irishness, whether it was simply attempting to understand the bloody birth of a nation, or establishing that the Irish were "the blacks of Europe", which was certainly something to be proud of. These films, and the milieu from which they emerge, find a voice with which to consider nation, post-colonialism and cultural identity.

As the most famous and successful product of Irish filmmaking, and despite the recent growth in the study of Irish cinema, it is noticeable that more often than not Neil Jordan is categorised still as a "British" director, even when works as "Irish" as *The Miracle* (1991) are discussed (although Ian Christie does rightly emphasise the link between Jordan and European cinema). (Murphy, 2000: 4; Christie, 2000: 68-80) This is more than odd when one considers that few of his films take place in the UK, and that the status of the Irish-Britain they present is nothing if not debated. The requisition of Jordan is the standard model of British (English) cultural appropriation, something that is itself questioned and interrogated by the films. The director of *Michael Collins*, for instance -- whatever you think of that film's political stance -- would have serious questions for anyone who called him British. His films rank in the front line of what Byrne would have as the uniting purpose of recent Irish movies. Furthermore, Jordan has now attained such cultural capital that the recent retrospective at the Irish Film Theatre coincided with a new film, magazine cover stories, interviews on television and radio, and a new academic book on his work. He is truly a high profile Irish cultural figure, important both in the evolution of an indigenous film industry, and in the self-fashioning of a national identity. Yet, in classic Dublin fashion, I (coincidentally) sat next to him in a pub recently and no one batted an eyelid.

However, it is the case that Jordan's films often do not pin their national identity on their sleeve. In fact, they do not really seem to have a coherent sense of corpus or oeuvre. Jordan obviously considers himself an *auteur*: a novelist, scriptwriter, director, producer, D.Litt (honorary at Queen's Belfast) and member of the Office of Arts et Lettres. Yet his films do not have a central bank of motifs or concerns that are drawn on again and again. Whilst there obviously are pieces that consider Irishness or questions of identity, there are texts that are



concerned with fantasy, psychosis and sexuality. The perceived unevenness of his work has been put down to his compulsion to make Hollywood movies. Richard Kelly memorably dismissed movies (essentially 1994's *Interview with the Vampire*) that "seem to bear the rabid tooth-marks of preview testing" (Kelly, 1999). It seems to me, however, that there is a method in the seemingly non-linear direction of his career. In many ways, according to Jordan himself, the point is the lack of coherence. Who wants to make the same film twice? What I am going to do in this article is to attempt to bring together various of the key strands of Jordan's work -- concentrating on *The Crying Game*, *Michael Collins*, *Mona Lisa* (1986) and *Angel* (1982) -- in order to identify and organise the requisite tools with which to approach his new film, *The Good Thief* (2002).

Jordan's first film, *Angel*, introduces many of the key concerns and ideas that seem important throughout what one could term the "political-generic" strand of his filmmaking (as contrasted with the "fantasy-psychological" aspects he covers in *In Dreams* [1999], *The Butcher Boy* [1997] and *The Company of Wolves* [1984], something I'm not really going to concentrate on here). This updating of a noir revenge plot is an exploration of the consequences of seemingly random violence. Danny, the central character, is thrust into the role of the avenging just man; yet his journey is morally ambivalent, contorted and confused. The film showcases the strength and dexterity of Stephen Rea (himself a Jordan stalwart) as an actor, moving as he does from perplexed murder to lugubrious depression. *Angel* presents the randomness of violence in Ulster, and there is no attempt at giving it context, or trying to understand or explain the initial murders. We don't know who the criminals are, what they are doing or why. In his introduction to *Angel's* screenplay, John Boorman cites *Point Blank* (1967) and terms the style "poetic cliché". (Jordan, 1999: viii) In *Angel* the repetition and heavily stylised pressure brought to bear on the everyday reflects the film's concerns of a daily atmosphere charged with unpredictable and untraceable, motiveless violence. Nothing in this film is comfortable or "normal", and Jordan works hard to counterpoint the banal grimness of urban Northern Ireland, the sheer boredom of the place, with the violence inherent in the generic approach and which hangs over the area as a whole. He was criticised for showing a certain political naïveté in his presentation of a political conflict without politics, but his conception of a bewildered agent of vengeance wandering around a confused world does present the situation better -- and intentionally less coherently -- than more explicit treatments. He updates the noir sense of confusion and disconnectedness, of corruption and desperation, and, in doing so, has much to say about the commonplace violence and fragmented identities of the North. The reconfiguring of the noir plot is complicated by the Ulster setting, and this inflects each generic aspect -- confusion, moral complexity, corruption, the lone man's search for justice -- with the resonance of conflict and civil trauma: as Detective Bloom says, 'Nowadays everybody's guilty'.

The ambivalent approach to violence and politics that *Angel* begins to explore is something that runs through Jordan's "political" films. He is particularly interested in the banality of violence, the normality of the traumatic event, and how this can change or affect a character, from Danny in *Angel* to Jody in *The Crying Game*. In the latter movie the inability of Fergus to escape the cycle of violence he "volunteered" for -- in contrast to Jody's assertion that "we do a tour of duty and go home" -- destroys the fragile relationships he sets up with both Jody and Dil. Jordan likens the relationship between Jody and Fergus to something that metaphorically presents the "broader history of Anglo-Irish relationships: two cultures in need of each other, yet at war with each other." (Jordan, 1993: viii) This sense of a complex dynamic in the interplay between the UK and Ireland is key in understanding the haunting destruction and fragmentation that attends acts of violence associated with the conflict. The

violence of the situation overtakes all of those involved in it, playing out in a terrible symmetry of its own. This is a similar story to that of *Mona Lisa*, the doomed victims ending up laughing at the ironies of their fate.

*Michael Collins* is a test case in many ways because it is an historical film, one that purports to present a version of "true" or "real" events. It was criticised when released for romanticising Collins and playing fast and loose with history. However, the film surely is interested in the very contingency of "history" and our understanding of such things. At the outset seemingly a Whig view of positivistic historical progress, the "great men" version of things, the film is far more complex than it has been given credit for. Jordan has spoken of how he was interested in Collins because you could use his life to tell the story of some important events in the construction and foundation of the Irish nation, rather than suggesting that the story of Collins was the story of Ireland: "Through this single character...one could tell the story of the most pivotal period in Irish history." (Jordan, 1996: 2) He is simply a focal point, a framing device. One of the key moments in the film sees Pathé newsreel announcing the arrival of the Black and Tans, a historical document of a key moment in the developing narrative of Ireland. The final shot of the news footage follows Charles Dance's car into Dublin Castle, and the shot segues from black and white into colour, and the newsreel becomes subsumed into the film's narrative. The film mimics documentary evidence, and uses familiar sites from around Dublin to retell a relatively canonical story. The film is at once taking on the authority of the news, presenting itself as a record of history, but simultaneously complicating our relationship with historical texts, suggesting that historical "fact" is just as contingent as historical "fiction". The dramatisation of the past is complicating and questioning our version of that past, challenging the completion of historiography. This is not as purely intellectual as it might seem. Any suggestion that the stories that make up the history of Ireland in the past few centuries are contingent and fragmentary, any interrogation of the totalising view of history and identity inherent in narratives of nation, and complicating of the process of nationhood, the key inveterate subjectivity of history and identity on the island -- all this is a long way from innocent or naïve.

Far from celebrating Collins as a romantic figure, a binding and key man, he becomes increasingly subsumed and questioned by the film. The text is constantly complicating our and its own views of events, from the construction of de Valera as "villain" (despite his key role in Irish history and independence), to the questioning of the entire discourse of nationhood and political progress. One important scene relates the purely fictional story of de Valera's escape from a British jail. De Valera escapes in drag, dressed as a whore; he comments that it is an historic moment. He and his companions joke that the "President of Ireland" is dressed as a whore, but surely the whole movie shows that definitions and titles and all that are simply subjective definitions; for instance, he is President of Ireland but an escaping convict in England. Definitions and identities are extremely relative, and Collins is finally defeated by this, by the fact that he "can't go to war over a form of words", because he recognises that "a form of words" is not important -- but it is, and still is. All this complicating and subtle interrogation of the stories of Irish independence and nationhood is deeply political, suggesting, in a fashion drawn from the earlier movies, that things are always a little more complicated than they seem.

This complexity is expressed often on the level of interpersonal relationships, and it is in this confluence of the conceptual and the practical that Jordan begins to present a case to be considered an interesting and challenging filmmaker. He delights in exploring oddball or off

kilter relationships, presenting complicated and non-standard intimacies between characters, from the divine *ménage-a-quartre* of *The End of the Affair* (1999), to the homosocial/sexual relationships explored in *Michael Collins* and *The Crying Game*. The purpose of this exploration of dissidence and deviance varies. *In Dreams*, *Interview with the Vampire* and even *Mona Lisa* involve parodies of family that challenge the compulsory heterosexual unit, the coherent organisation of society. The central relationships of the film are not standard or obvious, the dynamics and impetuses of the interrelationships between characters are unsettling and contorting in a way that confuses and challenges; and this denial or interrogation of standard models of sexuality, friendship, family and gender can be very effective plot-wise (*Mona Lisa*), intellectually (*The Company of Wolves*) and simply in getting the film talked about (the "twist" hook that sold *The Crying Game* in America). At its best, Jordan's work challenges and subverts, playing with the expectations of culture, society and audience in order to explore and complicate our understanding of film, family and ourselves.

Often central to this presentation is the cynical, ambiguous figure of Stephen Rea -- beautiful, empty, tortured, complex. His mournful face is as crucial to the dynamics of treason in *Michael Collins* as is his eventual acceptance of his "nature" in *The Crying Game*. It is probably a rule of thumb that anything with Rea in a central role is worth watching, and those films of Jordan's from which he is absent or in which he is marginalised -- *The Miracle* (1991), *We're No Angels* (1989), *High Spirits* (1988), *Interview*, *In Dreams* -- lack the focus and clarity he brings to the screen (obviously, *Mona Lisa* is the exception that would prove this rule). This is certainly the case for *The Good Thief*. The film that springs to mind when watching this remake of Jean Pierre Melville's *Bob le Flambeur* (1955) is Stephen Soderbergh's *Ocean's Eleven* (2001). Jordan's movie is directly parallel, a remake of a "cool" movie, a sentimental memory of a more stylised era of celebrity and culture, a reclaiming of a film and genre that had been lost down the back of the Hollywood/European sofa. The team of heisters are less beautiful (or more European) in Jordan's movie, but they have the similar ups and downs and generic plot tropes to deal with. When Soderbergh announced he was reshooting the Rat Pack movie, most commentators questioned his decision, and there is a large "why?" hanging over Jordan's film. He takes the kernel of an idea from Melville, and grafts on various plotlines and digressions. Whilst many of these are of interest, be it discussion of fakes or the seedy relationships of necessity forged on the streets of urban France, they are not explored in enough depth or with sufficient wit to justify a remake. The film suffers from a sense that it is taking a shallow approach to a number of conflicting and intriguing ideas, but never working them out in full. Annoyingly, Jordan has no excuse for this one: a freer hand than normal, a decent cast, and a film that evidently worked once (in Melville's version).

Nick Nolte stars as Bob, the good thief of the title, good insofar as he is relatively effective (although he apparently keeps on getting caught), and good in that through a process of spiritual rebirth he too can ascend to heaven and be forgiven. The redemptive structure recalls that of *Angel*, in which Danny has to attain grace; it is, in fact, a characteristic of most of Jordan's narratives in films as varied as *Michael Collins* and *The End of the Affair*. Jordan says he wanted the film to "look like a hangover". Quite apart from the way that this notion of sensual disjunction mirrors the central character's psychology, the concept of a (self-inflicted) pain that has to be endured before the return to the relative safety of the mainstream is a good way of thinking about Jordan's work in general. At this juncture, it is interesting to note that Jordan's next mooted project is *The Return*, a text concerning the conclusion of *The Odyssey*. The metaphor of the quest toward enlightenment and normality that this story

represents seems to be a clear analogue for many of Jordan's explorations of character and self-definition.

However, the logical morality of the tale is lost somewhere in the mire of the final act of the movie. Has Bob been forgiven or reborn, or is he just riding his luck? In the end, the film fudges all these issues to conclude with a clever twist rather than a profound realisation, gesturing toward something stronger but never delivering. In this respect, it again recalls the majority of Jordan's movies; unsatisfying endings, or thoughts not fully interrogated or expressed, seem to recur too often for comfort in his work. There is a continual sense that the films burst with ideas but sometimes cannot sustain them, and regularly fall into unreflective generic patterns rather than push the boundaries any further. This is demonstrated here by the deployment of a motif -- freezing the frame and using stop-action editing to make the text jagged and staccato -- that is seemingly used for effect rather than to develop the film in any way. It does add to the "hangover" feeling, and has something of the new wave jump cut about it, but ultimately the approach echoes far superior movies that have used such an effect with more purposeful intent than is evident here -- *Run Lola Run* (1998), for instance. The seemingly random freeze-framing of character as a device for narrative reflection or development is something of a standard from *Goodfellas* (1990) to *City of God* (2002), but Jordan's use seems to be more interested in flashy atmosphere than anything else. As with most things in this film, what could be a challenging or thoughtful approach to atmosphere and narrative runs out of steam rather too easily. There is nothing of the intellectual chutzpah evident in *Michael Collins'* use of newsreel, for instance. By the time the final jump has Nolte wandering into the dawn sunlight having broken the bank at Monte Carlo, any impact the film or the effect might have imparted is well lost, and the conclusion to the film is confusingly low key.

The addition of a transsexual character adds little more than heavy humour (she/he is incredibly strong but cannot stand spiders since the operation), and echoes more interesting and challenging explorations of sexuality and gender from Jordan's early career. The characters are pretty poorly drawn, not the least Bob, who wanders between incoherent artistic ramblings, caddish insouciance, crumpled elegant lying and noble failure without coming to rest anywhere. The only engaging figure is Emir Kusturica, giving a zestful performance that seems to be drawn from an entirely different film, one of his own perhaps (and you long for the humour and complex emotional engagement of *Underground* [1995] or *Black Cat*, *White Cat* [1998] here). It would be tempting maybe to suggest that Jordan's central characters are intentionally vague, but that is letting him and Nolte get away too easily with what is an annoyingly smug performance. There is little light or shade, and, cruelly, the performance that leaps to mind is that of Jeff Bridges in *The Big Lebowski* (1998), a generous and nuanced playing of what is a "slacker" version of the same kind of role. Here, it is all late night smoking at a pool club whilst talking about Picasso and drinking Pernod or brandy. Didn't this kind of caricaturing of the French go out of fashion about fifty years ago? A similar film about the gambling dens and pubs of Ireland that presented the locals in such a hugely clichéd fashion, and had for a central character a ravaged but nobly romanticised figure would have been widely scorned. You could argue that this is a fond reworking of familiar tropes, but, if so, it loses all sense of purpose halfway through anyhow.

Jordan's awkward and strangely stylised dialogue adds to this sense of falseness, and prevents the film from ever attaining an engaging narrative or hitting its stride. This is intentional; the awkwardly off kilter dialogue is something that can be traced back to *Angel*. Quite what the purpose of this approach is in *The Good Thief*, however, is unclear. Where in *Angel* it had

expressed an updated noir and the false echoes of conventions or relationships in a brooding Northern Ireland, *The Good Thief* does nothing with the idea, and it becomes a stylistic tic, a pointless affectation.

So we come full circle, criticising Jordan's new film in the light of his first. The edginess and fizzing interest of the early films has been lost, and somewhere between Dublin and Hollywood Jordan has misplaced the urgency and intellectual engagement that characterised the early films and his undoubtedly seminal and clearly thought texts, *The Crying Game* and *The Butcher Boy*. The action of looking at his films as a coherent whole in sequence that this retrospective has allowed presents us with Jordan as an interesting and varied Irish filmmaker, who is concerned to push ideas and play with genre and identity. Often this approach comes off with challenging results, but his work is too uneven to reassess him as an important or remarkable director. Rather, it is probably fair to think of him as a key cultural phenomenon in the development of Irish cinema, and the maker of some interesting, but ultimately unsatisfying films.

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# O

Dir: Haley Fishburn, USA, 2001

## A review by Haley Fishburn, Texas Tech University, USA

We have become accustomed to teenagers falling in love over Shakespeare. From tragedies *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* (1996) and *Hamlet* (2000), to comedies *10 Things I Hate about You* (1999), *Never Been Kissed* (1999) and *Get Over It* (2001), teen idols have starred in award winning adaptations of all our favourite Shakespeare plays within the last few years. However, the tradition of either faithfully retelling Shakespeare, or, as is most common with the comedies, skirting the controversial issues presented by Shakespeare, is abandoned by director Tim Blake Nelson and screenwriter Brad Kaaya, who go a step beyond what all other adaptations have dared with their *Othello* adaptation *O*. While keeping the basic plot, Nelson and Kaaya have added both situations and imagery to update the 17th century play for a 21st century audience.

The plot closely follows Shakespeare's *Othello*, with just a few minor removes. Odin James, the Othello character portrayed by Mekhi Phifer, is an inner city boy turned star basketball player of an otherwise all white private school, thus earning the envy and resentment of his teammate and coach's son, Hugo Goulding, incarnated by Josh Hartnett. Odin also dates the Dean's daughter, Desi Brable, a very strong and outspoken Desdemona played by Shakespeare film veteran Julia Stiles, and must, with the help of coach Duke Goulding (Martin Sheen), defend himself against Dean Brable's accusations that Odin forced himself on Desi. The film's plot develops much as the play's, with Hugo recruiting Roger, a lonely but rich outcast, to help him get Michael (the Cassio character rendered by Andrew Keegan), who had recently been chosen by Odin to share the MVP trophy, off the basketball team. As tempers and pressure escalate, Hugo prompts Odin to kill Michael and Desi, resulting in the all too familiar Shakespearean death filled tragic ending.

The black/white motif so integral to Shakespeare's play is also adapted in Kaaya's screenplay. By using dove/hawk imagery, an O-shaped staircase (white spiral staircase with a black centre), and Odin's relationship with Desi, viewers feel both race tensions and the good versus evil conflict at work. As in the play, the movie adaptation quickly sets up possible villains: Odin is the outsider of the group (the only back character for over thirty minutes); Hugo obviously resents Odin; Roger urges Dean Brable to accuse Odin of forcing himself on Desi, and Desi defiantly tells her father that her life is "none of [his] business", provoking Dean Brable to warn Odin, "She deceived me. What makes you think she won't do the same to you?" We as viewers are confused as to who, if anyone, is good in this strikingly dark drama.

The most interesting new image introduced by Nelson and Kaaya is one of flight. Birds do not appear in Shakespeare's play, yet references to flight and freedom and glimpses of doves and hawks abound in the film. Hugo's voiceover accompanied by scenes of cooing and roosting doves begins the film: "All my life, I've always wanted to fly. I've always wanted to live like a hawk. I know you're not supposed to be jealous of anything, but to take flight, to

soar over everything and everyone, now that's living." Hugo's admission instantly focuses attention on references to flight and images of birds throughout the film. The opening visual sequence of blurred white doves against a black background slowly comes into focus, then quickly switches to the almost black hawk, mascot of Palmetto Grove Academy, and a basketball game in which Odin is the only black person in the room. However, the hawk imagery promptly becomes associated with Hugo as camera shots switch between Hugo and the hawk. We start to question who is evil or hawk-like -- is it Odin, the popular basketball star being praised and paraded around the court for winning the game, or is it Hugo, the dark eyed outsider who looks on, jealous of Odin's "flight" around the court on his team's shoulders? Later, Hugo declares, "You make your own rules. When you figure that out, you're free", before stealing the hawk mascot. Hugo takes the hawk to the dove roost and strokes it as he talks through his evil plot. "Watch your girl", Hugo warns Odin, "the girl knows how to keep a secret". Odin starts to doubt Desi's faithfulness and begins to stay in shadows, while images of the O-shaped staircase begin to spin in possible reference to Odin's and Hugo's spiral into madness.

When Desi arranges to go away for a night with Odin, we get a slightly askew version of the bedroom scene in *Othello*. Desi tells Odin, "Don't hold back", and Odin, with plenty of thoughts and interpolated scenes of Desi and Michael together, goes into an angry trance, raping Desi. The camera shots shift from Odin's angry stare to Desi's tearful face to the doves at the academy, lending a significantly sacrificial aspect to the scene not present in Shakespeare's play until Desdemona's death scene. The bedroom scene, or actually pre-bedroom scene, when Desdemona speaks with Emilia of her "schooling" Othello in bed, is Desdemona's time to shine. She is confident, beautiful, feminist and completely in control. Nelson and Kaaya shift the power from the Desdemona character to the Othello character at this point in the film, taking a strong-willed Desi (who is even more assertive than her Shakespearean counterpart) and bringing her to the point of tears and violation because of her lover. However, Nelson and Kaaya, though turning Desi into a victim for this scene, do not victimise Desi for the remainder of the film. If anything, this experience with Odin creates a more feminist, even more self-assured Desi than before. She begins to stand up to Odin, telling him during a verbal fight, "If you want to stay with me, don't ever talk to me like that again!" Yet her strength and love for Odin, even after the rape scene, make her death all the more tragic. As we watch this modern Desdemona, we hope for her salvation. We wish that someone so bright and resilient could cheat the death which we know will come, and when Desi looks up at Odin with utter disbelief and astonishment while he strangles her, we feel the betrayal and pity her, not condescendingly but because we know that she was a character worth saving. Odin realises this as well as he continually repeats, "Hush now, just go to sleep", as tears stream down his cheeks.

The movie ends very much like the play. Michael, Roger, Desi, Emily and Odin die. Hugo, like Iago, says, "From here on out, I say nothing." Yet it is Hugo's voice that closes the movie. Hugo, in a voiceover, repeats his opening statements and then continues the flight imagery: "But a hawk is no good around normal birds. It can't fit in even though all the other birds probably want to be hawks. They hate him for what they can't be: proud, powerful, determined, dark." Once again, darkness, or blackness, enters the plotline as we watch Hugo being driven off in a police car into the night. However, this darkness and punishment, which end Shakespeare's play, are juxtaposed by the peaceful view of white doves which take the screen in the film. Hugo's voiceover concludes, "Odin is a hawk. He soars above us. He can fly. One of these days, everyone's gonna pay attention to me because I'm gonna fly too."

After we have overcome the shock of what we have seen, we begin to ask ourselves about the title of the movie. Is *O* for Odin, the sympathetic rags-to-riches basketball player who finds himself manipulated by Hugo ("He twisted my head up", Odin exclaims, pointing at Hugo)? Is *O* for outcast or outsider, referring to Hugo, who feels he does not have his father's love, or Roger, who is lonely enough to become a willing pawn in Hugo's plot? Or does *O* mimic the shock we as viewers experience after seeing this disturbingly dark drama? Regardless, this film creates an *Opening* for conversations about race, sex, jealousy, peer pressure, violence, popularity, love and any number of other topics teens face today.

By taking the core plot and themes of *Othello* and placing them in a modern private high school, both director and writer have created a thoroughly thought provoking and highly controversial rendition of race relations, sexual relations, jealousy and peer pressure in modern high schools, anticipating the wave of violence which shot through American schools (also causing Miramax to hold the 1999 film for two years and finally sell the film to Lions Gate). Nelson and Kaaya, in the tradition of Shakespeare, whose play was just as controversial in its day, have created a ground breaking piece of cinematic history, a work that not only modernises Shakespeare's language, plot and themes, but one that also renovates Shakespeare's imagery and controversy to give contemporary audiences a gut-wrenching feel of what it must have been like to be in Shakespeare's original audience.

Viewers can't help but ponder the ending: "I'm gonna fly too." What exactly is the message of this movie? How can we apply it to our lives? How can we keep such a story from recurring? Such are the questions Shakespeare's audience must have asked, and, as a result, Nelson and Kaaya have created what, to my mind, is the truest Shakespeare adaptation to date.



# Salton Sea

Dir: D. J. Caruso, USA, 2002

## A review by Winter Elliott, University of Georgia, USA

Rumour tells us, though not history, that the mad, terrible emperor Nero fiddled, while around him Rome erupted in a blaze of fire and death. The 2002 film *Salton Sea*, directed by D. J. Caruso, opens with a scene reminiscent of Nero's alleged action: the main character Danny Parker, played by Val Kilmer, sits alone in a burning room, playing his trumpet, the haunting music a stark counterpoint to the fire rapidly consuming the building, and his life. The film abounds with such contrasts, introducing a dying protagonist who seems to have very little reason to live. Yet the audience quickly, and surprisingly, comes to sympathise with the apparent lowlife Danny Parker, even as the film progressively reveals the grimy, seedy depths of drugs, murder, betrayal, hatred and revenge that characterise Danny's existence. *Salton Sea* couples violence with grim comedy and the mournful tones of Miles Davis' jazz. Set in a Los Angeles at once grimly realistic and startlingly surreal, a violent and overwhelmingly modern environment of hopelessness and speed freaks, *Salton Sea* reveals uniformly bereft and desperate characters -- and still offers a hope of redemption.

The film merits its "R" rating. Abounding in violence, drug use and bad language, it falls behind only in sexuality. *Salton Sea*, as Danny Parker recognises in the opening scene of the film, begins with speed, the essence of the "tweaker". In its setting and characters, the film somewhat resembles the independent film *Trainspotting* (1996), with methadone replacing heroin and Los Angeles substituting for Scotland. But *Salton Sea*, with its episodic, fragmented plot line and combination death/revenge thesis, might be better described as a fantastic mating of the lesser known *Vanishing Point* (1971) and the more recent *The Crow* (1994). Danny Parker is not by native inclination a tweaker, and the film is not a celebration or even an explanation of drug addiction. Instead, Danny Parker, and the audience, are visitors to the bizarre party world of drug addiction, detectives in a shady world of clues, hints and flashbacks -- both drug-induced and cinematic -- to which neither entirely belongs. For the audience reacts to the film and the characters as Danny Parker himself does to the troubles in his life. *Salton Sea* is a mystery movie treading on the hems of manifestly philosophical independent films, a film that asks the audience to discover Danny Parker's real identity, and to evaluate the human condition. Danny Parker, searching for the murderers of his alter ego's wife, has dual goals of discovery and revenge, and the audience likewise must piece together from fragmented scenes and symbols Danny's history and identity. Danny gives the audience its purpose in the movie's opening scene, explaining, "My name is Tom Van Allen. Or Danny Parker. I honestly don't know any more. You can decide. Yeah, maybe you can help me, friend. As you can see, I don't have a hell of a lot of time left. You can decide who I am. Avenging angel, Judas Iscariot, loving husband, prodigal son, Prince of Denmark? All of these? None of these? You decide." *Salton Sea* itself offers few answers, and no judgement. Tweakers and cops alike exist in a world of grime and crime, with no line separating right and wrong, and it is, in fact, a tweaker who proves to be the truest, simplest soul in the film.

Jimmy the Finn, Danny's young junkie friend, played by Peter Sarsgaard, is his companion through the netherworld of drug use, but he is not a guide, as Danny is not on a Dantean exploration of faith, but one of revenge. Finn participates wholly in tweaker culture, his choices and behaviour defined in large part by the drug that dominates his life. Able to joke about Queen Elizabeth being a tweaker, he quite seriously has no conception of who JFK was, or even that he was assassinated. Yet there is an undemanding honesty to Finn that can't be found in Danny or in many of the other characters; Finn has no self-delusions or ambitions. Danny comments that speed is "something that becomes your life, and you belong. You've finally hit bottom and you know who you are, because you can't go any lower." Danny, here, deceives both the audience and himself. Still struggling to be both Danny Parker and Tom Van Allen, tweaker and trumpet player, he does not know who he is. He has indeed lost the fine clothes and proper behaviour of Tom Van Allen, and, in the eyes of society, he's a rat and a tweaker, something that crawls around at night. Altered in form and character, his essential purpose remains the same; having sunk to the bottom of the sea, he still has consciousness of injury and revenge. Simply put, Finn isn't that complicated. Finn is a junkie, but he is a *nice* junkie, a human being capable of friendship and devotion. As unlikely a saviour as Danny would seem a crusader, he is nevertheless the angel that pulls the dying Danny from the flames at the end and carries him to healing and resurrection.

Unfortunately, while Finn proves *Salton Sea's* most idealistic element, he is also its most false, its least likely even in the hazy, dazy, lonely world of speed freaks. Danny Parker comments on himself and his behaviour with a wry, self-conscious irony that lends him both sincerity and anguish; there is no such realistic note to Finn. In keeping with *Salton Sea's* discretionary stance, the point may be that the best of humanity, friendship, love, can be found even in its lost souls, those who, like Finn, have willingly given themselves over to captivity and living death. If so, Finn's behaviour and actions reveal a persistent hope in the innate goodness of man. While every other character in the film, including Danny's love interest Colette, schemes and betrays friends and allies, Finn remains innocently true to his friendship with Danny.

Pooh-Bear, well played by Vincent D'Onofrio, delves into the opposite side of mankind. Inhabiting Finn's world, he has none of his goodness. D'Onofrio's performance can be described as no less than compellingly creepy. Lurching through his scenes, he appears a brutal monster who abandoned his humanity when he lost his nose. Equipped with a prosthetic -- and porcine -- replacement, Pooh-Bear re-enacts Kennedy's assassination, feeds Danny a piece of supposed human flesh, and tortures his own henchman with equal aplomb and equanimity. But Pooh-Bear is not overarchingly evil, merely a very bad man and, finally, only a tool of Danny's revenge. Pooh-Bear is an immutable constant, the flat, static character of basic literary criticism, and he mirrors Danny, reflecting back his problems, trials and changes into the audience's vision. Danny, finally, is the real site of moral conflict and development. Neither fully good nor fully bad, he is not such a simple character as either Finn or Pooh-Bear.

According to the film's official website, the Salton Sea of the title is a real, inland body of water in the Imperial Valley of Southern California, a closed sea from which water can escape only by evaporation. Like the Sea itself, the mysterious, dangerous background to the crisis in which Tom Van Allen's wife is lost and Danny Parker is born, the movie's characters are trapped in an ethereal haze of drugs, crime and revenge. Danny Parker himself is subject to the same street-laws of vengeance and retribution that Tom Van Allen enforces upon the corrupt cops Garcetti and Morgan, and his own punishment for being a "rat", giving

information to the cops, is death. And Danny Parker *does* die, as does Tom Van Allen. The man who survives, tattooed and scarred but alive, does so only because of the friendship and faith of an unlikely saviour -- the naïve, unlettered junkie Jimmy the Finn. Neither pollutants nor water can escape the Salton Sea, and water is only freed, purified, through evaporation. Likewise, Tom Van Allen/Danny Parker must undergo a metamorphosis by fire and pain, effectively becoming a new individual, one freed of past love and hate, injustice and retribution. Ultimately, the film is a journey through the darkest moments of a man's life, a passage in which the protagonist becomes one of the fallen and rises from ashes like a human phoenix.

Yet there is no pity, not even self-pity, in *Salton Sea*, but an odd, often ironical sense of humour and very dark comedy. From the wired housewife depicted as the typical 1950s methadrine freak, to the frightening antics of Pooh-Bear, *Salton Sea* demonstrates an understanding and tolerance of its characters -- all of them. There is no doubt that Pooh-Bear is evil; there is no doubt that Tom Van Allen, trumpet player, was a well-loved and loving man. Yet neither one is judged, for good or for ill. That, as Danny advises at the opening of the film, is the audience's role -- decision, judgement, conclusion, from an illusively safe position outside the Salton Sea.

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# Der Siebente Kontinent (The Seventh Continent)

Dir: Michael Haneke, Austria, 1989

## A review by Eva Kuttner, Penn State Erie, USA

Transgressing taboo is unarguably Michael Haneke's signature. In 2001 and 2002 the critically acclaimed, Munich-born, Austrian/French filmmaker drew a lot of attention with his award winning adaptation of Elfriede Jelinek's *Die Klavierspielerin* (*The Piano Teacher*, 2001), which followed *Code Unknown* (*Code Inconnu*, 2000) and his gruesome, horrific, postmodern Max and Moritz tale, *Funny Games* (1997). Yet his unusual directorial career, after numerous successful productions for television, began with his cinematic trilogy of "emotional glaciation". His first feature, *Der Siebente Kontinent* (*The Seventh Continent*), selected for presentation at Cannes, was followed by *Benny's Video* (1992) and *Fragments einer Chronologie des Zufalls* (*Fragments of a Chronology of Chance*, 1994).

Haneke thinks of himself as an "optimist [who] tries to shake people out of their apathy" (Horton, 2003), which is a mild understatement of what awaits viewers in *The Seventh Continent*. Magnetically drawn to the ambiguous, incomprehensible side of the human psyche, Haneke examines the everyday routine of an unassuming family in Linz, Austria as they prepare to carry out their collective suicide. There seems to be nothing spectacular about the engineer Georg Schober (Dieter Berner), his wife Anna (Birgit Doll), an optician, and their daughter Eva (Leni Tanzer), whose lives revolve around school, work and home, although the film's title implies paradox and a longing for an imaginary utopian place beyond the ordinary. It alludes to submerged Atlantis where apocalypse, fictions and myths converge, and, more appropriately, to the permanent ice in Antarctica. Similarly disquieting are the camera shots of activities without people and the focus on precision, as if to cover up a crime.

Haneke's "banality of evil" theme in this film is divided into three segments that essentially portray strategies for creating a *tabula rasa* with numbing popular music and mass media reports, and reducing life to mechanically performed daily routines, such as setting the radio alarm for 6.00 every morning so that news broadcasts fill the room, followed by the ritual of getting up, waking up the daughter, having breakfast, going to work and school, and parking in the same spot day after day. The numbness of the family is epitomised in the recurring scene in the car wash, where all three sit in complete silence in their car, watching the brushes go over it as if caressing the metal. The first part closes with the image of the seventh continent after Anna has tucked their daughter into bed.

Similarly, the film's second part stresses routine and opens with perfectly timed sex. Two scenes allude to the fleeting nature of life and looming emotional and psychic parental breakdown: Georg is ill at ease when his former boss, now retired, unexpectedly shows up at work to retrieve his personal belongings; Anna can't stop crying after she witnesses an auto accident with fatalities.

The film's third part poignantly anticipates their final goodbye by showing Georg, Anna and Eva bidding farewell to Georg's parents after a visit. Gradually, the seeming homage to the trivia of life turns into horror as the family embraces suicide and, in the same systematic manner in which they approach life, withdraws into the imaginary seventh continent -- a state of oblivion. As if they were preparing for a long trip, the couple get prescription drugs, sell their car, withdraw money from their savings account, quit their jobs, and excuse their daughter from school. Georg writes a suicide note to his parents, reassuring them that they fully agreed to die together. Even their daughter Eva is fully complicit, having taken them by surprise when she emphatically responded, "Me too" to the chilling lines in a cantata that claimed, "I look forward to death." Finally, they purchase tools to destroy their personal belongings and turn their cozy apartment, fully equipped with all the conveniences of modern life, into a disaster area, pausing only for lavish meals which, peculiarly enough, are their happiest moments in the film. They tear up neatly folded shirts, Eva's drawings and photos, and flush their money down the toilet. By leaving none of their personal items intact, they destroy their common memory frame, and leave nothing behind to aid others in reconstructing it. Apparently, they channel their long-held-back passion toward destruction, as if to fill the *tabula rasa* of their lives with debris. Only when the father smashes the fish tank do the family members show emotion, shrieking. Not even unexpected outside intervention makes them reconsider their plan. As destruction reaches its peak, so does irony when the father reminds Eva to put on good shoes so that she does not get hurt when they tear apart their home. Systematic material destruction precedes their self-destruction, all carried out with rigor, discipline, and in strictly hierarchical order. After Eva drinks the bitter overdose, she recites her usual prayer one last time. Then the image of the seventh continent is blended into the scene, confirming her death. Georg records Eva's and Anna's times of death on the wall. Shortly before he dies, his life goes by in flashes, and once again the image of the seventh continent confirms the suicide.

At the end of the film, emptiness fills the screen, with a TV on in the background, no longer broadcasting anything. Then viewers get additional information from titles announcing that, in spite of the lengthy suicide note, Georg's parents launched a police investigation for murder, and that the film is based on an actual suicide. This news comes as a slap in the face, denying the audience the closure traditionally provided by a funeral, and instead leaving a gaping hole.

Focusing on mechanical devices that section life into measurable units creates a hyperrealism, if not surrealism, in select scenes reminiscent of Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* (1982): when father and daughter try to sell their car at a dealership, suddenly, in the midst of all the cars, a huge boat goes by; the family enjoys a lavish banquet to celebrate their suicide in their partially destroyed home. Inverting logical expectations, these grotesque scenes enhance visual harmony, whereas physical gestures signalling emotional neediness actually rupture the narrative. In school, Eva pretends that she has gone blind after saving newspaper clippings about a blind child who was showered with love due to her condition. Her mother curtails this simulation with a slap in the face. Coincidentally, as an optician, she makes a living by correcting distorted vision; that profession obviously freezes her own emotions, which need the radical awakening that happens after she drives by a fatal car crash. Only then does Anna reach for her daughter's hand.

Haneke, visually as well as linguistically, announces the family's clearly premeditated suicide. While he refrains from suicide fantasies, he gives several hints that should make viewers suspicious. Already the opening sequence suggests erasure, zooming in on a license

plate that gets covered with foam from a car wash, and essentially summarises the plot: life reduced to numbers about to vanish. The second signifier of erasure is the film's title, which evidently points to non-existence, as well as the recurring poster "Der siebente Kontinent. Welcome to Australia", with waves washing onto a barren beach. Throughout the film, this poster signals both a pre-suicidal state of mind and a suicide completed. Visually coding suicide is a strategy Margarethe von Trotta already successfully employed with the recurring image of a forest in *Sisters or The Balance of Happiness* (1979). Haneke's inanimate poster of the deserted beach on the seventh continent, however, comes to life when its waves actually wash ashore in the style of an animated cartoon as the family drifts ever closer toward death. Contrary to von Trotta, Haneke does not employ the poster to conjure up specific memories shared by the family, but to create a frame of reference for the viewer.

Close-ups of mechanical devices and daily routines do not divert attention from the family's problems, but subtly point to their ineffective communication. Eva's teachers, for instance, follow up on physical symptoms when Eva uses her body to call attention to her state of mind. While images provide information about the family's economic status, two letters by Anna and the final one by Georg create context for the suicides. These factual rather than reflective letters are read out loud by their respective authors, and, thus, readily shared with the viewer. Georg's and Anna's letters imply an absent recipient, refrain from addressing an immediate listener, and preclude confrontation, interaction or dialogue, instead functioning as symbolic literary testaments.

Haneke neither romanticises nor fetishises suicide. His numbing repetitions create distance that keeps viewers from feeling trapped in the house with the family, and instead reminds them of eerily familiar everyday situations, such as riding tightly packed together in elevators in utter silence. Haneke's *modus operandi* borrows from the Bauhaus principle "less is more", and requires the viewer's undivided attention for his subtly coded signals anticipating the looming catastrophe.

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# La stanza del figlio (The Son's Room)

Dir: Nanni Moretti, France/Italy, 2001

## A review by Jason Cisarano, University of North Carolina, USA

*La stanza del figlio* has a nude scene. It's a sex scene between husband and wife Giovanni (Nanni Moretti) and Paola (Laura Morante), and when I saw the movie in a Roman theatre last spring, I heard more than one gasp from my fellow spectators. These weren't prudish gasps at the idea of a couple making love on screen; remember, I was in Italy where you can hardly walk a block without seeing a bare chested woman on a billboard, or buy a news magazine without a topless margarine ad. The gasp was for the unexpected subject and tone of the new movie that, in some ways, culminates with that husband and wife in bed. This isn't the Moretti of *Caro Diario* (1994) with its social comedy, nor is it *Palombella Rossa's* (1989) political rants at poolside. This time, the camera turns toward a more intimate subject, toward a family bearing the weight of the unexpected loss of Andrea, the teenaged son.

The subject is smaller than what we're used to seeing on the big screen, and not just because there are no gunfights or car chases. This is the story of a family with problems, but not the story of a family breaking apart. There's no dysfunction, no substance abuse, no violence. Nobody is driven to the brink of anything. The film finds the family in a nearly idyllic state: Giovanni goes jogging with his son Andrea, and he runs his psychiatric practice in the back rooms of his house. He and Paola go to see their daughter Irene play basketball. These details are so small, they seem like they would be more at home on the pages of a Raymond Carver short story than on a movie screen. It's Moretti moving close to his characters, getting into their everyday lives, and using the things that they do on a daily basis to show us who they are, rather than relying on the extraordinary moments, as many films do.

Though the subject matter of this new film is a departure from his earlier work, its style is unmistakably Moretti's and reveals what makes him such an original, exciting director. Moretti has an amazing command of visual storytelling technique; he depends on the images more than the words in order to create characters, set the mood and move the plot. Remember Moretti on his moped driving around Rome in *Caro Diario*? You got to know him by seeing the things he was interested in: Roman buildings, dancing, movies. He spent much more time talking about Rome's old neighbourhoods than he did talking about himself. And you got to like him by watching him have fun at it; his passion came through loud and clear. *La stanza del figlio* opens on a beat that accesses the "Islands" section of *Caro Diario*: Giovanni stops in a café for a glass of juice after his morning jog, and he sees a group of hari krishnas dancing and singing in the street out front. He steps outside and joins the dance line. In *Caro Diario*, Moretti's character drinks a glass of juice and dances in a café while watching a bit of a musical on television. It's a visual shorthand that accesses the Nanni character we know from the earlier movies, a character that we got to like the first time around and that draws us right in to his family here. Even if the viewer is unfamiliar with the earlier film, seeing this man dancing in the streets without any self-consciousness immediately sketches out a portion of his character.

At the turning point in the movie -- the diving accident that stretches the family to the limit -- words fall away almost completely and the images take over. While Andrea prepares his diving equipment on a sunny stretch of Italian beach, Moretti creates a feeling of foreboding by showing other people at risk. For example, Irene speeds her moped down the street with her friends, and the motorbikes weave around each other as she horses around and pushes at other bikes with her feet. This visual method of storytelling reaches its nerve-wracking height when the family goes to the funeral home and the camera closes in on the details of the closing of the coffin. The camera becomes the eyes of the father as he concentrates on the hands that cover his son with a satin cloth, the blowtorch that seals the metal inner lid, the screws that dig into the wood of the outer lid. The images are final, poignant, intense. And in the theatre, the noise of these two mechanical acts was shocking and even overwhelming in a picture that is generally very quiet. Unfortunately, the DVD released in America tones down the racket of the tools, levelling it out to something more like the rest of the picture and lessening the overall power of the scene.

Look for the scene in the hospital waiting room when Moretti uses a glass wall and its frame to separate the characters from each other and from the viewer. From that moment, the characters begin to drift apart from one another as each tries to find a way to deal with his or her loss. Giovanni finds it difficult to concentrate on his work, and his patients drone on as he stares off into the distance. Paola tries to connect with her lost son through photographs left in his room. And Irene spends her time at school on the basketball court, practising alone for hours in the evenings. There seems no chance for relief when Paola tries to track down a girl who sent a love letter to her son. Giovanni tries to dissuade her from the attempt, and the girl refuses the mother's advances. But when the girl appears -- backpack in hand, in the middle of a hitchhiking trip to France -- with another friend, the parents can't help but offer them a ride to get them started on their trip. She's a part of their son's life that they never knew, and in her they see him in a different light.

When she and her friend move on, the family are left alone again, standing next to their empty car in an empty parking lot. It's not an ending that offers any easy solution to their problems. There is no grand reconciliation; there is no golden sunrise on a new day that promises a bright future. Yet the film does end on a sunrise: a flat and grey sunrise on a beach that's just as flat and grey. But the mood has changed in that overnight car trip, even though there was little conversation and certainly no discussion of their states of mind. But the family are now in the close quarters of their car, and as they travel, their faces relax as they agree to prolong the journey as long as possible. On screen the change is slight, but perceptible: the family have become comfortable with each other again. Even if nothing has actually changed, life has somehow become bearable again. It's not much, but it feels real and it feels right.



# Sweet Home Alabama

Dir: Andy Tennant, USA, 2002

## A review by Ross Thompson, University of Dundee, UK

It is difficult to be objective about a film that falls so short of entertainment. I mean, I know that romantic comedies rarely offer insight into the human condition, but they should at least *entertain* loved-up viewers while they burrow to the bottom of their box of popcorn. By all accounts, *Sweet Home Alabama* is a romantic comedy, but it is neither that funny nor that romantic. One of this genre's cardinal rules is that the audience knows full well that the two attractive leads will get it together in the end. The romantic comedy sells tickets because it does exactly what it says on the tin. Offering few surprises, these familiar movies are the purest form of escapism, designed to entertain couples for an hour and a half after a romantic meal at a local restaurant. It is the feminine version of those boyish action movies in which two mismatched cops initially hate each other, but are soon making blood pacts of allegiance. In this brightly lit world, what really matters is whether or not there are enough sarcastic jokes and witty banter to keep viewers occupied until the big kiss. And this is where *Sweet Home Alabama* fails: the film makes very little effort to turn on viewers, coasting by on the good looks of its stars and the grim inevitability of its narrative.

I wanted to be pleasantly surprised by the film. I wanted director Tennant to defy, if not overcome my hard-won cynicism with likeable characters and a witty script. Admittedly, the signs did not look good: Tennant's curriculum vitae to date includes the Jodie Foster flop *Anna And The King* (1999) and the mawkish fairytale *Ever After* (1998). Continuing this pattern, *Sweet Home Alabama* is a formulaic and ultimately rather hollow picture, intended to carry Reese Witherspoon's career to the same dizzy heights scaled by Julia Roberts with the likes of *Pretty Woman* (1990). This is a shame, because Witherspoon is gifted with more on screen charm and better comedic timing than the actress with whom she is most often compared. In this instance, however, Witherspoon is reduced to the role of screen decorating eye candy, sold short by a lack of memorable one-liners, or even unmemorable ones. It is easy to forget that she guested as Jennifer Aniston's younger sister on a few episodes of the evergreen American sitcom *Friends*, a series that perfectly illustrates how a strong writing team can weave gold out of limited storylines and shallow characterisation.

Witherspoon plays Melanie Carmichael, a savvy New York fashion designer who is forced to return to her small town home in the Deep South. Abandon hope y'all who enter here.... We don't see Melanie doing a lot of designing, but she does rub shoulders with the rich and vacuous at fashionable parties, so we assume that her work must be of some importance. Melanie has also managed to blag a proposal of marriage from the City Mayor's son, Andrew. Some men stoop down on one knee, others smuggle a diamond solitaire into a chocolate gateaux, but Andrew uses both his affluence and influence to rent out the entire jewellery department at Tiffany's. I struggle to believe that this gesture is supposed to be romantic, for it is as hollow as the film itself. Tennant is trying to make an incisive comment here, how one should not choose money over love, but this half-written moral is completely undermined by the fact that Hollywood does the exact opposite. Most reviews of *Sweet Home Alabama*

indicate how Witherspoon has become one of showbusiness' most bankable stars, and that this film relished one of the genre's most successful opening weekends.

Perhaps I am being overly critical, but it is easy to be cynical about a film that preaches a philosophy that its makers do not practice. What is worse, however, is that the film's humour relies upon some fairly offensive stereotypes. Andrew has a lot of money and great cheekbones, but the fly in this Lancôme ointment is that Melanie is already married, to the childhood sweetheart who still lives in the redneck populated hick town back home. Everyone who lives in the Deep South, of course, has a name like Bobby Sue and spends his free time re-enacting battles against those damn Yankees. Far too many scenes revolve around Melanie meeting her old friends and noting how much they have not changed. A barroom sequence that should be nostalgic or bittersweet is tainted by cruel snobbery, as a drunken Melanie (high on moonshine, presumably) all but sneers at the girl from her high school class who is now "burdened" with three children. Melanie also manages to out her supposed best friend Bobby Ray, whose portrayal of a closeted homosexual is as phoney as his "Southern" name. This is a world where the men nurse Budweisers whilst the women nurse their babies. Suspiciously, there is only one black character in the film, and she is a minor one at that, a housemaid who works in a mansion owned by a rich landowner.

I hope, to lift some dialogue from *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, that this is not too radical an interpretation of the text, but in truth there is nothing sweet about Sweet Home Alabama. In fact, its consolidation of the great divide between North and South leaves a rather sour taste in the mouth. The familiar fish-out-of-water conceit that Melanie may be dressed head to toe in Gucci but is still a Southern girl at heart has been done better many times before. In the same way that *Pretty Woman* conveniently airbrushed the less savoury aspects of prostitution, so *Sweet Home Alabama* glosses over racial tensions that are part and parcel of the South's troubled history. The inclusion of a gay subplot is a contrived means of limping towards another joke, and you can probably guess the punch-line before it is half-heartedly delivered. Besides, do we really believe that Bobby Ray's plaid-shirted friends would accept his sexuality so freely, slapping him on the back and sliding over a fresh beer?

Maybe I am being typically male, stubbornly misunderstanding a romantic sub-genre that is meant to entertain, not to provide social comment. Maybe I am reading too much into a movie that is merely meant to last a box of popcorn, and one of tissues. Whatever the reason, I don't much fancy revisiting the Deep South, or this version of the Deep South, in the company of Melanie Carmichael. As my English teacher was so very fond of saying: must try harder.

# Veronica Guerin

Dir: Joel Schumacher, USA/Ireland, 2003

## A review by Karen McNally, University of Nottingham, UK

The claim made in *Veronica Guerin* that the moment of hearing the news of the journalist's murder is etched on the memory of every person in Ireland is close to the truth. Guerin, an investigative journalist for Ireland's *Sunday Independent*, was already a nationally known figure when she was shot and killed in her car at a set of traffic lights on 26 June 1996. Her articles exposing corruption in the business world and church scandals such as the Bishop Casey debacle gave her a media profile that increased when she began to delve into the underworld dealings of Dublin's drugs trade. It was through her murder, though, that Guerin's name became internationally famous, as evidenced by this second Hollywood attempt to depict the journalist's story which follows the 2000 film, *When the Sky Falls*.

Joel Schumacher's version of events follows Guerin (Cate Blanchett) from her fatal confrontation with a motorcycle gunman, back through the course of her investigations that led to her death. The film's opening scene threatens yet another stereotypical depiction of Irish life as bound up in Catholicism and whimsy. As we soon learn, Guerin is appearing in court on the latest in a long line of speeding offences. Her mother's (Brenda Fricker) post-mass plea for divine intervention to inflict a driving ban on Guerin brings the recognisable screen elements of Irish religion and humour immediately into play. But, despite the obligatory Celtic soundtrack, the film goes on to paint an unfamiliar picture of modern-day Ireland.

Dublin's north side tenements frequently feature in cinema's tales of the Irish capital, as in Alan Parker's 1991 film *The Commitments* where they become the backdrop for the release of musical creativity. Here, Guerin's early attempts to probe the psyche of heroin addicts expose a less appealing reality of the flats as a site where informers are tortured and toddlers play with used syringes. The only beneficiaries of Ireland's economic boom of the 1990s seem to be the cast of unsavoury characters who drive around in Mercedes as the fruit of their labour in the drugs trade. Guerin moves beyond the pitiful addicts and teenage prostitutes to track down the architects of their misery, her initial investigations leading her to Martin Cahill, the subject of John Boorman's 1998 film, *The General*. Following Cahill's murder, Guerin weaves her way through the underworld, aided by John "The Coach" Traynor (Ciarán Hinds), a brothel owner with whom she forms an unhealthy alliance of sorts. Guerin's inquiries appear more successful than those of the Garda who are portrayed as largely ineffective. Their failure to make an impact in the undeclared drugs war is the result of both the apathy -- or political expedience (it's unclear which) -- of the Police Commissioner who willingly accepts the IRA's false claim of responsibility for Cahill's murder, and the helplessness of those lower down the chain of command to do anything but inconvenience the organisations' foot soldiers with sporadic arrests. Guerin, however, slowly realises that Traynor's information has been designed to lead her on a path away from her optimum target, Ireland's ruling drug baron, John Gilligan, played with superb menace by Gerard McSorley.

Cate Blanchett gives a faultless performance in the title role, showing up the flaws that project her character beyond the one-dimensionality of a modern idol. In television interviews given around the release of the film Blanchett spoke of her concern about how audiences in the Republic would respond to the film, so aware was she of the immeasurably high esteem in which her subject is held in her home country. Even during her lifetime, as the film shows, Guerin had achieved an unusually high level of fame for a print journalist, making her face instantly recognisable to characters as diverse as judges and prostitutes -- a fact which, the film suggests, provoked some hostility in journalistic circles where she was viewed as something of a grandstander. Blanchett and Schumacher seek to bring some balance to the post-death deification of Guerin by building a framework of recklessness around her which undermines her ability to protect both herself and her family. This is set up initially through Guerin's fearless attitude to driving, as evidenced by her litany of offences and the speed at which she drives away from court where she has escaped with a fine, the journey which culminates in her murder. This fearlessness, it is suggested, is a necessary attribute for a successful journalist, enabling Guerin to maintain the course of her investigations despite violent attempts to persuade her to do otherwise. Yet when her family is caught up in her crusade, Guerin's unwillingness to nullify the threat against them by withdrawing becomes an unnecessary risk.

There are, of course, issues of gender around the film's depiction of Guerin as a partly absentee mother: at her young son's birthday party she is surprised when he informs her that she gave him a skateboard as a present; and, absorbed in her work, Guerin routinely misses putting her son to bed. To an extent, the film suggests her behaviour to be unnatural, or at least that others' reactions propose that this might be the case. Looking at an old photo of a teenage Veronica in a football kit, Guerin's mother remarks on how her daughter always aimed to keep up with the boys. Her games of football with her son's friends in a Manchester United jersey add to the notion of a woman impinging on male territory. Still, when gunmen turn up at Guerin's home, once to send a shot through a window and once to shoot the journalist in the leg, she seems unwilling to acknowledge that her activities, admirable though they may be, are putting her family in danger. Guerin has already dismissed her brother's concerns that their shared surname may make him a target, and her colleagues' suggestions that she halt her investigations are summarily ignored.

Guerin's encounter with Gilligan provides the strongest basis for the assertion that her journalistic curiosity overrides her concern for the security of herself and her family. Aside from the illegality and distastefulness of his trade in drugs, the film pitches Gilligan as a particularly unstable character. Despite attempting to insert himself into respectable society by establishing an equestrian centre with his wife, his violent outburst in front of clients when news reaches him that Guerin is drawing closer in her investigations leaves his true nature in no doubt. The extent of Gilligan's brutality is evidenced by an incident which provides the film's most dramatic scene. Earlier in the film, Guerin had confronted Cahill directly in his own home. Her decision to initiate a similar meeting with Gilligan highlights the question of her fearlessness, or recklessness, and its effects. Gilligan's immediate response to Guerin's appearance at the front door of his country home is shocking in its violent intensity as he punches Guerin repeatedly in the face, with accompanying kicks and a tirade of expletives. Gilligan follows up this assault with a phone call to Guerin at home during which he threatens to kidnap and rape her son and to murder her. Though Guerin bravely presses charges against Gilligan and accepts police protection, her determination to continue her investigations reveals the imbalance of her priorities. Her impatience with the difficulties

created by a constant police presence means that the officers are soon sent on their way, a decision which leaves her at the mercy of a gunman on her route into Dublin.

While the combination of Schumacher and producer Jerry Bruckheimer may not suggest itself as the perfect choice for a real-life drugs and journalism story, the resulting film manages to tackle its subject matter with the required degree of narrative interest and character depth. Schumacher even succeeds in injecting a few moments of humour into the film by making shameless use of his *Tigerland* (2000) star, the ubiquitous Colin Farrell, in a pointless but amusing cameo. The film's epilogue, which indicates that the effect of Guerin's death was to provoke government action to fight drugs crime, reinstates Guerin as a figure to be admired. Yet *Veronica Guerin* also accomplishes its goal to reveal the human flaws of the driven journalist, making her ultimately a more intriguing character.