

The Adventures of Antoine Doinel

Dir: Francois Truffaut, France, 1959, 1962, 1968, 1970 and 1979

A review by Richard Harrison, Norwich City College, UK

May 5th, 2004 marks the sixtieth birthday of Jean-Pierre Leaud, perhaps the most famous juvenile in world cinema history. As Antoine Doinel, his rise from pre-pubescent adolescent to fully grown man across five Francois Truffaut films between 1959 and 1979 is chronicled in a luxurious five DVD set from the Criterion Collection. *The 400 Blows* (1959), *Antoine And Colette* (1962), *Stolen Kisses* (1968), *Bed And Board* (1970) and *Love On The Run* (1979) provide not only a detailed insight into the cycle's eponymous star but also a semi-autobiographical portrait of their director.

The five DVD set is well packaged, with each film having been painstakingly remastered. The picture quality is outstanding, and reveals the true beauty of the films (compare the films with the short clips that appear in the television show extracts). *Antoine and Colette* appears on the same disc as the *The 400 Blows* which enables the fifth disc to include *Les Mistons* (1957), a delightful short film which acts as precursor to the Doinel cycle, and a fascinating documentary piece *Working With Francois Truffaut: Claude de Givray and Bernard Revon* (1986). All the discs have extras of some sort, ranging from Brian Stonehill's superb, friendly commentary that accompanies the *The 400 Blows* to newsreel footage of the 1959 and 1968 Cannes Film Festivals, and numerous television interviews with Francois Truffaut and Jean-Pierre Leaud. An informative and nicely illustrated seventy-two page booklet completes what is an essential purchase for any film enthusiast, and reveals why Truffaut's premature death in 1984 was such a catastrophic loss, not only for the world in general but for cinema in particular.

It was in 1959 that Francois Truffaut made a triumphant return to the Cannes Film Festival, winning the Best Director prize for his first feature film *The 400 Blows*, which was also the first film to star Jean-Pierre Leaud, "the most interesting actor of his generation" (Roud, 1980: 1011). The impact of the *The 400 Blows* cannot be overestimated both in its own right and as instigator of the themes that run through the entire Antoine Doinel cycle.

One reason for the enduring popularity of the Doinel films is the strong characterisation -- especially of Antoine himself -- which is subtly yet strongly established in the first scene of *The 400 Blows* as the boy is unfairly kept in during recess by the teacher. We feel Antoine's injustice and become further aligned with him through his voice-over as he writes on the classroom wall. Truffaut refuses to soften this portrayal of childhood and two key themes of the Doinel cycle emerge in this first scene of the *The 400 Blows* -- being trapped/confined and the theme of solitude.

Antoine is confined both at school and at home -- Truffaut juxtaposes the two places to show their similarity. At home, Antoine has to do adult jobs- organise the fire, lay the table, do the rubbish and get the shopping. Ironically, when he finally starts his homework (and attempts

to become a juvenile once more) his mother tells him it is not the time to do it as they are about to eat!

The 400 Blows, despite Antoine's friendship with Rene and some aspects of his family life, is essentially a film about loneliness, as Antoine gradually feels he must escape from his immediate environment. This is seen when Antoine and Rene cut school for a day of liberation which includes the cinema, a pinball machine, and the remarkable scene on the *Rotor*, where Antoine experiences a curious mixture of ecstatic pain -- a pleasurable fear- as the ground drops away before him, leaving him pinned to the rotating drum of the ride. The carefree happiness of the day's escape is starkly contrasted by that night at home where Antoine and his Father eat alone before Antoine retires to bed, only to overhear his parents arguing. The camera lingers on the boy's face and an incredible intensity of understated emotion is present, a credit not only to Truffaut as director but to Jean-Pierre L  aud as actor.

After Antoine's lie to his teacher ("Sourpuss"), Truffaut utilises silence, gesture and expression in a startlingly effective scene to convey the horror of the moment for Antoine when his parents appear to see his teacher, culminating with Antoine's father hitting his son across the face so hard it sounds like pistol shots, harshly breaking the silent, shocked atmosphere in the schoolroom. The visual nature of this sequence is later evoked in the boys' escape from the over-zealous gym teacher's excursion to the stadium, Truffaut's vertical camera angle being a lyrical piece of parsimoniousness which shows the boys scurrying away from physical exertion like ants.

The escape Antoine yearns for is achieved mentally by reading Balzac but this backfires, leaving Antoine's mother to adopt the previously paternal role of amiable peacemaker by suggesting the family outing to the cinema which ends happily as they ride

home at the end of the evening with the mood upbeat and happy -- the family are frequently united in a single frame as opposed to the isolated framing earlier in *The 400 Blows*.

Though this brief family interlude is an oasis of pleasure in Antoine's life, he again seeks Rene's friendship the next day. The boys' behaviour is precociously adult: they go to the cinema, to a caf  , smoke, gamble and drink, thereby accepting an alternative route to happiness that their childhood cannot provide -- Antoine's excitement at eating strawberry ice cream the previous evening now forgotten. The stealing of the typewriter could be interpreted as a further attempt to escape from childhood, but it is futile as Antoine is captured, and hustled through the crowded streets by his father. The camera lingers momentarily on a shop window as they pass which offers some comment on the situation: rotating Christmas angels are suspended by string. Antoine, encircled by a world he feels powerless in, is as helpless as these angels.

The closing sequence of the film, which takes place at the "Observation Centre for Delinquent Youth", is marked by Antoine's imprisonment and ultimate burst for freedom. The tracking shot which follows the boy's progress intently as he distances himself at last from confinement is memorably fluid, the soundtrack accompanying it composed of ambient sound until the end of the sequence when Antoine first observes the sea when the haunting music of the film's opening returns. Earlier, Antoine had confessed to Rene "I've never seen the ocean", and this partly explains why the boy slows to a virtual standstill as he trots along the shore. Antoine's look around him expresses the irony of his situation- the time spent trying to escape from his predicaments has led to his being free, but what does freedom

mean? It is the “freeze frame of irresolution” (Holmes & Ingram, 1998: 118) that closes *The 400 Blows*, perhaps implying that Antoine is caught but the fourteen year old incarnation of Antoine Doinel is actually *free* -- both from the Observation Centre and from his troubled childhood.

The Doinel cycle continues in the charming *Antoine and Colette*, a thirty minute short made by Truffaut for the anthology film *Love At Twenty*. Antoine Doinel is first seen in bed with cheerful French *chanson* heard from the radio by his bedside. As he gets up, puts a classical record on and opens the window shutters an informative voice-over picks up Antoine’s story. Having been caught and returned to a more secure juvenile detention centre, Antoine now works for Phillips. The iris flashback to *The 400 Blows* when Antoine meets Rene links the two films as does Antoine’s romanticism in seeking to court Colette.

Whilst *The 400 Blows* presented a young Antoine whose relationship with his parents was uncertain and unstable, *Antoine and Colette* shows the seventeen year old as maintaining a strong friendship with his would-be girlfriend’s parents. In looking to escape from the solitude of his bachelor lifestyle, Antoine’s naivety is beguiling when he receives a letter from Colette as he listens to a record and expresses his elation by turning up the volume. Antoine moving to live opposite Colette’s family is a positive step, but Colette later resists his advances in the cinema, anticipating the failure of their relationship. Antoine’s rebellious non-conformity in *The 400 Blows* has given way to an older if not wiser Antoine, symbolised at the end of the film as our hero sits sociably with Colette’s parents after Colette herself has left with another *beau*.

The third installment of the Antoine Doinel cycle -- *Stolen Kisses* -- finds Antoine dishonourably discharged from the army and adapting to civilian life. In a dedication not unlike that to André Bazin at the start of *The 400 Blows*, Truffaut supports Henri Langlois (sacked from his job as Director of the Cinémathèque Française but later reinstated due to public pressure) in the opening credits sequence. Other similarities to *The 400 Blows* occur in the panoramic high angle shots and narrative events in *Stolen Kisses* (the unreasonable treatment of Antoine the night clerk links to the injustice of *The 400 Blows*), but the character of Antoine seems more akin to *Antoine and Colette* in his limited success in love. Antoine shows his impetuous side and “awkward charms” (Roud, 1980: 1011) as he leaves the prostitute after she repels his advances and later abandons Madame Tabard in a display of nervous terror, but he does ultimately find love with Christine -- this love emerging in a spontaneous yet clumsy display of passion in the cellar.

Stolen Kisses continues Antoine’s amiable relationship with his girlfriend’s parents and highlights the happiness possible in family interaction, as in the extremely funny sequence when Christine’s father invites her to guess Antoine’s new job (which turns out to be a private detective). *Stolen Kisses* gives the Doinel films a comical edge (as in Antoine being offered the shoe shop job despite being the least suitable candidate), and portrays the protagonist as a amiably childlike romantic who lacks success in love.

Bed and Board seems to offer resolution to the ongoing problem of Antoine’s failed relationships but opens (as does *Stolen Kisses*) with a reluctance to divulge characters too soon. Thus, as its predecessor in the Doinel series first features Antoine’s voice before we see him on screen, *Bed and Board* features Christine’s long legs as she shops for oddments, correcting stallholders “not Mademoiselle -- Madame!”. When we do see Antoine, he has a job dying flowers, and is searching for an “Absolute Red” colour (which ironically connotes

love) despite seemingly having found love in his marriage to Christine. After Christine's restrained, mature display of affection in the wine cellar (recalling the spontaneous but hurried passion of Antoine in *Stolen Kisses*), the married couple eat with Christine's parents. The by now familiar *bon homme* at the table links to the other films in the cycle, especially *Antoine and Colette*, as Antoine still seems to have a rapport with the parents of the girl he is with, reflecting his growing maturity.

Despite this maturity, Antoine's childlike humour persists in his reference to Christine's breasts -- "you might give them names to tell them apart... Laurel and Hardy, for example". That he jokes with Christine (who does not appreciate the joke) is symbolic of the way Truffaut jokes with us -- in *Stolen Kisses* two children leave Antoine's shoe shop wearing masks, revealed to be Laurel and Hardy. This intertextual fascination adds an extra layer of interest to the cycle, as the films are linked by more than Antoine Doinel himself.

Truffaut utilises a very Hitchcockian theme (the wrong man) in *Bed and Board*, but subverts it for comedic purposes as Antoine is hired by the Hydraulics Plant in a piece of amusing mistaken identity. Harking back to being knowingly hired by the shoe shop, we celebrate Antoine's success, but his dishonesty in not admitting the mistake is perhaps punished in the meeting with Kyoko, which undermines everything Antoine has struggled for.

Kyoko first appears in the Japanese visit to the Hydraulics Plant, and immediately stands out due to her brightly coloured clothing. The intense red, as well as contrasting the drab colour of her surroundings, links both to Antoine's desired "Absolute Red" and to his red clothing. Thus, the *mise-en-scène* initially connotes love and possibly happiness, as the pair are further linked by the irises which isolate each face yet connect them because only they are treated in this way by the camera. The music too supports the ethereal bliss of the moment, as it is beautiful and delicate, relegating Mr. Max's commentary to an unconcerned background. As with his days of pleasure in *The 400 Blows*, where he returns home to routine, Antoine's happiness in *Bed and Board* is not permanent- after a night spent with Kyoko he returns home to Christine and their new child. The great subtlety of Truffaut's camera aptly explores the psyche of the married couple: Antoine exits the frame to the right whilst a light goes in the bedroom at the back of the shot. We do not see Antoine and Christine confront each other but hear their off-screen voices, Truffaut closing this brief vignette by fading to black, symbolising the couple's fading relationship.

In essence, the entire Doinel cycle is composed of the ongoing tribulations of various relationships Antoine has, often with an ironic undercurrent. Thus, Antoine's attraction for Kyoko wanes as they eat in the restaurant and prompts him to frequently telephone Christine, revealing the childlike insecurities as Antoine seeks perpetual reassurance and sympathy from his wife. In the restaurant sequence, Truffaut contrasts the aesthetic and symbolic use of colour when Kyoko is first seen with Antoine for a very fluid moving camera and occasional cut-aways to the clock on the wall to show both Antoine's desire to escape and the importance of passing time. Our young hero has achieved his new found desire -- to share his life with Kyoko -- but has come to realise what a mistake that would be, Truffaut enabling him to return home to Christine in the Epilogue.

Love On The Run, the final installment in the Doinel cycle, is also the most cinematically and narratively complex. It is a film that gathers up loose ends and fashions a detailed tapestry of emotion upon which is embroidered the many loves of Antoine Doinel. It is significant that, like *Bed and Board*, the film opens with a woman (Sabine), as it causes us to question

Antoine's latest relationship. That Sabine works in a record shop and is asked by a stranger to go to a Shapiro concert brings the Doinel cycle almost full circle, as *Antoine and Colette* utilizes a similar premise where music brings future lovers together. Truffaut, however, shows that things have changed since the romanticism of *Antoine and Colette* by having Sabine refute the stranger's proposition before moving on to Antoine's taxi journey with Christine as they travel to sign their divorce papers. As they sit side-by-side in the car their thoughts are in the past -- overlapping sound signalling Christine's flashbacks of Antoine furiously moving his bed, then a lighter moment when he jokes about the "lascivious broad". The two sides of Antoine's character are shown in these moments from *Bed and Board* -- passion and intensity mingle with his impishly childlike humour. When they arrive at the judge's chambers and have to wait for the other party to be interviewed, Antoine remembers his wine cellar passion (from *Stolen Kisses*) whilst Christine waits with the memory of her refined love (from *Bed and Board*). Here, as has been evident from the Doinel cycle, close proximity does not mean synonymous thoughts.

The strong influence of Proust in the interaction of past memory with present events that permeates *Love On The Run* is not reserved for Antoine and Christine though -- Colette, now working in law, sees Antoine ("a real independent type") and reminisces back to the concert when she and Antoine exchanged looks across the aisle. That this flashback from *Antoine and Colette* is in black and white both distances the memory and draws attention to the process of construction -- the art of the filmmaker. This does not detract from *Love On The Run*, but again adds pertinent intertextuality, as does Antoine's telephoning Sabine from the railway station which links back to the desperation of telephone calls in *Bed and Board*. In both films as he puts the telephone down Antoine is shown visually alone in the world- his relationship with the women he loves is conducted from a distance once more.

The vast complexities of *Love On The Run* can be amply illustrated by Colette sitting on the train reading *Les Salades De L'Amour*, a book by Antoine Doinel, complete with author's photograph on the back cover. As she reads, flashbacks from earlier films increase the intertextual and self-referential aspects of *Love On The Run* and make it a fitting climax to the Doinel cycle. The superimposition of images over flicking pages to illustrate the passing of time is particularly effective, and it reminds us what a roller coaster ride of emotion Antoine Doinel/Truffaut has taken us on throughout five films. When he is reunited with Colette it comes as no real surprise that Antoine does not have a train ticket -- his impetuosity and emotionally impulsive desire are an essential part of his character. *Love On The Run* is built round Antoine's interaction with his past -- meeting Colette is a part of this, as is the chance encounter with Monsieur Lucien, whose story enables Antoine's self reconciliation with his late mother and maintains the ongoing thread of love as a uniting force across the films in the Doinel cycle.

The power of love is also marked across all the Antoine Doinel films, and *Love On The Run* is no exception. Though it exists in its own right, *Love On The Run* runs a parallel course of memory and the past alongside its present. Thus, as the film draws to a close, Truffaut once more provides us with a striking piece of *mise-en-scène*. As Antoine and Sabine stand in the record shop and talk about love, a couple enter the shop to hear the latest Alain Souchon record. As the strangers kiss to its soundtrack in the background, Antoine and Sabine mirror them in the foreground before moving round the corner out of sight of everyone except us. Their kissing is not tentative, nor passionate, nor hurried, but languid and intense, its sincerity illustrating true love. The conventional lovers' embrace which closes many a Hollywood film is not right for Truffaut, however, who lets his camera oscillate gently between this present

scene and the fourteen year old Antoine on the *Rotor* then, in increasingly faster shots, between Antoine and Sabine and the strangers. The shot becomes blurred, the motion being that of the *Rotor*. In viewing the scene as the young Antoine views the world from the *Rotor*, we become Antoine and, like Antoine, we don't need to run any more.

References:

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Auto Focus

Dir: Paul Schrader, USA, 2002

A review by Jason Woloski, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada

Auto Focus, written and directed by Paul Schrader, tells the true life story of Bob Crane, probably best remembered as the star of the Nazi prison camp sitcom, *Hogan's Heroes*. When the television series began its run in 1965, Crane was already well known in Los Angeles thanks to his popularity as a local radio disc jockey. At the peak of his career as a disc jockey, Crane even came to be known as "Los Angeles' king of the airwaves". But it was by the end of *Hogan's Heroes*' six years on the air that Crane had finally found what he had wanted his entire life, but what had also eluded him for nearly forty years: celebrity to the point of being a household name across America. Unfortunately for Crane, his biography does not stop there, but ironically, if it did, Paul Schrader would not likely have ever been interested in making a film of Crane's life, nor would Robert Graysmith, whose book the film is based upon, ever have been inclined to write a tell-all biography about Crane. What Schrader and Graysmith are most interested in are the last nine years of Crane's life. Those are the years in which Crane, try as he did, could not get another sitcom off the ground, could not make a theatrical film that audiences actually wanted to see, and finally, ended up letting his personal life seep into and ruin his professional life becoming a full fledged sex addict, which in turn led to his being murdered under circumstances so mysterious that the crime has still not been solved to this day.

That said, Schrader does spend a good deal of time exploring Crane's life before and during his days on *Hogan's Heroes*, when he was married to his high school sweetheart and had three children, lived in a beautiful home in beautiful Los Angeles, and appeared to have everything going for him. However, even in these early scenes, such as when Crane's wife (played by Rita Wilson) discovers the nudie magazines and erotic photography that her husband keeps hidden in their house, and which he justifies as simply a "hobby", it is obvious that Schrader is not really interested in portraying Crane's life before it began falling apart as something that was all that pristine to begin with.

Right from the opening scenes of *Auto Focus* Crane is subtly yet obviously miserable, an emasculated male who has bought into the fictional promises of post-World War Two suburban utopia: promises of fame, fortune, and security. But what ultimately makes Crane so fascinating as a character, especially as portrayed by Greg Kinnear, who nails the TV star's constant, insincere pleasantness to a tee, is that even once Crane seems to fight back against his emasculation, divorcing his wife and abandoning his kids for the swinging life of raunchy, promiscuous sex on a night to night basis, he does not become the slightest bit more sincere, and more importantly, he doesn't seem to become any less miserable. As is the case with most addictions, Crane's sexual one is not really about sex. Something else is going on that neither Crane nor the viewer can put their finger on, and this is what makes the movie so compelling. Despite Crane being about as shallow and on the surface as a protagonist in a film biography could get away with, he doesn't come across as uninterestingly superficial or

stale. In fact, it is Crane's very ability to refuse those around him, and in turn the viewer, any access into a complex private life that leaves the viewer wanting more.

That Crane never seemed to feel autonomous in his life, never felt like he was ever being his own man, is certainly a big piece of the mysterious puzzle that was Bob Crane's existence. However, that is not the entire mystery. One of the biggest questions that Schrader decides to leave unanswered is, what was John Carpenter (brilliantly played, as usual, by Willem Dafoe) really all about? Throughout the film, Carpenter's character -- a video expert at a time when video was something that was brand new and incredibly revolutionary for its ability to play back images immediately after their being recorded, and who introduced Crane to these wonders of video recording, which in turn lead to a good portion of Crane's sexual life having been recorded for posterity -- is never fully explored, which only makes the eventual murder of Crane that much more mysterious. Apparently, Carpenter was the last person to talk to Crane before Crane was murdered in his sleep and, in many ways, it is Carpenter who initially awakens and continues to nurture Crane's seemingly uncontrollable sexual appetite, even while Crane was still starring on *Hogan's Heroes*.

That is not to say that Crane and Carpenter ever have sex with one another in the film, although there is an ambiguous homoeroticism layered throughout that culminates in a scene in which Crane becomes disgusted by and then temporarily alienates Carpenter when he notices, while they replay an orgy on a television set, that Carpenter was groping him. This scene is also interesting in that it points to and highlights the absolute mystery that was Bob Crane's perspective of the world. While Crane was willing to be sexually progressive to the point that he would tell the world about his promiscuity and his never-ending desire for sexual intercourse -- which not incidentally helped ruin Crane's public persona and career in Hollywood once and for all -- and even videotape these escapades, he could never make sense of what his actual relationship to Carpenter was, sexual or otherwise. When Crane sees Carpenter's hand caressing Crane's naked rear end during the orgy he can hardly believe what he is seeing, even though Crane and Carpenter have both obviously taken part in the same orgies hundreds, perhaps thousands of times.

That Schrader does not ever try to explain such contradictions is partially what makes *Auto Focus* his most accomplished film to date as a director. What has so often been a detriment to Schrader's ability as a filmmaker -- his need to clinically dissect all elements of the story that he is telling to the point that watching a film of his becomes an almost wholly cerebral experience largely devoid of emotion, only to end by leaving the viewer with an out of place, all too emotionally sprawling conclusion -- is not present in *Auto Focus* in the least. Maybe it is because Crane is finally so shallow a character that Schrader is forced from entering too deeply into a complicated examination as to why Crane was the way he was. Or perhaps because Schrader was working from an actual biography that ended abruptly with a murder he was forced to efficiently tell the story of Bob Crane as is, realizing that the many answers to the many questions of Bob Crane's life and death went to the grave with Crane nearly twenty-five years ago, and that it would be presumptuous to offer too many answers, and Schrader knows it. Another distinct possibility as to why Schrader's film turned out so well may relate to the fact that Michael Gerbosi wrote the screenplay to the film, as opposed to Schrader himself. That is not to say that Schrader is not an excellent screenwriter in his own right. He is, obviously. However, by having to interpret someone else's vision of the Crane story, which in turn was adapted from Graysmith's book on Crane, Schrader may have been left with a situation in which he had to make the story as interestingly his own as possible, while working within a clear structural framework that had already been laid out for him.

The sadness of the last scene of the film, in which Crane is murdered, even as we never see who murders him, lies in the fact that we are not meant to feel that bad for Crane, partially because we were never allowed to get to know him during the course of the film, as he was never not "on" as a performer. Perhaps even more sadly, by the time Crane dies, in a Scottsdale, Arizona hotel room, where he was performing in a play, it is only the circumstances of his death and not what he was doing professionally as an actor that remains at all intriguing. The tragedy in the film comes way earlier, when Crane's life begins to fall apart, and one is able to realize just how sad this man really was during his forty-nine years on Earth. In a way, Bob Crane is almost like a male Judy Garland, in that as a public figure we appreciate the fact that he never conquered his unhappiness because, in the end, it was his unhappiness that still makes him intriguing to this day. What was at one time charming about Crane -- his persistent smile, his wholesome, all-American handsomeness, his seemingly bottomless optimism, at least on television -- somehow becomes what is most mysterious and perplexing about him in the second half of the film, in that when watching Crane's life unravel, one is left wondering, has he only been smiling for our benefit all along?

Buffalo Soldiers

Dir: Gregor Jordan, UK/Germany, 2001

A review by Ross Thompson, University of Dundee, UK

Buffalo Soldiers is one of those films whose content is eclipsed by the furore surrounding the making of the work. The piece has been missing-in-action since it was completed two years ago by Australian director Gregor Jordan: it has only recently been shown in the United Kingdom and has just secured an American release. Even this is a small compensation, for I doubt that Jordan's film will run for very long, or in many screens.

However, *Buffalo Soldiers* is no *Marie Celeste*, and the reasons for its long absence are far from mysterious. Recent political forces within the United States smack of McCarthyism as the events of 9/11 and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have in part engineered an automatic suspicion of anything that could possibly be construed as anti-American. This drive is accompanied by the suspension of free speech: many sectors of American society did not appreciate Michael Moore's Oscar acceptance address for *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), in which he named and shamed George Bush as the cause of much discontent. The knock-on effect of this on cinema has been an upsurge of the feel-good and the insubstantial, and the slow eradication of the intelligent and the provocative. Furthermore, audiences have been drowned by a tsunami of saccharine romantic comedies full of fake nostalgia and the kind of contrived happy ending that Hollywood does best.

Please don't misinterpret my intentions here, or throw me down with all the other communists and heretics. Personally, I don't believe that every movie should challenge the viewer to think about the human condition. There is a place for hollow entertainment, but there is a place for thought-provoking drama too. However, it is progressively more difficult to find theatres, let alone the major multiplexes, that will play this kind of movie. It is not entirely surprising that *Buffalo Soldiers* has taken so long to make it to the UK, as it is a darkly comic satire on the purpose (if there is one) of modern warfare. From the opening shot of soldiers marching across a mural of the Stars and Stripes, the film repeatedly deconstructs the contrived conceit of American patriotism.

These dangerous sentiments are channelled through our anti-hero Ray Elwood (Joaquin Phoenix), a soldier stuck on an American base in Stuttgart just before the fall of the Berlin Wall. By way of a laconic voiceover, Elwood refutes false notions of the military life. At the same time, Jordan cleverly contests the square-jawed heroics of the War Movie genre. Elwood repeats the maxim present in *Platoon* (1986) that 'War is Hell' but continues, "But peace is really fucking boring." Elwood is just one of many soldiers with "nothing to kill except time", left to wonder what exactly they are doing on a decrepit army base in the middle of nowhere, so instead of cleaning his rifle he spends his days peddling drugs, smuggling illegal firearms, and making love to the colonel's wife.

Elwood is a likeable character, an appealing mixture of Holden Caulfield and Frank Abagnale, Jr. He is played with considerable charm by Phoenix, who is fast ascending as one

of the most dependable young actors working today. Therefore, our conscience is pricked when Elwood is persecuted by Robert Lee (Scott Glenn), a hard-as-nails 'Top Sergeant' who describes Vietnam as a very enjoyable experience and is determined to stamp out illegal activity within the base, both literally and metaphorically. Lee focuses on Elwood as the main cause of the base's problems, and berates him with the same venom used against Michael Moore in the real world. Instead of cowering, Elwood further aggravates the Sergeant by dating his daughter Robyn, played with the right blend of teen innocence and knowing sexuality by Anna Paquin. This romance forms the heart of the story, and the sweetness of this relationship is a welcome foil to the cynicism and anti-war sentiment that provides the momentum for the rest of the movie. There is genuine chemistry between the young actors Phoenix and Paquin, who breathe new life into a clichéd subplot of star-crossed lovers. This relationship is slightly askew, because for a long time it remains unclear if Elwood is using his involvement with Robyn as the perfect way of hitting back at the bullish Sergeant.

Buffalo Soldiers contains many moments that some viewers will find offensive. Various death scenes are played for comic effect, such as in the sequence in which a drugged-up tank driver blows up an outpost because he is too high to remember which way is left and which is right. Another soldier splits his skull open on the corner of a table while the battalion are playing football in their dorm room. His comrades throw his body out of the window, so that the death will be passed off as suicide. Admittedly, these stabs at black comedy provide illicit amusement, but they also leave a sour taste in the mouth. Perhaps this nausea is intentional: the dramatic shifts in tone disorientate the viewer, thus allowing us to feel the same emotions experienced by Elwood and the other troops. Death arrives quickly, without warning or apparent purpose, just as it would in a real war, passed off as 'collateral damage' by Sergeant Lee and those like him.

At one point, Elwood intones, "Life for me is all about distractions. I try to keep looking up so I can avoid what's down." His plight is less 'the horror, the horror' and more 'the tedium, the tedium', as he tries to decipher what good can come out of the ongoing Cold War. None of his superiors are able to answer this question. Sergeant Lee embodies a hateful strain of American foreign policy, the attitude of shooting first and asking questions later. Colonel Berman, brilliantly played against type by Ed Harris, is not much wiser, and is more interested in receiving a medal and being honoured along with the great military leaders that he idolises.

If we are to look for symbols and metaphors within *Buffalo Soldiers*, as many have done, causing the film to remain away from public consumption, then it must be said that Colonel Berman closely resembles many of America's political leaders, whereas Sergeant Lee is more like the man that they would like to be. Harris plays Berman as needy and confused, wanting to be a revered war hero but remaining out of step with the life that he has been part of for so long. If anything, *Buffalo Soldiers* holds back in this respect, for it could have been more vicious in its portrayal of America's politicians and military men. *Buffalo Soldiers* succeeds, even though it pulls itself in opposing directions, between tragedy and comedy, between love and bile. It can best be described as a mixture of Robert Altman's poignant *M*A*S*H* (1970) and Ivan Reitman's mischievous *Stripes* (1981). More than that, it is a strong example of the honest, thoughtful type of film that is more and more frequently denied a decent release. For that reason alone, it should be celebrated.

The Dancer Upstairs

Dir: John Malkovich, Spain/USA, 2002

A review by Erika Hernandez, Irvine Valley College, USA

Man tends to be captivated by the “unknown,” especially when it is experienced in brilliant glimpses. Case and point: John Malkovich. He is one difficult man for the public to “know.” We have seen his work as an actor (*Places in the Heart* [1984]; *Dangerous Liaisons* [1988]; *In the Line of Fire* [1993]) but he has no use for -- and seems to hold disdain for -- “celebrity.” He generally reads as emotionally detached; certainly not warm. In an interview with The Sundance Channel, he goes so far as to describe himself as “not to be trusted.” The critically acclaimed actor and American expatriate’s enigmatic persona is as illustrious as his talent. One might argue that our subconscious fascination with it begat a feature length film (Spike Jonze’s *Being John Malkovich* [1999]), at least in premise. Other talents have borne this aloof reputation, Kubrick and Chaplin to name a few, but as Chaplin himself once stated, “If you want to know me, watch my movies.” Thus, to finally see the work of the elusive Malkovich as director/auteur is perhaps our first, tangible key to “knowing” him.

This is precisely why critics were so greatly anticipating *The Dancer Upstairs*, John Malkovich’s directorial debut. The film is based upon Nicholas Shakespeare’s 1997 novel of the same name, which loosely draws from his personal account of “Sendero Luminoso” or “Shining Path,” a Peruvian, communist-led guerrilla movement in the 1980s and 1990s, established by college professor Abimael Guzman. Despite its basis in “real life” events, *The Dancer Upstairs* (also adapted for the screen by Shakespeare) is not written or shot as a documentary, or even a docudrama. Malkovich instead transports us into a “nationless” and “timeless” world. We are immediately told that we are in “Latin America, The Recent Past.” We also notice that the film’s characters are played principally by Latin American actors, but deliver almost every line in English. These curious techniques might evoke frustration in certain viewers, but they speak to the film’s ultimate purpose. For rather than being preoccupied with historical accuracy (names, dates, etc.), we are directed to probe into the film’s larger, thematic elements of terrorism, passion, and truth.

The Dancer Upstairs’ narrative follows Agustin Rejas (Javier Bardem), a policeman in “The Capital,” and his quest to capture a guerrilla terrorist/revolutionary who goes by the name “Ezequiel.” Though working within (and often against) a corrupt governmental system, Rejas is promptly established as fundamentally honest. This honesty permeates his every thought and action. In fact, the first time we see him, he is quietly packing some of his books. The camera tilts downward and captures one image: a copy of Harper Lee’s, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Rejas is indeed, the film’s Atticus Finch -- fighting for what he perceives as “right,” no matter what the expense. Intelligent and slow to anger, Rejas is from “The Countryside,” and had hoped to inherit his father’s coffee bean farm. The farm was seized by the military, whereupon he went to law school, and worked with a prestigious firm. In concert with his character, he left the law, because according to Rejas, “only one of its functions is to establish the truth.”

Rejas lives in a modest home with his wife, Sylvina (Alexandra Lencastre) and their eight-year old daughter. Sylvina is written in great contrast to Rejas' character. Indeed, in her first scene, she is taking photos of herself with different "noses," fantasizing about plastic surgery. "Which one do you like," Sylvina asks to her husband. "The one on your face," replies Rejas, matter-of-factly. This is the deepest conversation they have in the film. Although both share a love for their daughter (who is taking dance classes in town) Sylvia's inability to deal with the sticky business of "real life" precludes our protagonist for feeling anything for her but dutiful obligation.

The film's driving force is Rejas' search for the revolutionary, "Ezequiel" (Abel Folk). Seeking to overthrow the government, Ezequiel and his "soldiers" are ruthlessly closing in on "The Capital." At first, dead dogs appear hanging from lamp posts, with signs written in blood (a Chinese symbol of a tyrant being deposed by his people). The signs read various calls to arms (written in Spanish), and all close with the same rally cry, "Viva El Presidente Ezequiel." Rejas and his team begin to link his calling cards, and construct the identity and character of this man: His signs include Kantian and Biblical references, but issue no real manifesto. Like Christ and Socrates, he communicates nothing in his own writing. Ezequiel's people claim that he is "every tick of every clock." He lauds himself as "the fourth flame of communism," after Mao, Lenin, and Marx. His methods are indiscriminate. He uses children as suicide bombers. Those who kill in his name might be schoolgirls or grown men, each committed without question to his cause.

Malkovich paints both Rejas and Ezequiel as two sides of the human ethos—light and dark; good and evil; persona and shadow. This dialectic reinforces the film's philosophical stance: Terror ultimately transcends its cause or its figurehead. This is most aptly demonstrated in a scene in which Rejas gazes at the image of Ezequiel on a television screen. Their faces are matted onto each other, and merge as one. Our protagonist quietly gazes at both a literal image of his enemy, and a metaphorical image of himself.

The Dancer Upstairs' namesake is its subplot. Amid Rejas' search for Ezequiel and toleration of his passionless marriage, he falls in love with Yolanda (Laura Morante), his daughter's ballet teacher. Naturally beautiful, warm, and vulnerable (she is deathly afraid of the dark), Yolanda is a warm source of escape for Rejas, but their relationship soon throws him into inner conflict. After all, this might be the first and only instance in which our hero is faced with something that is both "true" and "wrong."

When Ezequiel is finally captured, he is anti-climactically revealed as nothing more than "a fat guy in a cardigan," and Rejas' "victory" is somehow not a victory at all. For we know what Rejas knows. Terror, like love and truth, has many faces; this was just one of them.

For all of its "epically characteristic" explosions, fireworks, and bloodshed, Malkovich's "Latin American" landscape (shot in Ecuador, Portugal, and Madrid) is photographed in a remarkably static style. (One wonders if this was intended to focus on the film's story, themes, or performances. This is never explained.) As a result, the film's more subtle moments quietly sear themselves into memory, long after the fire dies down and the gunfire ceases. The film's final scene illustrates this phenomenon perfectly. After his quest has ended, Rejas quietly watches his daughter dance (to Nina Simone's "Who Knows Where the Time Goes?") through a dark window. The screen yields a full and solemn facial landscape of Rejas (Bardem). His daughter, like Yolanda once did, is wearing red and floats in and out of frame against Rejas' face. As she dances, we scarcely see her. We instead see a long, reaction

shot of Bardem—and consequently, the full spectrum of his character’s emotions. It is through this shot that Malkovich ends the film. There is no “fade to black.” Bardem’s energy does not die down; it is abruptly halted.

Because of such moments of restraint, what might have been another banal, “good guys versus bad guys” film is, in Malkovich’s hands, a contemplative exploration into how terrorism works its way into the human psyche, whenever the era, wherever the place. Malkovich the personality may always be “the great unknown,” but if *The Dancer Upstairs* is any indication of Malkovich the auteur, it proves that he is full of promise.

Finding Nemo

Dir: Andrew Stanton and Lee Unkrich, USA, 2003

A review by Alice Mills, University of Ballarat, Australia

Finding Nemo is an animated film from Walt Disney and Pixar Animation, studios that have produced over the last few years such outstanding animated films as *Monsters Inc.* (2001) and *Toy Story* (1995). *Nemo's* underwater characters do not pose the technical problems of animation that were so successfully met in *Monsters Inc.* with its mammalian characters whose fur, hair and clothing were shown in the finest of detail. The outstanding achievement of *Finding Nemo*, in terms of animation, is its depiction of an underwater world with an intricate play of light and shadow and a sometimes turbid watery medium through which the fish characters dart, plunge and cluster. The film's human characters, the dentist-diver, his niece and patients, are quite crudely animated. The pleasures of this film, then, lie partly in its subtly realised underwater setting, but not in any dazzling innovations in the animation of its characters.

Finding Nemo was billed as ideal holiday fare for children. When I went to see it, however, my sense of the audience response was not one of either happiness or great amusement. This audience, mainly consisting of young children accompanied by adults, watched quietly throughout, except for a particularly fraught moment in the dentist's surgery when a child called out anxiously, "Is Nemo dead yet?" The film's ending proved happy insofar as the father clownfish, Marlin, was reunited with his son Nemo and his friend and helper Dory; but the overall concern of *Finding Nemo* lies with themes of death and loss, starting with the death of Marlin's wife Coral and continuing with the loss of his only son, Nemo. Its joyful finale is not potent enough to offer the audience reassurance after some two hours largely devoted to loss and the fear of dying.

In fact the film has three endings. First comes the indubitably happy ending for the three main characters, Marlin, Dory and Nemo, as they enjoy life together on the reef. After the film announces "the end", comes the much abbreviated story of how the dentist's tank-fish gain freedom, each having rolled its way out of the surgery window, tied up in its individual plastic bag, while the dentist is busy cleaning their tank -- but is this really a happy ending, as the tank-fish bob in their bags in Sydney Harbour, or are they now doomed to die a slow death by asphyxiation or starvation? The only viewers who will gain assurance from the film on this point are those few who sit through the credits, across and beside which cavort many of the characters, including the tent-fish; so they do, somehow, find a way out of their bags into the freedom of the ocean. For the majority of viewers, however, the film's final images are likely to be those of the scene, both ominous and comical, in which one of the plastic-bagged tank-fish plaintively asks what they should do next. Here jaunty success seems about to give way to panic.

Those plastic bags, at once a new prison and a means to keep the tank-fish alive as they seek freedom, are the last in a series of ambiguous containers in *Finding Nemo*. As he grieves for his dead wife, Marlin vows that he will not allow anything to happen to his unborn child.

Later, in a moment of crisis, he is forced to admit that, however lovingly this vow was meant, such protection amounts to imprisonment, denying the child independence and symbolically keeping him unborn. The same point is repeatedly made when Nemo first goes to school and Marlin renders himself ridiculous, humiliating his son by over-protecting him. In the film's funniest episode, satirising all 12-step addiction programmes, Bruce the Shark (memorably voiced by Barry Humphries) appears first as a terrifying threat to the little fish, then as a reformed character and fish-friend, then, reverting to type, as a fish-eater; but even as a follower of a 12-step programme, Bruce operates as a jailor, forcing Dory and Marlin to join his fifth step meeting. In another comical-sinister sequence, the helpful pelican (an eloquent Geoffrey Rush) invites Marlin and Dory to hop into his bill not to be eaten, as they fear, but to save them from the predatory seagulls. Here the ambiguous container is the bird's gullet.

The film's anxieties about protection and imprisonment, about containers that safeguard life and those that bestow death, take their grandest form in the whale who swallows Dory and Marlin when they ask for directions to Sydney. The whale's mouth is experienced by Marlin as a prison, by Dory as a playground. In the end the whale proves a vehicle to bring them to Sydney Harbour and expels them through its blowhole in what can be read as a symbolic rebirth. Rebirth is usually a favourable moment in a hero quest such as the two clown fishes' quest for one another, but in this film it is frequently a waste outlet for bodily fluids that functions symbolically as the birth canal. In this instance, the blowhole ejects both water and living fish. The dentist's toilet and the surgery bowl into which his patients spit, both carry the symbolism of a birth canal, which the tank-fish struggle to reach and which Nemo manages to escape down. "All drains lead to the ocean," says the fish masterminding their escape efforts (given suitably dark voice by Willem Dafoe), and it is via the Sydney sewerage system that Nemo arrives in the Harbour. Before this, he has twice attempted to block the tank filter and then escape via a long curved tube, attempts which risk his life when the filter fan restarts and sucks him back up the tube. This can also be read as symbolic of the experience of birth, with a desperate effort to escape and a terror of being reabsorbed and killed.

The most obvious example of death in the womb occurs at the start of the film, when Coral is attacked by a predator fish as she tries to defend her 400 eggs, each of them containing a visible fish in its individual womb-container outside her body. The predator kills Coral and all the babies except Nemo: it is at this point that the father vows to keep his son safe by protecting him from all experience in the world. Even the father, then, can be regarded as a potential killer of his unborn son's spirit, if not his body. As such, Marlin functions as the abject mother, who always threatens the growing child with loss of individuality in a deadly return to the womb.

Even though most of the underwater characters live under constant threat of death, and the film abounds in anxiety, only Marlin and Nemo appear to grieve for those they have lost -- and then almost entirely for each other. Marlin grieves briefly for Coral, only to put all his attention into protecting Nemo. Bruce the Shark uses his motherless state as an excuse for immoral behaviour. Dory, Marlin's new friend and helper, only dimly remembers the loss of her family, who, like her, suffer from short term memory loss. After the first moments in which Marlin acknowledges Coral's death, grief can thus only be experienced, in the world of this film, by male character for male character; Dory as lost daughter, and then as the friend that Marlin forsakes, is bewildered rather than upset, and the motherless shark uses his orphan state as another weapon. Dory may be a figure of (rather disturbing) fun as an amnesic, but there is nothing to laugh about in Marlin's dismissal of her, when he loses hope

of regaining his son and chooses just to forget. Here Marlin tries to suppress his grief for his lost son, but appears to feel no grief, no remorse and no sense of loss as he swims away from his loyal female friend.

The film abounds in such unfelt grief, starting with the rushed response to Coral's death. *Finding Nemo* is far from happy holiday fare for children. Instead, it breathes a sadness that is not outweighed by its jokes about 12 step programmes, its send-ups of positive thinking and its happy ending. Marlin may end by finding Nemo, but all his other children die in their watery womb-tomb; he begins by grieving for Coral, but ends by hardening his heart towards Dory; the film's reservoir of unshed tears gets ever fuller.

Kill Bill: Vol. 1

Dir: Quentin Tarantino, USA, 2003

A review by Brian Gibson, University of Alberta, Canada

Quentin Tarantino's films have been embodiments of cool detachment. *Reservoir Dogs* (1991) was a low-budget, double-crossing crime noir that was violent and mysterious enough to be idolized by many as a cult film. *Pulp Fiction* (1994), with its quirky songs, its oddball, ironic tone -- hit men having a Seinfeldian dialogue about hamburgers, followed by fatal accident; cooing dance scene followed by drug overdose; etc. -- and its interwoven tripartite structure, was a big critical hit. *Jackie Brown* (1997) was a neat change of pace, with Tarantino adapting an Elmore Leonard novel and lending grace and humanity to the title character, an aging black stewardess, played by '70s blaxploitation actress Pam Grier.

Tarantino's fourth work, *Kill Bill: Vol. 1*, is only coolly detached because it's all about disembodiment. People are decapitated, bodies are mutilated, and the luckiest victims are merely defenestrated. For years, Tinseltown has been churning out action flicks, and now Master Quentin has decided to outdo them all and make the most stylish, kill-for-kill's sake action flick ever. *Kill Bill* is a fascinatingly disgusting film; fascinating because Tarantino deftly wields his camera trickery (black-and-white flashbacks, a split-screen sequence, slo-mo build-up, silhouette images, overhead shots, fluid tracking, animation), and disgusting because the cinematographic conjuring has just one aim -- to show blood in all its furious explosions, expulsions, and spouting redness. Eyes shed hemoglobin tears, an enemy is scalped, and a man holds his own cut-off leg, within a red sea of wailing victims lying among the driftwood of their limbs. There's enough blood on screen in this hemophiliac film to make Sam Peckinpah shudder in his grave; I felt like I was donating to the Red Cross just by paying to see the movie.

The stylish fetishizing of gore in *Kill Bill* comes via an anemic revenge plot taken to the extreme. The Bride (Uma Thurman), an assassin whose real name is always bleeped out in the film, was beaten comatose while pregnant, at her wedding in a small chapel outside El Paso. Just as she was telling her former boss Bill that the baby is his, he shot her. Four years later, after her limbo-bound body was regularly rented out for rape by a leering hospital worker, The Bride, a.k.a. Black Mamba, comes out of her coma and seeks revenge on Bill and his Deadly Viper Assassination Squad: O Ren Ishii, a.k.a. Cottonmouth (Lucy Liu), Elle Driver, a.k.a. California Mountain Snake (Daryl Hannah), Vernita Green, a.k.a. Copperhead (Vivica A. Fox), and Budd, a.k.a. Sidewinder (Michael Madsen). Oh, and toss in the Bond-sounding characters Sofie Fatale (Julie Dreyfus) and mace-twirling schoolgirl Go Go Yubari (Chiaki Kuriyama), and about ninety more people as the rest of the Bride's victims.

Kill Bill is emptily pretty because, by slathering on the style and shedding all the blood, the movie is about as poetic and human as an embalmed corpse. Quentin Tarantino, a.k.a. Puff Adder, has spat out a slickly poisonous, bloody gob of a film. He never misses an opportunity to maximize the violence against the Bride, presumably so that the audience feels such disgust for what's been done to her that they will fully support her savage reprisals. The

speakers first ooze Thurman's whimpering sobs and panicked breathing, and then the film opens with a black-and-white, tight shot of Thurman's blood-caked face, as Bill's hand wipes some of the gore off her with his embroidered handkerchief while he murmurs, "Do you think I'm sadistic?" He then explains why he's not, only to shoot her in the head. Later, in the hospital, when Buck brings in a fat, dirty trucker as the latest rapist of the Bride, he explains that she sometimes gets dry, and tosses a jar of Vaseline to the leering, lascivious man-pig. So, of course, when the Bride tears off the trucker's lip with her teeth and bashes Buck's head in repeatedly with a steel door, we're supposed to feel a sense of justice. Instead, I mostly felt sick. This is *Reservoir Bitches* meets *Pulp Friction*, with no humanity, redemption, or transcendent artistry.

The Bride kills Vernita Green in her suburban house, which looks so cartoon-ish that it seems straight off a Tim Burton '80s film set. Their battle is interrupted when Vernita's Bambi-eyed daughter arrives home from school. The duelling assassins' 'dissing' dialogue consists of long, pseudo-articulate speeches involving such words as "rationality," followed by taunts of "Fuck you, bitch!" or, slightly more elaborately, "Look, bitch! I need to know if you're going to start any more shit around my baby girl!" Vernita dies on a kitchen floor strewn with Froot Loops as her daughter inexpressively looks on; later, O Ren and the Bride finish each other's thought just before they battle: "Silly rabbit! Trix are for kids."

Hyper-stylized violence, kids' cereal references, and catfights masquerading as female empowerment? This is the movie Master Quentin makes after a five-year hiatus. Off his Prozac and unleashed in his celluloid playground by the overindulgent Weinstein parents at Miramax (save for their suggested bisection of the haematic epic), juvenile Quentin, sated on comic books, video games, and kung fu movies, has used his unfettered power to gloss over a splatterfest with pop-cultural panache and flair.

The faux-feminist aspect of *Kill Bill* is the film's oddest addition to Tarantino's oeuvre. Here, women kick ass only by co-opting patriarchal symbols or, in the Bride's case, by using phallic weapons to kill women dominated by one man -- Bill. (All the men in the film are latently misogynist because they want to kill or screw women: a sheriff who sees the Bride in the chapel calls her a "blood-spattered angel" and then "this tall drink of cocksucker"; Buck tells the eager trucker about the comatose Bride's rebellious reflex: "this little cunt is a spitter"). After slashing his (Achilles) heel with a scalpel, then repeatedly ramming "I like to fuck" Buck's head in the hospital door, the Bride steals his truck, nicknamed "Pussy Wagon," thus reclaiming her sexuality. She lovingly surveys the long-bladed samurai swords at craftsman Hattori Hanzo's workshop, sheathing and unsheathing the weapons, and soon after she's efficiently eviscerating her opponents with her slicing shaft. At the end of her massacre of dozens of black-suited Japanese men in a nightclub, she faces the last remaining male fighter -- a trembling boy holding his sword in front of him insecurely -- and cuts his projected masculinity down to size. Whittling the boy's sword down to a puny length with her own mighty steel, she then whips him on his backside with the flat edge of the blade while chastising him: "This is what you get for fucking around with yakuzas -- now go home to your mother!"

In a scene that sums up the film's brutally simplistic screw-or-be-screwed notion of feminism, the girlish assassin Gogo Yubari asks an ugly, jag-toothed, grinning Japanese boy if he wants to fuck her; when he says yes, she stabs him in the stomach and asks, "Or is it I who have penetrated you?"

The dialogue pretends to be profound, then lapses into insults and expletives; Tarantino seems to have lost his talent for seemingly mundane speeches that hint at much more. The only lyrical sequence -- the swordfight between O Ren and the Bride in a snowbound garden -- is broken by pounding, jaunty music and an anti-climactic finish, complete with a gory, brain-exposing scalp job. Much of the film is over-scored; the titled chapter breaks and location notes are unnecessary -- can't Tarantino trust himself or the audience enough to realize that the various time shifts are easy to keep track of? The impressively varied camerawork here is not at the service of an artistic or even satirical point, as it was in Oliver Stone's rendition of Tarantino's script for *Natural Born Killers* (1994). And unlike Tarantino's previous three films, there's not even any humour or irony to this super-serious B-movie; this is a straight-ahead, all-out gorefest, so deadly stone-faced it seems ridiculous. I kept waiting for one of the hacked-up victims to keep taunting the Bride to fight, as with the knights' battle in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1974).

I think that *Kill Bill*'s animated sequence is closest to what Tarantino wants: an utter blood-spilling that can escape censors' concerns. In the sequence, explaining O Ren's childhood, the young girl witnesses her parents' piercing deaths, as ordered by the Yakuza boss Matsumoto. Founts of blood spurt through the room, dripping through the bed and onto the tearful, whimpering girl hiding underneath. But Matsumoto is a pedophile and O Ren comes to him in his bed, whips out a sword while they're having sex, and plunges it deep into him, unleashing a Krakatoa of plasma, the shuddering, stream of crimson jetting all over the room and the screen. The non-human medium of animation can allow for complete and utter 'gore porn.' Later, in the actors' world, when O Ren decapitates a boss who raises the issue of her mixed-blood heritage, and the stump of his neck showers out blood like a garden sprinkler, the 'real' scene actually seems fake and stilted as compared with the fluid, bloody orgy of the animated story.

In addition to his camera trickery, Tarantino alludes to the kung fu slaughterhouse that presumably inspired him, beginning with 1970s-style openings to those martial arts films (which is followed by a "Klingon proverb" about revenge), while 1970s martial-arts film star Sonny Chiba plays Hanzo. But *Kill Bill* shows little respect for the culture which give birth to kung fu films, parodying the odd, inferior Japanese. Hanzo and his assistant, in their post-retirement jobs as teashop workers, are buffoons until the Bride calls upon Hanzo to make a sword for her. Go Go Yubari is a cute, giggling murderess, while a mock 1960s band of three beehive-coiffed Japanese women plays to a hip-swinging crowd in the restaurant where O Ren and co. fight the Bride; the restaurant owner is a bumbling toady with a shrewish wife.

But in this cinematic abattoir, people are slabs of meat to be pounded, hacked, and sliced. There's no room for art (which would involve humanity/compassion/ambiguity), only slickly self-conscious stylings. No doubt the sanguinary *Kill Bill: Vol. 2* will complete the inward-looking orbit of that dying star-auteur Tarantino: from crime noir and subverting blaxploitation, to simplistic, macho feminism and Japsploitation.

Once Upon a Time in Mexico

Dir: Robert Rodriguez, Mexico/USA, 2003

A review by Reni Celeste, Yale University, USA

The third film of Robert Rodriguez's El Mariachi trilogy closes off the story of the lone guitarist in epic style. The budgets and production values of this saga have developed in significant increments from its cult origins. Likewise its hero has developed from a cleanly shaven young man who only wanted to be the best mariachi that he could (Carlos Gallardo), to "El," a man of striking impact and ruthless resolve (Antonio Banderas). Having lost everything he has attained the freedom of the dead; except he still walks the earth, staring off into space while strumming a melancholic tune. The cast and the setting share an uncontrollable beauty that is mesmerizing on the big screen. The manner in which the film has been shot exaggerates this pleasure. Extreme angles on beautiful bodies and penetrating close ups give the framing an exaggerated physicality reminiscent of comic book figures. The almost relentless images of violence and death also attain a level of graphic unreality. Sweeping long shots of Mexican villages and fast pans down colorful streets create a self-enclosed cinematic universe that rivals reality. The sonic environment is perhaps the greatest advance from the earlier films. Music, sound effects, and action seem to be interacting parts of a single body. The live action sequences employ the tools of recent blockbusters and yet maintain an independent feature's innovations and style. Shot using a twenty-four frames-per-second digital camera, this film proves that the 21st century will look better than ever, and puts a dent in the arguments of even the most fanatical of celluloid devotees.

Quentin Tarantino, who cameoed in *Desperado* (1995), also played a small part in the existence of the third installment by suggesting to Rodriguez that this was his "man with no name" trilogy. Rodriguez has clearly taken to heart this comparison with Sergio Leone's classic spaghetti westerns. As in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1967), the film's score resonates throughout the film space, defining its pathos, solitude and longing; and the camera establishes its terrain as a realm of infinite space and isolation. The film's style produces a luscious and evocative platform for action that rivals the classic trilogy it emulates. In *Desperado* El Mariachi redeemed his fallen lover, found love once again in the arms of the fierce beauty Carolina (Salma Hayek), and hit the open road for freedom. In the final scene he carries his guitar down a lonely highway, she pulls up alongside, he tosses his guitar to the wind, and they drive off into bliss. But before the closing titles can roll, the car reverses to the abandoned case and retrieves it "just in case," because as he says, "it's a long ride to the next stop." In that long ride between *Desperado* and *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* El Mariachi has suffered severe losses. The film's revenge narrative is established through flashbacks of his marriage to Carolina, her pregnancy, encounters with their enemies, and the tragic gunning down of mother and child. But Rodriguez does not stop there. Into this already substantial motivation, he weaves a tale of national political betrayal and intrigue. El Mariachi must do nothing less than avenge his wife and child while also saving the nation from drug lords plotting the assassination of the president of Mexico.

The plot is so heavy it takes a second or third viewing to truly understand all its dimensions. Action films traditionally minimize dialogue and simplify plot to make room for their visual and visceral impact. The convoluted plot threatens to distract attention from the engrossing live action sequences that define this film, but on closer inspection its complexity reveals something intrinsic to action films -- they stage a battle between characters for power over the plot. The film's introduction of several new characters makes this explicit. Foremost is CIA agent Sands (Johnny Depp), the man who sets the plot in action. El Mariachi has been enlisted by Sands to kill General Marquez; General Marquez has been enlisted by drug lord Barillo (Willem Dafoe) to kill the president of Mexico; and a retired FBI agent has been enlisted by Sands to kill Barillo. Like a series of well-constructed dominos Sands hopes to assure that the president is killed, along with the drug lords who seek to replace him. Agent Sands believes his best strategy is concealment. This is well illustrated through his use of a fake arm that he carries in a bag. This arm is seen holding a fork or coffee cup while his real arm clutches a weapon under the table. It also comes to symbolize the coveted advantage that all characters in the action narrative ultimately seek. At a bullfight where he has placed a long shot bet that the bull will win, he explains to his companion that if one wants to be assured of victory it is essential to rig the game in advance. At that moment an unseen dart penetrates the matador and to everyone's astonishment the bull slams into the fighter's body. However, Sand's third arm takes on comic proportions and becomes evidence of his eventual loss of control. He is outsmarted by the strategies of the other characters including deception, betrayal, false identity, dismemberment, and last minute surprises. El Mariachi trumps all strategies with his invincible guitar. Having determined that the president is a good man seeking to rescue the people of Mexico from the rule of the drug lords, El Mariachi and his two faithful buddies take aim with their loaded guitar cases against the coup d'etat, drug lords, and US interests.

The moral essence of the action is defined through the breed of epic heroism that Rodriguez has developed in the three parts of this trilogy. The hero is initially innocent, brought into the web of evil inadvertently through a case of mistaken identity. By responding to love and vengeance he achieves heroism by the second feature, emerging from the shadows, instilling dread in all who hear the tale of his barroom slaughters. In this way he achieves the universal and will later become simply "El", a man with no name whose solitude and freedom inspires respect and fear. In this sense he resembles the classic American cowboy. Freedom and personal integrity however are revealed in conclusion to serve the higher value of nation. In the end El, holding the Mexican flag, responds to the president's inquiry into the identity of his savior with the proud reply "we are the sons of Mexico." The goal is not money, love or fame, but justice itself. The trilogy creates a hero whose freedom is inseparable from his loss. Because he wants nothing he is beyond defeat. As such he escapes both identity and mastery and achieves the universal. His misfortune is life itself, to be a part of a plot for which he has no need or desire.

Renewal is a theme that threads throughout the narrative. Each character seeks to shed his misfortunes for a new life. Barillo resorts to facial reconstruction, Agent Sands is going to take the money and run, the revolution seeks a new order, and the finale, set during the day of the dead parade, depicts a struggle for the new life promised by the president for Mexico. But El Mariachi remains riveted to one spot, trapped in nostalgia for a life that he has outlived, and possessing only a freedom rendered meaningless by the end of the road. Although the El Mariachi films did not set out to form a trilogy, they are held together by repeating themes, characters, events, and a steady development of El's heroism. That all the pieces do not add up entirely is inconsequential. Ultimately, *Once Upon a Time in Mexico's* greatest strength is

that it stands alone as an epic work. Many critics lamented the reduction of Salma Hayek's role to a series of flashbacks, but it is important to note that this footage is not a flashback of a previous film in the trilogy, but of a film that never existed; a glimpse into a dark space functioning between works. In this sense these flashbacks reveal the other pieces to be irrelevant, and the work autonomous.

Once Upon a Time in Mexico provides a sensory assault both visually and aurally, combined with enough plot elements to mull over for weeks. Rodriguez has developed his craft to near perfection and provided an extravagant spectacle whose ultimate expression may be the pure pleasure of filmmaking and spectatorship. At the same time, in this film Rodriguez has shown the action sequence to be a unique art form working in conjunction with the narrative and moral structures of the film. In a genre dominated by Asian and North American scenarios, Rodriguez has ventured south to reveal the unseen side of the Americas. El Mariachi, the romantic Latino hero, has proven to possess his own third arm. This arm, in the form of a guitar case loaded with force, has been brought out from under the table at last.

Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl

Dir: Gore Verbinski, USA, 2003

A review by Rayna Denison, University of Sussex, UK

This summer's "surprise" blockbuster hit, *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* has more humble but unusual origins than even most other blockbusters can boast. Based on Disney's Pirates of the Caribbean, this film's source text was not, as is the norm, a book or a television show, but rather a theme park ride. This has interesting implications for both the film text as it relates to its origins, and also more importantly the way film studies and the film industry has typically viewed the relationship between theme parks and films.

Pirates of the Caribbean's blockbuster "surprise" is perhaps not so surprising though. Its stellar production crew and cast, its backing by two major producers (Disney and Jerry Bruckheimer Films) and its \$125-million budget belie the critical surprise that greeted the film. Where *Total Film* reviewer Ceri Thomas tells readers that "if any of this summer's big movies seemed to have 'turkey' clearly stamped on its mangy, feathered butt, then *Pirates of the Caribbean* was the potential Christmas dinner in question" (Thomas, 2003: 94), this seems to have been a dig mainly at the film's genre rather than its production team. Produced by Jerry Bruckheimer (indeed posters and other advertising declare this a Bruckheimer not a Verbinski film), known specifically for producing calculated hit films and television series like *The Rock* (1996), *Pearl Harbor* (2001) and *C.S.I. (Crime Scene Investigations)*, *Pirates of the Caribbean* was in relatively safe hands. Similarly, its large budget allowed for quality crew: Ted Elliot and writing partner Terry Rosso (*Shrek* [2001] and *The Mask of Zorro* [1998]) brought their experience of writing comedy/adventure films to bear on the recently struggling pirate film genre. Dariusz Wolski (*The Crow* [1994] and *The Mexican* [2001]) added his occasionally avant-garde approach to cinematography and Christopher Boyes, fresh from the first two *Lord of the Rings* films (2001 and 2002) and *Minority Report* (2002) brought what might be termed a blockbuster approach to sound design.

This high profile, blockbuster-oriented crew combined in *Pirates of the Caribbean* with some impressive rising and established talent to secure box office credibility: Johnny Depp as Captain Jack Sparrow, Geoffrey Rush as his nemesis Captain Barbossa and relative newcomer Orlando Bloom (playing romantic lead Will Turner) wooing Keira Knightley's Elizabeth Swann. Here a spread of talent appealing to a wide range of audience demographics is in evidence. Knightley's success in *Bend it like Beckham* (2002) and Bloom's rise to fame with the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy made immediate appeals to youth and blockbuster audiences while Depp traversed those and crossed over into the more "art" oriented audiences for whom Rush was most likely chosen to appeal.

However, the classical beauty of the three young leads was played with in *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Depp's teeth were capped in gold, and his hair dreadlocked and his eyes surrounded with black kohl pencil creating a visually striking pirate. Rather famously now

Depp's performance was modelled on the Rolling Stones' Keith Richards, resulting in a swaying and swaggering cockney Captain Sparrow that steals much of the limelight in *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Bloom on the other hand was made to look like, and do, a passable impression of Errol Flynn in *Captain Blood* (1935), portraying his blacksmith-cum-pirate as a classical romantic lead, providing a central foil to Depp's swaying Sparrow. There is a playful take on femininity in *Pirates of the Caribbean* too, with Knightley's damsel-in-distress eschewing the trappings of period femininity ("You like pain? Try wearing a corset!" she growls, sword in hand). Although at times unconvincing, particularly given the strength of Knightley's tomboy in *Bend it like Beckham*, Elizabeth Swann is a reasonable addition to the pirate-genre's long line of feisty women.

Indeed, *Pirates of the Caribbean* owes much to its filmic ancestors. The long line of pirate films was largely popularised beginning in the 1930s with, for example, Errol Flynn's *Captain Blood* or *The Sea Hawk* (1940) and continued through Burt Lancaster starring in *The Crimson Pirate* (1952). Since that time the pirate film has fared less favourably, with recent financial (and artistic) disasters including *CutThroat Island* (1995) or Disney's own *Treasure Planet* (2002). Nevertheless, pirates have consistently remained at the forefront of filmmakers' heroic imaginings. Recent pirates have proven popular for example from The Dread Pirate Roberts (Cary Elwes) in *The Princess Bride* (1987), through to Dustin Hoffman's leering Captain Hook (*Hook* [1991]) and modern pirates like those populating *Six Days Seven Nights* (1998). *Pirates of the Caribbean* is largely dependent on the mythos these films and others like them have created around pirates in general and the Caribbean more specifically. The film takes as its geographical basis a series of real places -- Port Royal, Jamaica and Tortuga -- which have been made legend by the early pirate films. For example, Tortuga is described by an intertitle in *Captain Blood* as a place friendly to pirates where "easy money consorted with easy virtue".

These geographical locations become the anchor for *Pirates of the Caribbean*'s narrative. This narrative is essentially a chase from Port Royal through to a mythical island (which can only be found by those who "already know where it is") via Tortuga. The central organising McGuffin of the plot is a cursed hoard of Aztec gold found by Barbossa and his pirate gang of the ship the Black Pearl. These pirates are called to Port Royal by the last missing piece of gold, in the possession of Elizabeth Swann, the governor's daughter. To save Elizabeth, Will Turner strikes a bargain with the disenfranchised ex-captain of the Black Pearl, Jack Sparrow. Driven by love and revenge respectively, these two protagonists lead both the pirates and the British naval fleet on a Caribbean adventure.

It is in the narrative "chase" that *Pirates of the Caribbean*'s ride origins begin to show. Spectacle is brought to the film not only in terms of the ships and swordplay stunts that protagonists undertake, but also in a more overt form of "showing" or attraction: a ghost story. The curse on the Aztec gold is such that Barbossa and his pirates become skeletal in the moonlight and cannot be killed. This twist on the pirate legends discussed above enables an understanding of *Pirates of the Caribbean* as what Geoff King refers to as a "ride-film" (King, 2000: 2). Indeed the extensive and effective use of computer-generated imagery in *Pirates of the Caribbean* lends itself to descriptions of the film as the current equivalent of early cinema's "cinema of attractions" (Gunning, 1986: 63). Moreover, the film's close narratological and visual links between Disney's theme park ride and the film text emphasise what King paraphrases as "a blend of fairground ride and forms of cinema that seek to engage directly with the viewer" (King, 2000: 2).

Pirates of the Caribbean is different to other so-called “ride-films” though in that its relationship to the ride is inverse. Instead of its narrative elements and moments being extrapolated out into a theme park ride, moments and vistas from Disney’s 1967 ride are incorporated into the film’s diegesis. For example, in *Pirates of the Caribbean* the film the introduction of Tortuga, the pirates’ playground, is almost a replica of the ride’s animatronic landscape replete with drunken pirates and lusty wenches. So too is the treasure hoard of Barbossa’s pirates very similar to the treasure hoard at the end of Disney’s ride. These moments, as well as providing knowing advertising for Disney’s theme parks worldwide, also act to reinforce the spectacular moments of *Pirates of the Caribbean*’s text. But instead of creating a film devoid of narrative, as is often the criticism levelled at the cinema of attraction films (King, 2000; Gunning, 1986), the efforts at spectacle and digression mentioned above enrich the diegesis of *Pirates of the Caribbean*, helping to make it the surprise hit of the summer.

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Punch-Drunk Love

Dir: Paul Thomas Anderson, USA, 2002

A review by Steve Woollock, University of Nottingham, UK

Expectation is a double-edged sword. Narrative cinema not only depends upon the repetition of structural forms (story arcs, plot contrivances, genre tropes) in order to function as identifiable entertainment, but the longevity of the medium is premised on the satiation of an audiences desire for more of the same. The inherent danger, however, is that expectation can lead to an over-investment by audiences in new projects due to the performance of past films which can, in turn, lead to disappointment with expectation turning out to be the sword of Damocles hanging over a directors head. With such expectation *Punch-Drunk Love* seems to have been vilified and vindicated in equal measures.

Anderson's first two films, *Hard Eight* (1996) and *Boogie Nights* (1997), were confident, expertly choreographed homage to period (40s *noir* and 70/80s Los Angeles porn industry respectively). Yet while a sense of nostalgia infuses these films, a homage of a more formal and contemporary kind is also evident. Often compared to Robert Altman and Martin Scorsese, Anderson often seems like the conductor taking credit for orchestrating the work of others, leading *Boogie Nights* to merely replay the structure of *Goodfellas* (1990) with money and drugs replaced by sex and disco. The acclaim that met *Magnolia* (1999) -- Anderson's multi-layered ode to love, machismo, chance and Altman -- similarly served to strengthen the debt to his influences and heighten expectation for his follow-up. With *Punch-Drunk Love*, however, the debt is cleared and a new account seems to have been started. The key to understanding the film lies not in any expectation of progressive narrative themes (as underpins all auteur investigations) but in a return to the concern of the 'Realist/Formalist' dichotomy; the blurring of realist content with formal innovation.

Ostensibly concerning the relationship of Barry Egan (Adam Sandler), the owner of a San Fernando-based novelty plunger business, and Lena Leonard (Emily Watson), the friend of one of Barry's seven sisters, *Punch-Drunk Love* charts the difficulties encountered by two adults in their thirties expressing their feelings for each other in a world made complex by expectation. Any attempt at synopsis would surely place this film in the category of 'romantic-comedy' which goes some way to hint at the narrative course the film will follow, yet does not account for the choices made by both the characters and, above all, the director.

Anderson constructs the film around Barry as a passive/aggressive, tightly-wound bundle of neuroses, unable to express himself fully, not through lack of outlet but merely because he has little idea how he should behave in a world full of so many proscriptions. As a male raised with seven sisters, Barry has lost any sense of identity and identification. He is the passive Snow White whose acquiescence is barely suppressed and whose life lacks any sense of harmony. At a gathering for one of his sisters' birthdays he is reminded of the "gay boy" taunts he endured as a child and which he still suffers as a result of being reminded. With such overwhelming pressure Barry has retreated into himself yet the pressure builds and

periodically erupts. After one such outburst (he breaks the patio windows at his sisters house) Barry seeks help from one of his brothers-in-law only to explain, "I don't know if there is anything wrong because I don't know how other people are". Barry is unable to conform to expectations because he sees no absolutes. This lack of comparison not only moulds Barry's existence but the form of the film itself. A schizophrenic Barry is mirrored by an equally schizophrenic romantic comedy.

Genre conventions dictate that romance doesn't come easily in a romantic comedy. Obstacles impede progress usually in the form of other people and commitments leading to misunderstanding and eventual (re)conciliation. *Punch-Drunk Love*, however, has as the obstacle Barry himself. Unable to properly express himself he manifests emotion in violent (solitary) outbursts. The socially inept Barry exists in a world whereby spontaneous and often perplexing events occur at random with no readily apparent cause or effect. A world whereby an unmotivated car accident in the films' first few minutes immediately segues into the abandonment of a harmonium on the sidewalk in front of Barry. This seemingly innocuous event amplifies the films form *and* content whereby both Barry and the film itself act as if unaware (or indeed ignorant of) any precedent. Just as Barry has no absolute to measure himself against so the *Punch-Drunk Love* behaves as if shorn of any mooring to genre conventions, a marriage of form and content rarely experienced in cinema (*Memento* [2000] being another example of this whereby the segmental reverse chronology works to highlight the investigation of events by a protagonist with no short-term memory). Barry's 'rescue' of the harmonium represents a part of his life he can control (if not master) just as subplots concerning free air-miles and phone sex are instigated by Barry born of a search for a control that ultimately ends up outside of his reach. As Barry struggles to comprehend his own feelings and external events devoid of any certitude so the audience is similarly placed in a vacuum whereby reality (or at least conventional expectation) is missing. The audience is as abused as the objects Barry vents his frustration upon and to this end directorial contrivance is crucial.

Constantly framed in the distance and at the end of narrow confines, Anderson places Barry in a world of his own creation (both Anderson's *and* Barry's), yet still isolated within that world, unable to escape. The location of Barry's office at the end of an anonymous industrial complex in an equally anonymous San Fernando town is far from incidental. Yet the Barry we meet, constantly dressed in a bright blue suit, isn't normally this way (as one of his sisters tells Lena). Anderson will not even grant the audience a fixed point of reference for Barry; he is tucked away in life, a prisoner of his own inadequacy and the films' manipulation. He possesses an almost vampiric presence of solitude and menace, exemplified in his reaction to the opening of the shutters and the start of his day. Into this discordant existence comes a number of chance encounters designed not so much to advance the plot as question it. The *deus ex machina* towards the end of *Magnolia*, whereby chance and omniscience take events out of the control of the protagonists, is echoed time and again in *Punch-Drunk Love* yet with no recourse to a perceived reality within the film itself. The *deus ex machina* here is extra-textually motivated with the film the machine and Anderson the God. Yet as Anderson's manipulating hand dictates the course and form of the action on screen another allusion becomes noticeable.

As genre, romantic-comedies strive to maintain a semblance of diegetic realism with cause and effect motivating narrative progression. Tangential to romantic-comedies, the musical genre has a rather more tenuous grasp on reality yet struggles all the same to link non-diegetic musical interludes and potentially socially alienating dance routines with narrative

drive. Whilst rarely progressing the narrative, a comment upon that narrative is usually made, thereby preventing any significant disruption to the presented 'reality'. In these terms, *Punch-Drunk Love* can be thought of as a musical devoid of any musical numbers. Rather than break into a musical number Barry breaks up a bathroom. Instead of cathartically exclaiming his feelings in song (which he is unable to do as he is emotionally repressed) Barry (and the film) finds its release in spontaneity and discordance. Unable to compare his feelings with others and unable to sit outside of genre, both Barry and the film exist in an alternative world whereby expectations are constantly confounded leading to an uneasy compromise. The scene in which Lena asks Barry out on a date highlights this contrivance.

Vainly attempting to maintain a quota of control over an increasing escalating situation; with Lena, factory staff, harmonium and soundtrack seemingly conspiring against him; Barry struggles to control his composure in a situation that requires not restraint but action. This cacophony of sound, performance and image is where the film mirrors Barry as maladjusted entity and it is in the soundtrack and 'lightshow' interludes that the formalism becomes chorus to the action, echoing Barry's discordant life in Jon Brion's discordant soundtrack. Just as Barry's attempts to wrestle music from the harmonium elicit nothing above a beginners range so the soundtrack seems to both aggravate and externalise Barry's state of mind. All is not doomed for Barry however. Just as Lena acts as a cipher designed to further Barry's trajectory from insecure in an uncertain world to secure in his own, so the subplots exist in order to allow this transformation to take place. Barry can finally focus on some absolute so as to ground his own persona. Just as the light in the Hawaiian phone booth suddenly shines as Lena accepts Barry's offer to meet, so a light of recognition should shine as the audience realises Anderson's hand in charting the capricious nature of love and genre. A telling hand that leaves the last words for Lena as a musical cue to the rest of their relationship -- "So...here we go!".

Touching the Void

Dir: Kevin Macdonald, UK, 2001

A review by Jenna Pei-Suin Ng, University College, London, UK

In his seminal work, *The Concept of Law*, the legal theorist, HLA Hart, came to a conclusion which he viewed as “something entirely obvious”, namely: “it is the tacit assumption that the proper end of human activity is survival, and this rests on the simple contingent fact that most men most of the time wish to continue in existence.” (Hart, 1994: 191)

Alternatively, one could simply watch *Touching the Void* for a toe-curling attestation of Hart’s conclusion. In May 1985, Joe Simpson and Simon Yates attempted an alpine-style ascent of the unclimbed west face of Siula Grande in the Peruvian Andes. After summiting in atrocious conditions, they commenced their descent but shortly after Simpson fell and broke a leg. With no hope of rescue or assistance, the pair nonetheless continued descending in worsening weather with Yates lowering Simpson on a rope from belay seats cut out of the ever-steepening face. After being lowered the length of the rope, Simpson would prepare the next belay seat, enabling Yates to down-climb to him and repeat the process.

Had Yates and Simpson successfully descended in this manner, it would have sufficed to make a pretty good story. But what was to follow went one better: the turning point came when Simpson was lowered over a sheer face, leaving him dangling in mid-air. Unable to reach the ice-face, too weak to ascend the rope and his shouts drowned by the howling wind, Simpson was helpless while Yates was increasingly being pulled from his belay seat by Simpson’s dead weight. In desperation, Yates cut the rope and Simpson plummeted into a massive crevasse below the cliff face. Against the odds, he survived the fall and managed an agonizing return to base camp. First written as a book, which subsequently won several awards, *Touching the Void* is Simpson’s survival story.

The format of the film utilises a straightforward “docudrama” style: verbal accounts by Simpson, Yates and Richard Hawking (a journalist friend who watched over their camp while they climbed) are interspersed with reconstruction scenes by actors (Nicholas Aaron as Yates and Brendan Mackay as Simpson) shot on location on the forbidding slopes of Siula Grande. Macdonald’s realistic touches are painstaking: for example, Simpson hanging upside-down on the rope after bouncing off the edge, or his attempts to tie a prusik knot to try to ascend the rope.

I am, however, uncomfortable with the concept of the “docudrama” -- a word whose hybridity epitomizes its problematic contradictions. More commonly applied as a genre for television programmes (two examples among countless are *Cambridge Spies* in the UK and *The Reagans* in the US), the term has also been assigned to films “based on real-life events”, such as *Erin Brokovich* (2000) or *Veronica Guerin* (2003), whereby fictional incidents or characters are added to true events to “spice” them up (the essence of dramatization). Of course, this does not suggest that pure documentaries are unambiguous purveyors of truth --

theoretical debates about documentary truth have developed beyond the naïve rendering of inherent reality within a filmic text: developments in the theory, including the debate surrounding the indexicality of a photographic image and concepts such as “vivification” as used by Bill Nichols, have served to move the discussion towards a more profound and complex understanding of truth in documentary (Nichols, 1991: 231).

However, what particularly damns docudrama is its explicit exploitation of realism and affect, the respective cornerstones of documentary and drama. Realism is the dialectical opposite of fiction. Dramatization, on the other hand, is the heightening of excitement and emotional content, *without ruling out the resort of fiction*. While the two are not obviously or even necessarily contradictory, neither do they make the lines clear, and where questions of truth -- particularly historical truth -- are serious, such fudging essentially becomes an exercise in dishonesty for getting around the rules.

This is not to place a punishing judgment on Macdonald’s film. One has to be careful to distinguish Macdonald’s strategy of “docudrama” in his film as opposed to, for example, that used in *Apollo 13* (1995). Macdonald’s approach is to derive veracity solely from the verbal narratives by Simpson, Yates and Hawking. The reconstructed scenes are simply for, as Brian McIlroy would put it, “aesthetic pleasure”, although in this case the pleasure is absent and the viewer is sutured into the protagonists’ agony (McIlroy, 1993: 287). They are not intended to be part of the truth-conveying text.

This strategy pays off handsomely. It is easy to see *Touching the Void* as simply an incredible survival story -- and on one level, it is that -- but it is also a story about the will to carry on with almost superhuman strength, about coping with the overwhelming vastness of being alone and injured, about how one must make choices in the face of the sheer need to survive. All these make up the soul of the film: the trauma of two people so intense there is no way to film it but to put a camera in front of their faces and let them tell it. For much of the time, Yates and Simpson tell their stories calmly and evenly, but the absence of high emotion does not matter: this is one of the times when a little conveys a lot. And this is one reason why the film is a winner: it is not the telling of a story (if we just want to know the story, we can always buy the book or read a review). It is the telling of the telling of a story.

However, this also brings a problem: because the film concentrates so much on the verbal narratives, it is difficult for the incorporation of any other perspective or, more importantly, critical discussion of other issues. This flaws the work in terms of a lack of reach or depth. A striking example is the remarkably brief coverage of the “cutting of the rope” issue, one of the bitterest controversies of the event (and the book) and which still generates passionate debate today. In the film, Simpson and Yates unsurprisingly repeat their stance (both had always defended Yates’s actions, and Simpson unwaveringly so), but I want to know more -- the controversy, the issues, the ethics, the debates -- all of which the filmmaker has chosen to broadbrush away.

In terms of the film’s visuals, Macdonald underwent tremendously harsh conditions to obtain his footage, but he certainly has the results to show for it. The images of the mountains are stunning and well-shot, with frequent horizontal and vertical panning of the camera to give one a breathtaking idea of their range and heights. One feels cold just watching the swirling snow and listening to the howling wind. There are also interesting cinematic touches, such as a close-up of a climbing rope in the middle of Simpson’s explanation of alpine-climbing, foreshadowing the crucial events to come. But the images of ice-climbing itself seem flat and

lifeless -- ice-climbing must be one of the most uncinematic activities ever. In contrast, its sunny sister -- rock-climbing -- lends itself very cinematically via the balletic grace and effortless beauty of the climbers' skilful movements against sun-dappled rock (one thinks of, for example, the award-winning *Oceans of Fear* (1999)). One can also think of other examples of cinematic vividness in extreme sports: the acrobatics of big-wave surfing against azure skies, crashing waves and golden beaches (*The Endless Summer* [1966], even *Blue Crush* [2002]); or the aerial gymnastics of skate-boarding (*Stoked: The Rise and Fall of Gator* [2002]). Ice-climbing, on the other hand, seems to consist mostly of "hack and plod", against lots of frames of white-out, with characters bundled from head to toe. It is undoubtedly a tremendously painful and exhausting activity, and one admires the climbers for their strength and tenacity, but it is simply not visually exciting.

Nonetheless, (ignoring one or two other off-placed touches, such as the risible choral music when the climbers reached the summit), ultimately the simplicity of the film shines through, and Macdonald achieves a rare feat of achieving honesty and clarity via a rightly uncomplicated style. In a strange way, I think this also somehow reflects the mentality of climbing (at least as much as a non-climber can understand). For the less athletically gifted and more temperamentally placid among us (including myself), extreme sports take on an aspect of incomprehensibility: why take the risks? Why go through the pain? Why climb? In the film, Simpson tried to explain: "Climbing was fun. It was just brilliant fun" (before adding darkly: 'And then every now and then, something would go very wrong, and then it wasn't.') The thing is, they do it and it is brilliant fun. If they die, they die. No fuss. No tears.

And thus it goes with Macdonald's film as well: no melodrama, no histrionics, no pyrotechnics, no intercuts of weeping girlfriends and roaring helicopters (because there weren't any). This is a true story told true.

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