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APOCALYPTO

(US, 2006, d. Mel Gibson)

With a name like Apocalpto and a director like Mel Gibson, this film could be about anything. As it is, it is an immersion of the audience in the last, dying days of the Mayan civilisation.

The film itself offers no background explanation as to the Mayans and their history. Obviously, much of the history is speculation, information coming from archaeology and conclusions drawn from what remains of a civilisation which, except for its buildings and ruins, is lost.

The film opens with a quotation from scholar Will Durant stating that dying civilisations decay from within before they are destroyed from outside. Apocalypto presents a society of hunters who are menaced by lethal warriors who plunder, rape and kill (with quite some visual impact) and who enslave their victims so that they can be sold in markets to an effete nobility or can be slaughtered as human sacrifices (quartered and their hearts cut out – memories of Braveheart – and then beheaded at the top of the high temple staircase so that their heads can roll and bounce down to the bloodthirsty crowds and then be impaled). Gibson evokes the bread and circus atmosphere of the Roman arenas as well as the lance and arrow gladiatorial pursuits of victims by the temple guards.

Gibson has decided to tell the story of a hero, a hero who is a victim, a hero who has to endure almost unendurable torture and suffering. This means that Apocalypto is definitely a Mel Gibson film in terms of subject and treatment and the visual, visceral presentation of pain. William Wallace and his execution, Jesus and his passion and death, were not exceptions to Gibson's concerns.

We can see now how Mel Gibson's sensibilities are strong, male, suffering-oriented, focused on heroic endurance with some kind of hope that the heritage is redemption and freedom.

The language of the film is Yucatec. Gibson's films contribute to a mainstream's acceptance of sub-titles.

The first part of Apocalypto shows the peaceful and happy hunting villagers. It opens with a chase and a division of the meats – interrupted by an ominous appearance of some displaced tribes people. However, there is camaraderie, respect for elders, strong leadership and earthy jokes about sex and families.

Then comes the attack in all its brutality, massacre and the enslavement of the warriors, their trek through forest, river and cliffs to the centre of 'civilisation' with its temples, priests, sacrifices and atmosphere of superstition and appeasement of the Gods.

In the tradition of *Run of the Arrow*, *The Naked Prey* or *A Man Called Horse*, the Mayan leader, Jaguar Paws (Rudy Youngblood) endures extraordinary pain and danger to outrun his pursuers and rescue his pregnant wife and child.

And, there coming to the shore, are the ships of the conquistadors and their friar chaplains. The era of the Mayans is over.

This is not a particularly appealing film. Rather, it is one that can be admired on a storytelling and technical bravura level – an example of cinematic ethnography.

BLACK CHRISTMAS

(US, 2006, d. Glen Morgan)

Black Christmas was originally a horror thriller of 1974, directed by Bob Clark who made a range of films from the *Porky* series to serious films like *Tribute* and *Murder by Decree*. He acts as an executive producer of this remake, more than thirty years on.

It is a routine adaptation of the rather sensationalist original. But, there has been a proliferation of this kind of film since those days and this one is fairly routine. A group of sorority students are in peril on Christmas Eve and are gradually dispatched. Audiences learn early in the piece who is responsible so there is no mystery. In fact, there are a series of flashbacks visualising the crisis in the home that has later become the sorority house. A bizarre and cruel mother has been responsible for the repression of her son who killed her and eventually escapes from a mental institution.

Glen Morgan directed the remake of another 70s thriller, *Willard*, and was a writer of such films as *Final Destination 3*. His wife, Kristen Cloke, appears as the sister of one of the victims and the male lead, a rather unsympathetic ladies' man, is played by Goldie Hawn's son, Oliver Hudson.

BLOOD DIAMOND

(US, 2006, d. Edward Zwick)

The title is quite evocative. It sounds like a violent story as well as a story of greed. And it is.

The film is principally set in Sierra Leone in the recent past. It is 1999. The country is in the turmoil of civil war. International diamond companies are interested in exploiting the diamond fields and rebels want to exploit the diamond trade so that they can buy arms. The jewels at the centre of this struggle are called 'conflict diamonds'. There was a movement to ban or curtail this trade for weapons – which, the film tells us at the end, was signed by forty countries in 2003.

Blood Diamond is an action thriller with a message – or several messages.

The principal message is that customers in search of diamonds, even for an engagement ring, need to check whether the stones are the product of social injustice and exploitation. The second message is the obvious one that there are greedy smugglers as well as industrialists and corporations ready to bypass laws and conventions.

The third and underlying message is about the status of Africa and the results of the colonial era that has left in its wake, civil wars and tribal conflicts, massacres, oppression and the dismaying phenomenon of the

abduction of children and brainwashing them into becoming fanatical soldiers. This is quite an agenda for an action film starring Leonardo di Caprio.

Di Caprio appears as a bitter thirty year old mercenary, born in Rhodesia where his parents were brutally murdered, and who has seen action in Angola and South Africa. With the end of apartheid and limited fields of action, he has become involved in diamonds for arms smuggling between Sierra Leone and Liberia. Arrested, he overhears information from a rebel confronting a fisherman (Djimon Hounsou) who had been forced into mining and who had hidden a blood diamond. This could be his answer for a new life.

When he encounters a strong-minded American journalist (Jennifer Connolly), he travels with her and the fisherman to find the diamond. Along the way, they encounter ambushes, the child soldiers, a kind teacher trying to rehabilitate the young abductees, and the mercenary colonel who wants the diamond.

The action sequences are staged with power and flair.

The journey becomes a journey of conscience for the young man. He is challenged by the journalist who wants to write to change attitudes. He is especially challenged by the fisherman whose son has been taken by the rebels and has become a bitter boy, despising and confronting his father.

Films appeal to the emotions and heart more than to the mind and the head. Some tough American commentators have dismissed *Blood Diamond* as a 'Liberal Lefty's dream'. They say that hard-headed policies are needed for development in Africa and the facing of economic necessities. The film, on the other hand, wants to focus on the human cost, enslavement, brutality and murder and exploitation by power-hungry authorities in both the developed and developing worlds. It wants audiences to be moved by people in desperate plight, the powerless, and the bringing down of the exploiters, the powerful.

Djimon Hounsou has a strong reputation in a variety of roles (*Amistad*, *Gladiator*, *In America*, *Constantine*) and he is impressive here. Leonardo di Caprio proves again that he is a fine actor who can immerse himself in all kinds of roles, from romantic heartthrob in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Titanic* to comedy in *Catch Me if You Can*, to gangster and police roles for Martin Scorsese. Here he shows how he can be an action star and, more deeply, portray a man on a conscience journey from ruthless to compassionate to self-sacrificing.

DÉJÀ VU

(US, 2006, d. Tony Scott)

If one was asked to describe the genre for *Déjà Vu* in a few words, one might say that it is a crime thriller masquerading as futuristic science fiction or, on the other hand, science fiction masquerading as a crime thriller – with a romance (in reverse) thrown in. It is produced by Jerry Bruckheimer and directed by Tony Scott, so it is quite big, loud and booming.

The setting is New Orleans, the first film to be made there after Hurricane Katrina and the film pays tribute to the city. Denzel Washington is his genial and honourable self once again as an investigator of the brutal explosion on a river ferry with many deaths. So far, so straightforward. He is approached by FBI agent, Val Kilmer, who seconds him to a specialist team to track down the terrorist.

And then it changes. We move into the realm of time travel. In *Minority Report*, Tom Cruise was preventing crimes before they happened. Denzel wants to rectify a crime that has already happened.

There is a great deal of scientific jargon offered to explain how the space time continuum can fold on itself – and how people can meet their former selves, take an alternate path in time and a whole lot of other hypotheses that seem to be physically and metaphysically impossible. Now, if you are patient and tolerant of all these theories, you may well have a wonderful time as the events are relived, how the screenplay takes us back to literal déjà vu of the opening, of events in the life of the terrorist's hostage which we have seen from the other side and now understand what happened – or might have happened.

If you have a low frustration tolerance of the seeming logic covering the lack of logic in time travel, then your patience might not hold.

As a crime investigation, there is plenty to interest us. As time travel, maybe. And as a romance where the hero first comes across the woman as dead, then, as they say, it is romance in reverse, from death to life, it is pleasingly emotional.

Paula Patton is attractive as the hostage and Jim Caviezel has the chance to be diabolical rather than Christlike as the terrorist.

EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH

(US, 2006, d. Greg Coolidge)

A take it or leave it easygoing comedy. It's shenanigans at a supermarket warehouse. Some of it is funny in the broadest way although it generally leaves out the usual crass stuff (and, therefore, so much more palatable than the previous film of its star, Dane Cook, the execrable *Waiting*).

The trouble is that the hero is far less interesting (even though he does his best to move from failed IT programmer and loser to employee of the month) than the larger than life 'villain', Dax Shephard who has a real flair for scene-stealing even as he acts in mean and nasty ways. Jessica Simpson is there for romance and decoration.

There are a number of eccentrics, especially in the warehouse staff, more particularly, Tim Bagley as the harassed manager.

Somebody suggested, 'Carry on Supermarket'.

ERAGON

(US, 2006, d. Stefen Fengmeier)

Christopher Paolini began writing his Eragon novels at the age of fifteen and he was published before he was twenty. These stories are well researched by a young writer who knows his mythologies and the literary tradition. He cites Tolkien, Pullman and the principal writers as influences.

So, here we have a sword and sorcery saga that has a seventeen year old as its hero and is aimed at that age audience. Jeremy Irons solemnly intones the origins of the legends as the film opens. The wonderful days of Riders and their dragons have died out with feuds and deaths. Only the evil king (John Malkovich) has survived and he uses sorcerers called Shades to do his bidding to stamp out rebels and uprisings.

This does not sound too original. But, as with all mythic battles between good and evil, the dark and the light, a young hero is chosen by destiny to lead the oppressed to victory. And the hero is a farm boy hunter, Eragon (Ed Speleers) who discovers a magic egg which hatches to produce a dragon, a friendly dragon. Eragon, with the mentorship of Jeremy Irons, becomes a Rider.

As with all these stories, there are journeys, magic swords, ambushes and fights, a maiden in distress (Sienna Guillory), a potential traitor (Garrett Hedlund) and a dignified group of hidden rebels.

Special effects and computergraphics enable the arch Shade, the evil sorcerer Durza (Robert Carlyle) to cast spells and, ultimately, to have a mid-air dragon battle that is more spectacular and faster than Quidditch.

These days of mythology offer much more equal opportunity because Eragon's dragon is female and voiced by Rachel Weisz.

Eragon is colourful, fast-paced, with all the familiar ingredients for a more modest post-Tolkein entertainment.

FLAGS OF OUR FATHERS

(US, 2006, d. Clint Eastwood)

While *Flags of our Fathers* can stand alone, it was made back-to-back and is a companion piece to *Letters from Iwo Jima*. Each film focuses on the battle for Iwo Jima in early 1945, *Flags* as a re-creation of the fighting and a memoir about the soldiers as well as a reflection on the famous photograph of the raising of the US flag. *Letters* is in Japanese and is a Japanese perspective on the events.

When each film was released, Clint Eastwood was 76. He has become not only one of the screen icons of American cinema but one of its most prolific and celebrated directors, winning Oscars for *Unforgiven* and *Million Dollar Baby*. Since 2000, his four films (including *Mystic River*) have shown a maturity of storytelling and reflection that has been appreciated worldwide.

Both storytelling and reflection are important elements in *Flags of Our Fathers*. In fact, the storytelling is not presented chronologically so that we do not know when we will be on Iwo Jima, when we will be accompanying the three young men who were sent on tour of America as heroes and to raise bonds for the war effort, when we will be flashing back to incidents on the island and when we will be listening to interviews and reminiscences fifty years later. This complex way of narration keeps us attentive while continually challenging us to test our feelings and to gauge what we are thinking about war, about maiming and death, about the reasons for war, about heroism and heroic behaviour.

This is one of the main themes of the film, heroism. The men who raised the flag originally on Iwo Jima simply acted spontaneously in a deadly situation. They were photographed. However, the photo was damaged and an opportunity arose for six men who had gone to the top for other reasons (laying a phone cable) were asked to re-enact the former raising. Something small became something enormous, especially for American morale and propaganda. This is the nature of symbolic actions. They are not symbolic until they are imbued with meaning. The photo of Iwo Jima became a rallying cry for the American forces and people. They had a felt need for a symbol and this was it. And it was managed with US showbiz pizzazz.

The three young men, inexperienced even in war, were feted by President Truman, politicians and ordinary people. They were celebrities for a time. Rene Gagnon (Jess Bradford) loved it, a dapper man who had simply been a runner; 'Doc' Bradley (Ryan Phillippe) who observed people and did his medical duties quietly and with courage; Ira Hayes, the native American Indian who experienced racism, who felt guilty that he was feted and who drank and died tragically (Adam Beach in a very fine performance). (Ira Hayes was the subject of the 1961 film, *The Outsider*, with Tony Curtis.)

Steven Spielberg co-produced this film with Clint Eastwood and the reconstructing of the landing on the island and the battle sequences will remind war movie aficionados of the graphic depictions of D-Day in *Saving Private Ryan*. The audience is not spared the bloodshed and death. However, since it is constantly intercut with the bonds tour and the interviews, the audience is not mired in it as the soldiers themselves were.

There is a very strong cast of character actors. The colour is desaturated, made to look like photos of the period (and the final credits should be watched for actual photos and a final panorama of Iwo Jima). Clint Eastwood composed the score and included contemporary songs like *I'll Walk Alone*.

The screenplay by William Broyles Jr and Paul Haggis (writer of *Million Dollar Baby* and *Crash*) keeps reminding the audience of the ambiguities of war, of young inexperienced fighters, of officers and decision-making, of the financial debt incurred by the US and the need for bonds, heroism, duty, the exploitation of heroism and the distinction between heroes (in the grandiose sense) and ordinary men and women behaving heroically when required.

FROSTBITEN (FROSTBITE)

(Sweden, 2006, d. Anders Banke)

Vampires in Sweden, in the winter dark of Lapland ('dawn is a month away', chuckles one of the living dead)! Well, if they can be at home in Transylvania and in Whitby, why not in the Arctic circle?

This is a tongue in both cheeks blend of the serious and the comic. The dark prologue is a World War II battle in Ukraine where German soldiers encounter the vampires – suggesting as a symbol the consequences of Nazi eugenic experimentation. The main action is set in a contemporary small town where there is an institution with an expert on genetics. A doctor decides she wants to work there and drags her unwilling daughter along. The daughter finds the town boring – as do most of the teenagers who take to drugs for enjoyment. The drug addiction also has some symbolic suggestions for the director – an analogy for the insatiable blood addiction of the vampires.

Well, the town has some dire secrets – which do have a connection with the wartime opening – and the teenagers become the living dead. The poor police don't know how to cope. The doctor undergoes some distress and more. The genetics expert is not what everyone thinks – and there is a twist at the end.

For those who follow the vampire genre this is a must with its Arctic variations – and vampires who owe more in their makeup and effects to Nosferatu than to Christopher Lee (whom the director acknowledges as an inspiration when he watched Hammer horror films on TV in his youth).

THE HOLIDAY

(US, 2006, d. Nancy Meyers)

Writer-director Nancy Meyers cuts off potential attacks by having Kate Winslett say half way through this romantic comedy concoction, 'I like corny'. This is rather lush corny - and romantic with two parallel stories and two picture book settings.

We are introduced to Amanda, a bit of a control freak who runs her own company making trailers in Hollywood. She is breaking up with her fickle boyfriend. On the other side of the Atlantic, Iris, a journalist at London's Daily Telegraph is dumbfounded when her fickle boyfriend publicly announces his engagement to someone else. What to do when a woman is disappointed, bewildered and feeling alone? Well, Iris suddenly puts her charming country house on the net for an exchange holiday. Amanda thinks it would be just the secluded place for her. So, Iris goes off to LA dream luxury and Amanda gets some rude surprises in wintry England. And men?

With Cameron Diaz as Amanda and Kate Winslett as Iris, we are assured of two strong performances that grab our attention and don't let go. And the men? Iris's brother calls in unexpectedly on Amanda and the relationship rushes ahead. Iris, on the other hand, befriends her 90 year old neighbour, a veteran screenwriter, helping him, ultimately, to go to a tribute ceremony. She also encounters a composer for the movies who has been betrayed in love as well. She has to go beneath the surface to appreciate him because he is played, of all people, by Jack Black. He is not the romantic comedy star that immediately comes to mind, but he handles it nicely and does get in a chance in a video store to do his schtick of music and face-pulling as he comments on different movie scores. No problem about the surface of Iris's brother, Graham, since he is played by Jude Law at his really nicest.

It takes a bit to get into the feel of the piece, which is certainly contrived. However, there is quite an unexpected plot twist concerning Jude Law which changes the mood of the proceedings, making them even more sweet and emotional.

It is a great joy to see Eli Wallach (at 90) playing the role of the screenwriter. He has some good and wise lines, some nice sentiment and some comedy, a persuasive reminder of the old days of Hollywood and the durability of its best actors.

IT'S A BOY/GIRL THING

(UK/Canada, 2006, d. Nick Hurran)

This is a light comedy aimed squarely at the age group presented in the film, senior teenagers, Americans in high school thinking about going to college. Their parents and other adults might find the film a bit slight with a sense of *déjà vu*.

It is full of stereotypes, which is perhaps the point. It's a mild comedy but it is also a moral fable about being oneself and not living up to other's expectations.

Nell (Samaire Armstrong) is a born student with a love for poetry, expected to go to Yale by her snobbish mother. She is perpetually irritated by her next door neighbour, Woody (Kevin Zegers), the school jock and football star. They go through all the motions of the ladylike versus the boor.

And then, hocus pocus, their souls change bodies. Each of them has to learn what it is like, not only to walk in someone else's shoes, but to manage in a body of the opposite sex. Woody then becomes quite prim. Nell slouches and slobes around. Friends are shocked. Parents bewildered. Woody-body has to play in the football final and become Homecoming king. Nell-body has to go for an interview for Yale and discuss poetry. Needless to say...

KABUL EXPRESS

(India, 2006, d. Kabir Khan)

Interesting to see this adventure set in Afghanistan with an Indian audience who chuckled a lot at the dialogue and the references. They really enjoyed it, especially with Indian model and star, John Abraham, hero of several big Bollywood movies, at the centre.

This is India cinema being more serious than usual, though it is interesting to compare how several Iranian directors (especially the Makhmalbaf family films, *Kandahar* and *At Five in the Afternoon*) have made films about recent events in Afghanistan. The Iranians, neighbours to Afghanistan, are very serious with a tradition of documentary and exploring issues in depth

The Indians are also serious but there is a certain light-hearted treatment even in perilous situations. John Abraham and Arshad Warsi are two ingenuous TV journalists who turn up hoping for a story and get more than they bargained for. Encountering the Taliban (it is November 2001), they are dismayed at the violence, bloodshed and repression. When they are abducted by a Taliban Pakistani who wants to go home, they begin a road journey that gives them a more realistic picture of life in the mountains and the desert. They are joined by an American photographer which gives the opportunity for comments about American attitudes, foreign policy and the bombings.

In fact, the politics of the area are explored, the Taliban, the Mujahadin, the war lords, the Pakistanis, the aftermath of the Russians and the Americans.

The location photography is magnificent. Audiences will feel that they have travelled through the country.

The film is ultimately on the side of humanity, reconciliation and peace. The journalists get to know their captor and find that he has a story, that he is not simply a fanatic or an ideologist.

Not as fine-tuned as glossily-crafted as bigger budget films but it offers audiences familiar with the countries and the wars from the media a chance to give more thought to the issues.

NIGHT AT THE MUSEUM

(US, 2006, d. Shawn Levy)

One of the nicest surprises for the end of 2006 and a film to recommend is Night at the Museum. Children of all ages will find something to amuse and entertain – and so will parents.

The museum is the Museum of Natural Sciences in New York. Only the night security guards (Dick Van Dyke, Bill Cobbs and a fiercely feisty tiny 85 year old Mickey Rooney) know that every night all the exhibits come alive. They are being retired and are not too happy about it. They have a devious plan. Their replacement is a desperately out of work father, Larry (Ben Stiller), who wants to relate to his young son who is being brought up by his mother and her new husband.

One of the other difficulties at the museum is that it is managed by Ricky Gervais. He gives a very funny performance as a pompous ass, censorious but who can never find the right word, or any word, to finish his reprimands. On the other hand Carla Gugino is a charming museum guide who is doing her thesis on Sacagawea, the Indian scout who helped the Lewis and Clark expedition.

When you know that the exhibits which come to life include a dinosaur who likes to play catch, a range of African animals, a western panorama alongside one of the Roman Empire, Teddy Roosevelt (played entertainingly by Robin Williams), Attila the Hun and friends as well as some cavemen trying to invent fire, you will know that there is trouble in store.

There is a great deal of humour and gleeful fun to be had, not only in way that the exhibits deal with Larry but with his trying to cope with all the situations, complicated by Jedadiah from the west (Owen Wilson doing his usual performance most entertainingly) and Octavius from Rome (Steve Coogan) perpetually clashing. The special effects are wonderful as are the adventures.

Ben Stiller, who can be quite manic (Dodgeball) as well as the straight man for comedy (Meet the Parents), has to be a bit of both and is very good as the guard and father – we are on his side as he tries to deal with the growing chaos every night. Shawn Levy has directed some broad comedies (The Pink Panther, Cheaper by the Dozen) but with this one he has excelled himself. Recommended light entertainment.

PERFUME: THE STORY OF A MURDERER

(Germany, 2006. d. Tom Tykwer)

Perfume is a skilful adaptation of a celebrated novel by Patrick Suskind who is said to have resisted the idea of making a film of his book – which many considered to be unfilmable. Now director Tom Tykwer (Run, Lola, Run, Princess and the Warrior, Heaven) in collaboration with British writer-director, Andrew Birkin, and German producer Bernd Eichenger have filmed the unfilmable.

One of the reasons for declaring that the novel could not be filmed was that it is about a sense that does not lend itself to cinema (except by means of a gimmick): the sense of smell. However, Tykwer rightly stated that a printed book is not a medium for smell either. The communication is in the writing and its evocations. So, for a film, the evocation is in the images.

Perfume is primarily about smell and touch, much less so about sight and hearing, though they are not, of course, irrelevant to the film. Rather, the evocation of audience imagination is by suggestion through sight and hearing. Film lecturers talk about the camera and 'point of view'. In Perfume, the audience is offered the central character's 'point of scent'.

Before considering how Tykwer communicates this experience of scent and smell on the part of Jean Baptiste, it is necessary to focus on who that character is. It is Paris in the 18th century, the most populated city in Europe, a city which, so the elegant narration (from the prose of the novel) by John Hurt reminds us,

stank. Personal hygiene, urban garbage and pollution, the welcome as well as noisome odours from places like the fish market meant a distinctive and sometimes overwhelming aroma. (The word choice available to suggest this already has its limitations: smell, odour, scent, aroma and, of course, perfume.)

Perfume is what motivates Jean Baptiste, an unwanted baby born under a counter amongst the fish waste as his mother took some minutes off from her work. Growing up in an orphanage, he became more and more aware of his giftedness, his ability to detect and relish a vast variety of odours. After working in a tannery for years during his adolescence, he has the opportunity to come across some tantalising and beautiful odours amongst the rich and Parisian society: perfumes. Perfume becomes the be-all and end-all (literally) of his life.

It can be said, without spoiling the plot, that we know from the opening of the film (where Tykwer immediately limits our vision with darkness and silhouette but focuses on an inhaling nose) that Jean Baptiste has been accused of murder and is to be tortured and executed, to the delight of a crowd baying for blood and vengeance.

Then the flashback to his birth and the narration. The first half of the film then shows how Jean Baptiste impressed an ageing and out-of-date perfume creator and becomes an expert in recipes for perfumes that become the talk of Paris. The old man is played with some relish (and some peculiar variations of broken Italian and American accents) by Dustin Hoffman.

It is in this context that Jean Baptiste, fascinated by a young serving woman wearing a perfume, kills his first victim. He does not want to murder her but to keep her quiet. He strangles her. But, Jean Baptiste has very little moral sense and is not much bothered by what he has done.

The second half of the film has him go to Grasse, a perfume-making town in Provence where fields of lavender and other plants are cultivated. After demonstrating his skills, he is employed there but he has become obsessed with creating the perfect perfume - which are made from the personal odours of beautiful women. Thus, he begins a hidden and solitary career as a serial killer. The culminating victim is to be the beautiful daughter of the lord of the local manor (Alan Rickman).

While he pursues his goals, the audience focuses on a version of an 18th century panic, hysteria, the attempt to cope with a serial killer in a village and the investigation. Finally, there is an execution scene which takes us from reality and goes into the mind and imagination of Jean Baptiste: everybody understands what he has done, asks his pardon and are so influenced by his perfect perfume that they love everyone near them, throw off inhibitions and clothes and indulge in a love-in (which might have made Ken Russell in his heyday rather jealous).

The running time of the film is quite long, almost two and a half hours. For those not drawn into the themes and the pace of the film, it will seem very long indeed and give them time to disapprove and even think the film and its style pretentious. For those attracted and intrigued by theme and treatment, the length will not matter too much as they have entered into another world, into the 18th century settings, into the mind and morbid imagination of Jean Baptiste as well as the fears of the society he has intimidated.

But, most of all, this audience will have been seduced, sometimes subtly, sometimes obviously, by the visual evocation of so many smell experiences, a range of odours from the vile to the exquisite, that are the idiosyncratic experiences of Jean Baptiste. That is the skill of the screenplay, of Tykwer's directing style and the editing and the performance of Ben Wishaw who, with his skinny build and air of being perpetually put upon, has chosen to make his character something of a 'tabula rasa', someone who passively absorbs rather than being proactive (except for his grotesque series of murders and his bizarre methods of using animal fats to absorb the essence of his victims).

Tom Tykwer has every reason to be pleased with and proud of Perfume: the Story of a Murderer.

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPYNESS

(US, 2006, d. Gabriele Muccino)

The title is one of the key phrases in American consciousness. This verbal icon from the Bill of Rights is considered a birthright by all Americans. Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

The spelling in the title here comes from a graffiti statement on the wall of a childcare centre where Chris Gardiner (Will Smith) takes his son (Jaden Smith, Will Smith and Jada Pinkett's son) while he goes out to try to sell the stock of bone density machines he has imprudently bought. The wrong spelling irritates him because he admires Jefferson but wonders whether the intention was to emphasise the pursuit while acknowledging that achieving this happiness might be impossible.

For most of the film's running time, the achievement does seem impossible and the pursuit is so physically, mentally and morally demanding that the temptation to give up seems entirely reasonable.

Chris Gardener, without benefit of college education, has set his sights on becoming a stock broker. He sees himself as good at figures and good with people. And, despite everything, he has a deep-seated confidence in his dream and in himself. And he has an overwhelming love for his son.

The person he is not good with is his wife, Linda (Thandie Newton). Or, he is good, but she can't take the uncertainties, the financial pressures, the hard life. She leaves. Chris then has to pursue his unpaid internship as a broker, trying to sell the bone machines at weekends (with his son tagging along), working less time than his fellow interns because he has to go across town to collect his son and bring him home and feed him.

And then things really start to go wrong! A genial man, Chris is imposed on by the supervisor and by friends. Tax troubles, an overnight stint in gaol for parking ticket non-payments, traffic jams delaying appointments, eviction from home, queuing and struggling to get into night shelters, a night in a railway station men's toilet for father and son.

Audiences feel the pain of father and son, the bewildered five year old who is supportive but who really does not understand, the father who wants only the best for his son and cannot provide the basics.

Yet, the film seems positive at the worst of hazards, primarily because Will Smith is such an engaging screen presence and communicates a positive outlook on life no matter what. Working with his own son, there is a wonderful chemistry between the two that makes what goes on credible and palatable.

The events are based on a true story, set in San Francisco in 1981. Interestingly, it was the year of the popularity of the Rubik Cube – which becomes a symbol of focus and perseverance as well as intelligence as Chris demonstrates he can solve the puzzle, to the amazement of a top broker, who gives Chris a chance to learn the trade.

So, it is, as they say, an inspirational story. With the pursuit of happiness and happiness, the tone is particularly American. It tends to presume that one can pull oneself up by one's bootstraps no matter what. It urges the audience never to lose sight of their dreams and believe in them. It is more than a touch capitalist in its philosophy while focusing on real and heartfelt social difficulties.

The director is an Italian, Gabriele Muccino, who directed *L'Ultimo Bacio*, which was turned into an American vehicle for Zach Braff with the title, *The Last Kiss*. Muccino brings a warmth to the difficult events that makes us want to share them with father and son.

ROCKY BALBOA

(US, 2006, d. Sylvester Stallone)

A surprise. After Rocky first ascended those steps in Philadelphia to Bill Conti's now classic fanfare and theme back in 1976, he now returns to prove that he is still alive, that life is worth living and to exorcise his inner 'beast', his demons, and move to the next, more peaceful, stage of his life journey.

Sylvester Stallone has not been able to let go of Rocky Balboa and, on the evidence of his new screenplay, Rocky has not been able to let go of Stallone. Their lives parallel each other. And one can only wish for great success for this film, released at a time when Sylvester Stallone has reached sixty.

In interviews, Stallone has been very candid about his life and career. He acknowledges the effect of his early successes, especially the Rocky and Rambo series: a man who grew up poor then achieved all that could be desired in terms of career, reputation, marriage, wealth and comfort. But, he admits, it went to his head and he experienced some chaos in his personal life as well as a deterioration of his career. He had to go back to his roots, his Christian roots and rediscover values and authentic meaning for his life.

This is what happens to Rocky Balboa – although his character seems to have made a better fist (and fists) of his life than his creator. Rocky is now grieving the death of Adrian (and Stallone has written quite tenderly of this marriage love and commitment). He runs a successful restaurant, well patronised, where he recounts his tales of the ring to eager customers who also want a photo opportunity. He loves his son who feels that he has been overwhelmed by his father's reputation and lives in his shadow. Paulie is still his close friend.

In his late 50s, Rocky still has the urge to fight another day. TV pundits speculate how he would have fared had he fought a bout with the current world heavyweight champion – and they provide a computer game to illustrate this. A challenge for an exhibition fight is offered. It is a redemptive challenge for Rocky. Is it wishful thinking? Is it his ego? Has he the physical stamina to endure? And so, with great feelings of nostalgia for the Rocky movie fans, the training (adapted to his age and condition) begin again.

After this, the training and bout are very much for boxing fans. Others will look at the punishing fight more as the will of a warrior striving for victory with his talent.

The screenplay, as with the other Rocky movies, is by Stallone himself. This is quite a literate screenplay considering that Rocky himself, unlike the real life Stallone, is rather inarticulate: 'Yo, Paulie!'. And it is not without some humour and pleasant self-mockery. Needless to say, Stallone does justice to the performance.

Burt Young is back as an older and scruffier Paulie. Talia Shire appears in photos and flashbacks to the earlier films as Adrian. The supporting characters this time are Robert Balboa – with some effective scenes between father and son, frankness in resentment and reconciliation. 'Living in my shadow is not an excuse for blaming someone else for underachieving.'

A local woman and her teenage son provide an outlet for Rocky's kindness and warmth and friendship in return.

There are some specific Christian references and images indicating Stallone's own spiritual journey.

RUNNING WITH SCISSORS

(US, 2006, d. Ryan Murphy)

What image does a title like Running with Scissors evoke? Something a bit mad, to say the least.

Which means that it probably is a very good title for this piece of cinema of the absurd.

There has been something of a fringe tradition of eccentric American films which not only highlight the absurdities of the human condition (especially the American variety) but also a tradition of films that take on the absurd in their style and ways of communicating characters and themes. To go back only over the last forty years, one might think of Dr Strangelove, Catch 22 and some of the oddities of the 1970s. In more recent times, Wes Anderson has created a niche for himself in this tradition with Rushmore, The

Royal Tennenbaums (which seems something like a cousin to Running with Scissors) and The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou.

This is a memoir by Augusten Burroughs – who himself appears during the end credits with the actor who portrays him, Joseph Cross. The film begins preciously with his voiceover about his mother leaving him and his leaving his mother. There follows an introduction to his increasingly strange mother, Deidre (Annette Bening), a would-be poet who lives in her dreams of fame and success but whose appreciative audience is her little boy, Augusten, and whose unappreciative audience is her continually frustrated and now alcoholic husband (Alec Baldwin).

Annette Bening gives a tour-de-force performance as the mad and maddening mother, something like an amalgam of some of her impressive roles in American Beauty and Being Julia.

Running with Scissors has touches of the surreal, the oddball, the queer, the satirical, the frustrating – it is like being lost in bonkers.

Where mother and son are lost is in the mad hatter's kind of pink house of Dr Finch, Deidre's psychiatrist – who qualifies as the most likely to be deregistered. The household is somewhat controlled by his haggard wife, Agnes. Dr Finch has a tendency towards incorporating or adopting clients into his household. He has two daughters, the standoffish and almost normal Natalie and the older, repressed disciple, Hope. The audience also spends a lot of time incorporated into this mad household.

What makes the stay so persuasive, even while we feel alienated from what is going on, are the performances. Brian Cox can turn his hand to most roles. He really makes us believe that such a character as Dr Finch could exist. Jill Clayburgh, in a rare screen role, opts out of glamour as Agnes. Evan Rachel Wood is the frequently deadpan Natalie. The surprise is that the supporting role of Hope is well played by Gwyneth Paltrow.

The cast is really very strong, especially with the addition of Joseph Fiennes as another adoptee, a gay schizophrenic who has a relationship with the young Augusten and who is the character who gets the opportunity almost to run with scissors, literally.

The screenplay is an accumulation of memories rather than plot-driven, so one could opt in and out much as Deirdre does and as Augusten does. The effect of the film depends on whether you get caught up with Deirdre or with Augusten – and Joseph Cross tries his best to be independent of them all while really dependent. But he survived to remember and invent this tale from the madhouse.

UNACCOMPANIED MINORS (GROUNDED)

(US, 2006, d. Paul Feig)

The title indicates the target audience (around 12 years of age or so). It also indicates how it should be seen. Parents and grandparents may want to flee the cinema and leave the shenanigans to the unaccompanied minors.

It's a Christmas story – or, rather, like Christmas with the Kranks, Deck the Halls and others – it is, rather, a Christmas tree, decorations, Frosty the snowman, Santa Claus and Christmas presents story. Christmas Eve brings on a blizzard that grounds all planes. In the mayhem of rounding up the children and supervising them, five of them get out and cause problems all over the airport. A lot of the behaviour and humour is brattish, some crass touches and poking its tongue out at adults.

Of course, by Christmas morning they will be little angels, doing nice things for others and discovering friendship and bonds with each other (they all come from divorce homes).

The minors will enjoy it – and the seniors will hope they grow out of it!

ZOOM

(US, 2006, d. Peter Hewitt)

Another comic book hero. This film is for younger audiences, a kind of blend of Spy Kids with the powers of the X Men and their heroes. It is played for some laughs and for some action.

It is also a Tim Allen film. This time he is having a rest from playing Santa Claus. He is Jack Shephard who thirty years earlier had been trained to be a hero, Zoom. However, his brother Connor had gone over to the dark side, so to speak, and was lost in another dimension. Now he is coming back. A martinet general (Rip Torn) and the head scientist (Chevy Chase) are devising way to capture him. What else to do but to re-recruit Jack/Zoom and get him to train some young heroes for combat?

So, that's what happens. A group of children with super powers are auditioned and four chosen and trained with some tongue-in-cheek action and with the help of the resident accident prone psychologist (Courtney Cox).

This is a short-running and cheerful film, undemanding and following in the footsteps of this very popular genre of adventure and special effects shows.

SIGNIS FILM REVIEWS

FEBRUARY 2007

3 NEEDLES

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FREEDOM WRITERS

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LITTLE RED FLOWERS

MISS POTTER

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RETURN, The

SCOOP

SMOKIN' ACES

VENUS

WELCOME TO DONGMAKGOL

3 NEEDLES

(Canada, 2005, d. Thom Fitzgerald)

A film about the spread of AIDS and the social, medical and religious challenges it offers. It is made up of three separate stories (though with a unifying voiceover by Olympia Dukakis) from three quite diverse parts of the world, reminding us of the global culture that cuts across boundaries. The film was written by Thom Fitzgerald, a Canadian director who made *The Hanging Garden*, *Beefcake* and *The Event*. Fitzgerald has a Catholic background which is evident in two of the stories. He also has focused on homosexuality themes and AIDS in other films (especially *The Event* and the issue of assisted dying). In *3 Needles*, the nature of the illness is never named directly as AIDS but is referred to as the virus.

Fitzgerald has given titles to each of the three stories, each with religious implications: *The Patience of the Buddha*, *The Passion of the Christ*, *The Innocence of the Pagans*. Fitzgerald wants to communicate his message via narrative and immerses the audience in the three worlds.

However, the film starts with a prologue in South Africa with an episode that will be background to the third story. A group of young men experience initiation rites in the bush, especially circumcision, before they return to their communities as men (in the context of the AIDS epidemic in Africa).

Lucy Liu is the star of *The Patience of the Buddha*. In southern China, Jin Ping (Liu) operates a blood donor racket, giving simple villagers \$5.00 which can change their lives, help them buy seed and oxen. However, when a whole village is infected with the virus, the authorities have to step in. It is a sad story of poverty and death. Jin Ping is herself pregnant, with a sick husband. Sam, one of the local farmers, has a successful crop – but at what cost.

After the beautiful Asian settings, we are taken to suburbia in Montreal, rather dark, rather drab, for *The Passion of the Christ*. A young porn star argues about condom use or not and the film-makers consider the dangers of infection. The young man's father is on life-support and his son takes his father's blood as substitute for his own tests. His mother does not know what he does for a living. When circumstances change, the loving mother wants to do the best for her son, taking out a huge life insurance policy and wanting to be infected by the virus so that she can die and help her son. Stockard Channing is the mother, Shawn Ashmore the young man. Mel Gibson's Jesus-film was about blood and giving one's life for others, so Fitzgerald has chosen this title for his contemporary Montreal passion.

The third story is more specifically religious, focusing on the situation of the virus in Africa and its effect on old and young, men and women. Three North American nuns arrive to work with the people. The older nun, Sister Hilde (Olympia Dukakis) is in the tradition of the saving of souls and a less ecumenical approach to religion. Sister Mary John (Sandra Oh) is committed and is comfortable with people. The third is a dedicated novice, Sister Clara (Chloe Sevigny), who wants to save the living.

This story is more complex than the other two. It highlights the work of sisters (in a post *Dead Man Walking* era) and contemporary mission work of working with local people. It takes on what one might call a Graham Greene approach to storytelling, introducing moral dilemmas that haunt Greene characters: doing something immoral for a greater good. This is the issue for the novice and is disturbing according to one's own moral stances.

The film ends with Sister Hilde's voiceover. She is talking about holiness, saints, ordinary people doing ordinary things well without hope of canonisation or a feast day – which means many of us may really be saints.

BOBBY

(US, 2006, d. Emilio Estevez)

Bobby was presented at the Venice film festival, 2006, as a work in progress. It was very well received by critics and public alike. This led to some editing and a commercial release of the film – and nominations for awards.

The film is a work of devotion from Emilio Estevez. Estevez was a star in the Brat Pack of the 1980s in such films as *The Breakfast Club* and *St Elmo's Fire*. He moved into direction with films like *Wisdom*, *Men at Work*, *Rated X*. For some years he researched the life of Bobby Kennedy and focused on the day of his death. He was inspired by his political campaigner father, Martin Sheen.

The film is structured as one day at a hotel in Los Angeles, the Ambassador Hotel. This was the place where, in the kitchen, on that night, Bobby Kennedy was assassinated. There are references to the film *Grand Hotel* in the screenplay and the film is a version of a *Grand Hotel* of the 1960s.

The history of the hotel is explained, the focus on a doorman who had received visitors for forty years (Anthony Hopkins) and other members of the staff (Harry Belafonte). The film has quite a number of subplots interwoven giving an impression of American society in the 1960s. Lindsay Lohan portrays a woman who has promised to marry a young man who has been called up to go to Vietnam so that he will not have to go (Elijah Wood). Two young men (Shia LaBeouf and Brian Gerraty) help as volunteers in the Democrats' campaign but are more interested in scoring some drugs than going out knocking on doors. They encounter a rather way-out, spaced-out, drug dealer (Ashton Kutcher).

In the meantime, Estevez himself portrays the husband and agent of the star singer at the hotel, Demi Moore, and is clashing with her. She spends some time at the hairdresser's. She is played by Sharon Stone in a very strong performance, especially in the scene where she confronts Demi Moore. The beautician is married to the manager of the hotel, played by William H. Macy, who is trying to arrange for the Hispanic members of the staff to vote, against the wishes of his staff manager, Christian Slater. He is also carrying on a hidden affair with a telephonist, Heather Graham. A wealthy couple from New York visit the hotel, Martin Sheen and Helen Hunt.

Laurence Fishburne is the chef at the hotel – and has the opportunity to make a lot of comments about racial attitudes in 1968, the assassination of Martin Luther King, the interactions between black Americans and Hispanics. In the kitchen are Freddie Rodriguez as an ambitious young man who wants to be very much an American in contrast with Jacob Vargas who is critical of the attitudes of whites and blacks. Joshua Jackson is in charge of the campaign.

The film works well in the interactions of the characters as well as the intercutting of the stories.

As regards Bobby Kennedy himself, the prologue indicates the political climate of the 1960s, the role of the Kennedys, the death of Martin Luther King. During the film there are various excerpts from Kennedy's speeches playing on television sets which are watched by the various characters.

The film eventually shows the arrival of Kennedy, the formal dinner in his honour, his speech, his leaving by the kitchen – and his assassination. In the work in progress, a long speech by Kennedy played over the visuals of the characters reacting to the assassination, the confusion, those who were hurt by bullets.

Emilio Estevez has achieved a considerable work in his focus on America, the 60s, and the speculation of how American society would have been different had Bobby Kennedy survived, won the 1968 election instead of Richard Nixon.

BOYTOWN

Australia, 2006, 90 minutes, Colour.

Glenn Robbins, Mick Molloy, Lachy Hulme, Sally Phillips.

Directed by Kevin Carlin)

Here's a how d'ye do. What is this film trying to do? On the one hand, it is a piece of Aussie nostalgia for the Boy Bands of the late 1980s and the 1990s. On the other, it is sending up the bands, the singers, the agents, the public, the songs and their lyrics (in the vein of the corniest country and western songs). This makes it sound like an either/or situation when the answer is probably a both/and.

The screenplay was written by brothers Richard and Mick Malloy and serves as a star vehicle for Mick (after several TV shows and the lawn bowls comedy, *Crackerjack*). It is also a star vehicle for that most durable of comedians (Fast Forward, Kath and Kim), Glenn Robbins. In fact, Robbins holds the film together.

Now happily married (to UK's Sally Phillips), he has a yearning to reunite the band and re-live the glory days, even hoping for records and tours. He rounds up the motley group, one of whom is a lecturer on literature, another works on a building site, another stays at home with his mother and the last is a DJ beyond Woop Woop.

The plot goes according to formula – so we can enjoy following the steps we anticipate. Reluctance follows agreement, visits to the most obnoxious agent (Lachy Hulme) who has perfected the arts of two-timing and exploitation, tours, records, failure, an appeal to a middle-aged women (with songs like, *It's That Time of the Month*, or *Picking up the Kids from School*), mix-ups in the past with strange consequences, feelings of betrayal so that the leader can go solo, truth finally outing and a feeling of achievement and contentment to finish up with.

But, it is still puzzling as to when one should feel nice and nostalgic and when one should be laughing at these silly shenanigans.

CHARLOTTE'S WEB

(US, 2006, d. Gary Winick)

Essayist and grammar expert E.B. White wrote *Stuart Little* in his mid-40s and *Charlotte's Web* in his early 50s. They were published in 1945 and 1952 respectively. It does seem strange for a learned writer like White to have written two of the favourite American children's classics of the 20th century but it reveals an imagination of charm and humorous fantasy: a talking mouse, a talking pig and a wise, talking spider.

There was an animated version of *Charlotte's Web* in the early 1970s with Debbie Reynolds voicing Charlotte. And there have been two very entertaining *Stuart Little* films.

This version of *Charlotte's Web*, like the *Stuart Little* films, has opted for live action with animatronic creatures for the animals and their speech and a range of special effects. This offers a sense of realism – Wilbur really could speak, Charlotte really could get some words from Templeton the rat and weave them into her web.

The voices for the animals are very successful. Julia Roberts may seem a surprise choice for Charlotte but she does very nicely. Dominic Scott Kay makes Wilbur very sympathetic. Steve Buscemi has a right old time enjoying himself as Templeton. The line up for the supporting animals is quite a list, including Robert Redford, Oprah Winfrey, Kathy Bates, Reba McEntyre, Cedric the Entertainer and John Cleese. Andre Benjamin and Thomas Haden Church are funny as two belligerent crows trying to work out who the scarecrow is.

On the human side, Kevin Anderson and Essie Davis are the parents. But the drama depends on the character of Fern, the young daughter who befriends Wilbur. She is played by that most self-assured of child stars, Dakota Fanning. The characters she plays are always determined and confident that they are always right. Which means that she charms some audiences and alienates others (including this reviewer!).

Fans of *Babe* will note how similar the plot outline is, though E.B. White got in first with his nice farm, cuddly pig – but his star is the wise and web-literate, Charlotte A. Cavatica.

Charlotte's Web works quite well as a family entertainment.

LA DOUBLURE (THE VALET)

(France, 2006, d. Francis Veber)

Francis Veber has been writing comedies for over thirty years. Many of them have become classics (La Cage aux Folles, The Tall Blond Man with the One Black Shoe, Le Placard, Tais Toi). Many of them have been remade in the US (Buddy, Buddy, The Birdcage, Three Fugitives). Veber has himself made several films in the US (Partners, Out on a Limb)

La Doublure, which might have had a better English title with The Stand-in, is firmly in the tradition of the comedies he has long been making. There is an odd couple, some farcical situations, some comic lines, some mistaken identities and an underlying critique of hypocrisy.

La Doublure is more than a bit on the light side. What if a very successful businessman who has been deceiving his wealthy wife of twenty years during an affair with a top model for over two years? What if the model was sick of the deception and wanted the businessman to get a divorce? What if the smart corporate lawyer advised the model to move in with a valet nonentity, the Stand-in, to make the wife jealous and ask for the divorce? What if it did not work out at all as planned? There you have it.

Moroccan born comedian and mime, Gad Elmaleh is the slightly forlorn valet, desperately in love with his childhood sweetheart (Virginie Ledoyen) who happens to walk past the secretive couple as a photo is taken for a magazine and finds himself embroiled in the deception. Elmaleh looks fairly nondescript but invests his character with warmth and decency. Alice Taglioni (a Gallic Elle MacPherson lookalike) is also quite charming and genial as the model who goes along with the plot and shows she has a very nice side to her character.

On the other hand, Daniel Auteuil, one of the great French actors who can turn his hand to any role, makes the businessman a monster of selfish rage and manipulation. Kristin Scott Thomas has no trouble in playing his icy and shrewd wife. Richard Berry is the conniving and smooth lawyer.

Many of Veber's comedies are laugh out loud farces. This is, rather, a smiling comedy with a touch of the bitters. Imagining who might star in the US remake highlights how the film works. Suggestions: Michael Douglas knows how to do the Wall St hypocrite and Glenn Close can do icy wives. Why not Elle MacPherson herself with Adrien Brody doing the lovelorn hero, pining after Jennifer Love Hewitt? That should work.

DREAMGIRLS

(US, 2006, d. Bill Condon)

There are not very many movie musicals these days. Chicago was a big hit four years ago. Then there was the screen version of The Producers but not much else. Now there is Dreamgirls.

Dreamgirls has been an unexpected hit with the American public. The music takes us back to the 1960s and 1970s and to an era of political unrest and change, especially for civil rights and African Americans. All this is present in Dreamgirls.

There is the usual disclaimer at the end of the film that characters and events do not refer to any actual person or happenings, that any similarity is coincidental. Well, this time that warning must be taken with a grain of salt. Even the press notes offer some background to the establishment of the Motown company by Berry Gordy and the career of Diana Ross and the Supremes. Of course, it is fictionalised but, at times, only just.

The musical was first staged on Broadway in 1981, in the aftermath of *A Chorus Line*. So, this is a musical about the theatre, about hopefuls who audition for a career, about dreams and nightmares as personalities clash and rivalries take their toll. This familiar scenario always makes for interesting and involving drama.

The setting is Detroit during the Kennedy era. Vietnam is in the offing. Martin Luther King is dreaming his dream. Racial prejudice is rife, but African American musicians and entertainers are making their mark and entering the mainstream. Three young girls sing at a talent quest and an enterprising car salesman invites them to be backup to a popular singer. Stars are born.

The story of the three girls resembles that of the Supremes. One of the demure backup singers, Deena, is eventually chosen to be lead when Effie, the temperamental but forceful front, is fired. Deena (not much of a leap to Diana!) becomes a glamorous star and marries Curtis, the entrepreneur, and lives a life of fame and luxury under the severe control of her husband. Effie has a daughter but years later makes a comeback as a soloist in the Aretha Franklin vein.

The theatre book has been adapted for the screen by Bill Condon (who adapted *Chicago* and directed the striking films, *Gods and Monsters* and *Kinsey*). While it has been opened out, it is still recognisably an adaptation. Like *Chicago*, the songs are the means for establishing characters and motivations. In the way that opera does, the characters speak, communicate in recitatif that moves into music and song, much of which is dialogue singing. It works.

The score reflects the black community's musical heritage, Gospel, rhythm and blues, jazz.

While the focus is on show business, there are enough reminders, especially in the destructive race riots in Detroit where most of the action takes place, of the turmoil of the times. The racism is especially forceful when the star singer, Jimmy Early, is booked in a Miami club and alienates the white audience with his gyrations and perceived provocativeness.

Which leads to a comment on the excellent cast. The standout is newcomer Jennifer Hudson as Effie (who is reported to have lost on TV's *American Idol* – it would be fascinating to see the winner perform). She has a four octave range, a large presence (literally) and can make potent drama with her singing. Popular singer Beyonce Knowles makes the transition from quiet back up singer to Diana Ross star quite credible. Jamie Foxx is the callow Curtis who has no appreciation of art or entertainment. Everything is business, even his wife's career. Surprise casting is Eddie Murphy as Jimmy Early. He is always good for comedy but is persuasive here in the serious situations and does his own singing. He and Jennifer Hudson won most of the awards for Best Supporting Actor and Actress for 2006, though Eddie Murphy missed out on the Oscar.

FLICKA

(US, 2006, d. Michael Mayer)

A favourite book of the early 1940s was Mary O'Hara's *My Friend Flicka*. It soon became a star vehicle for a child refugee from England, Roddy McDowall. More than sixty years on, and updated to a technological age, it is also transformed into a girl-loves-horse drama.

It is set in modern Wyoming (where forty years ago cowboys worked on *Brokeback Mountain*). Here the location photography is attractive, creating an atmosphere for life on a ranch as well as the small town which celebrates with a fair and a rodeo.

Flicka is a mustang, a wild breed of horses that the ranchers resent since they roam freely and devour the grasses for the better breeds. When Katy McLaughlin encounters a clash between Flicka and a mountain lion (seeing Flicka as an image of her untamed self), she knows she has a strong and personal bond with the horse. Her father, a stolid disciplinarian (played by singer Tim McGraw) is steadfastly opposed. Her

vivacious mother (Maria Bello) is more understanding. She is helped by her brother who wants to leave the ranch for college (Australian Ryan Kwanten).

The teenage Katy is played with intensity and verve by Alison Lohman (Flicka was filmed when she was twenty five). Lohman has played children much younger than her age (in *White Oleander*) as well as seductive reporters (Where the Truth Lies) and gives her character some bite.

While we are asked to admire her independent spirit and intuitive sense of how to manage Flicka (even riding in the rodeo's wild horse race), common sense warns us as do the characters that she is too headstrong and stubborn. However, in that indomitable American way, she proves that the determined individual who knows what is best always wins. The trouble is that most of us cannot tell whether a person is gifted or plain foolhardy.

The film is geared to an audience of girls who can identify with Katy. However, the film moves along and has some wonderful vistas of galloping horses every so often to perk us up.

FLYBOYS

(US, 2006, d. Tony Bill)

The World War I flying squad, based in France, and joined by over thirty young Americans before America entered the war, Lafayette Escadrille, has been a popular focus for aerial combat films. Here is a 21st century version, complete with top of the range special effects for the battles. It is probably a plane enthusiasts' dream film.

However, dramatically, it is not the greatest war story ever made. A pity that the very conventional background stories are so ordinary that they detract from the hoped for powerful impact of the film.

A group of young Americans are shown, their background, their reasons for joining up, their arrival in France, their bonding and the difficulties of relating well to the previous veterans. In so many ways, they are the usual suspects. There is the large wealthy young man (with his 100 year old bottle of brandy) who has to prove himself to his father and finds that he is really a racist prig. There is the conventional young man who leaves parents and girlfriend behind and experiences nerves. There is the black boxer who has experienced success in the ring in racially tolerant France. There is the farm boy from Texas who resents the bank's foreclosure on his farm who becomes the leader. He is played by James Franco with his familiar pouty style (which he showed to great advantage when he played James Dean but which needs some variation).

Jean Reno is at hand as the group's instructor. Martin Henderson is the senior flyer who makes life harder for the new recruits.

The screenplay seems to be based on a great deal of accurate detail (including the local lion as mascot).

Inserted is a rather Hemingwayesque doomed romance for Franco which does give some humanity and variation to the action.

Meanwhile, in the air, the battles are deadly in the newly-developed, fragile and flimsy flying machines, with German superiority (and the gentlemanly ace Wolfert) giving a life expectancy of pilots of only three weeks.

A memoir of a war which took place almost a hundred years ago.

THE FOUNTAIN

(US, 2006, d. Darren Aronofsky)

The Fountain is a somewhat esoteric piece of science fiction and imagination. It was written and directed by Darren Aronofsky who also made the tantalising film Pi and the stark drama, Requiem for a Dream.

The Fountain is very ambitious in its scope, covering the past, present and future. The past is focused on an expedition to Mexico in the 16th century and the search for a fountain of life, the battles of the Conquistadors. The present focuses on a scientist, his work with chimpanzees, an attempt to find an elixir, a potion that will ensure eternal youth. In the meantime, his wife, a novelist, is dying of cancer. The future focuses on the same man, in a bubble, floating in space, with a tree and the means of eternal life – but wishing to die and be reunited with his wife.

The main protagonists are played by Hugh Jackman and Rachel Weisz (Aronofsky's wife). Jackman appears as a Conquistador in the past as well the scientist in the present and future. Rachel Weisz portrays the queen in the past and the scientist's wife in the present and the future. Ellen Burstyn (who appeared in Aronofsky's Requiem for a Dream) is a fellow scientist.

The film is particularly intellectual – appealing to the mind rather than to the heart and to the emotions. While emotions are shown, the audience is invited to respond in a somewhat cerebral manner.

Perhaps this is what led to divided critical opinion. While some championed the film as imaginative and adventurous, it was booed and hissed at its screenings at the Venice film festival.

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

(US, 2006, d. Christopher Guest)

Fans of Christopher Guest have looked forward to each of his films over the last ten years. Every three years or so, he comes up with an idiosyncratic and satiric take on some aspect of show and show business. There was his very funny Waiting for Guffman in 1996, a spoof on putting on a musical in a small town (with all the rivalries, egos and complications of Broadway). He followed it with his best, the dog-show comedy, Best in Show (2000). Then it was the music industry in A Mighty Wind (2003). These were all mockumentaries, a genre Guest had worked on originally for This is Spinal Tap (1984), a style that spoofed films, interviews and the lifestyle and workstyle of the targets.

For Your Consideration (that phrase so beloved of the movie industry with its ads for the Academy members to watch possible nominees) has traces of the mock documentary, especially in Fred Willard and Jane Lynch's hilarious send up of the Entertainment Tonight style of interviewers. There is also some good fun in the spoof of the TV film reviewers disagreeing (and, better, agreeing) on air. The sequences of the film within a film, Home for Purim, with its old-fashioned sentiment and idiotic dialogue and poses, are amusing as is the director's (Guest himself) odd attempts to rally his cast.

In fact, there is a whole lot of detail and many lines that are quite funny: Ricky Gervais and Larry Miller as the producing 'suits' who turn the film into Home for Thanksgiving, Michael McKean and Bob Balaban as the beleaguered writers who take themselves terribly seriously, Jennifer Coolidge (always excellent) as the really dumb producer, Eugene Levy (also always excellent) as an agent with adaptable spiels and John Michael Higgins as an over-earnest PR man.

However, For Your Consideration has more of a narrative plotline than usual, a story about the cast of Home for Purim and the effect of an on-line rumour about Oscar possibilities, especially for the ageing star played by Catherine O'Hara. It begins to devour her – and her facelift look in anticipation of the nomination is truly alarming. Harry Shearer has a big role as the lead and Parker Posey and Christopher Moynihan are the young leads – all of whom get caught up in Oscar fever (and also have their time in mock interviews).

But, overall, this is a smiling movie rather than loud laughter (except for Fred Willard and Jane Lynch). It seems somewhat patchy, its zaniness not so inspired as the previous films.

Having said that, it is an amusing film from a director who has set his own bar particularly high. (And Catherine O'Hara's fine comic performance did win her the Best Supporting Actress award from the National Board of Review!)

FREEDOM WRITERS

(US, 2006, d. Richard La Gravenese)

This is a must for educators.

Over the decades, a standard Hollywood interest has been the ups and downs of American education systems. Fifty years ago or more, the challenge of unruly gangs in school and in the classroom were introduced in *Blackboard Jungle* (which, incidentally, used Bill Haley and the Comets' epoch changing song, *Rock Around the Clock*). Forty years ago, Sidney Poitier on this side of the Atlantic, won over his students in *To Sir With Love*. The same year Sandy Dennis had to cope with students in *Up the Down Staircase*.

The film that made a great impact in the 1980s was *Dead Poets Society*. At the same time, Morgan Freeman was a tough school principal in *Lean on Me* and Edward James Olmos taught calculus to Hispanic students in *Stand and Deliver*. In the 1990s there was Michelle Pfeiffer trying to work with *Dangerous Minds*. In recent years there have been Kevin Kline in *The Emperor's Club* and Julia Roberts in *Mona Lisa Smile*. These two were set in the past and looked at elite schools.

It is still worth seeing at these films to appreciate how education has been considered on the big screen.

This is background to *Freedom Writers*, a very welcome addition to the genre. It is based on actual characters and events. (The group appears in a photo in the final credits.)

Erin Gruwell came from affluent Newport Beach, California, and, all smiles, was ready to take on the world and transform the students. While, ultimately, she did, it did not look like that at the start. She asked to teach at the recently integrated Woodrow Wilson High in Long Beach. The students came from all kinds of ethnic backgrounds (with some token white students), all hostile, all experienced in gang and street warfare, all with their angers, bitterness and practical apartheid.

A breakthrough came for Erin Gruwell when a caricature sketch of an African American was passed around the class and, emotionally, she took the opportunity to raise the issue of anti-Semitic prejudice in Hitler's Germany. The class had not heard of the Holocaust.

She then found books that they might read, a story of a gang member and, then, a book that they identified with, *The Diary of Anne Frank*. It was a revelation to them. They visited the Simon Wiesenthal Centre and had dinner with and listened to survivors. They even raised money to bring Miep Gies, the woman who had sheltered the Frank family, to visit and speak with them.

The other thing that Erin Gruwell did was to buy them exercise books and get them to write their diaries (memories, poems, anything) – and they gave her permission to read them. Education led to an awareness of potential, to affirmation and a group cohesion.

Clearly, this is an 'inspirational' film. There are the expected clashes with the traditional teachers, some of whom dislike and despise the students. There are the moments of triumph. But, her work meant sacrifices for Erin Gruwell and the loss of support from her husband who felt that he could not measure up to her energy and achievement.

Now a winner of two Oscars, Hilary Swank has become a strong presence on screen. She really enters into the role of Erin Gruell making her early mistakes credible yet showing that the transition in herself and in the students was possible.

Imelda Staunton (quite unlike Vera Drake) is the teacher who feels threatened, cannot understand these methods and opposes her. Patrick Dempsey is sympathetic as the husband and Scott Glenn is her conservative father who joins in Erin's activities with the students.

The title is a play on words on the Freedom Riders of the 1960s who stood up for civil rights.

GHOSTS

(UK, 2006, d. Nick Broomfield)

Nick Broomfield has been making hard-hitting, insightful and controversial documentaries since the 1970s. They include a range of topics, although they tend to focus on significant personalities. He is probably best known for his films on the serial killer Aileen Wuornos's, but also made documentaries on musicians, Kurt Cobain and Courtney Love, Biggie Smalls and Tupak Shakur. But, he has always been interested in the social dimensions of the cultures in which his subjects lived and has explored South African apartheid twice with Eugene Terre'Blanche.

In the late 1980s he tried his hand at a fiction film, *Diamond Skulls*, about the upper classes in Britain. It was not particularly successful. Now he tries again with *Ghosts*. This time he has been very successful.

Ghosts is what the Chinese illegal immigrants into Britain call the locals, a generic term for the white inhabitants of the British isles, but becoming more derogatory as the migrants experience the harshness of the people and the work, that Britain is not the fulfilment of their dreams.

The starting point of the film is the death of 23 Chinese workers, gathering cockles in Morecombe Bay and caught by the rising tide in February 2004. The prologue shows the beginning of this disaster and comes back to it at the end, highlighting the local hostility to the Chinese which resulted in fights and bashings and led to the Chinese deciding to work at night – and being caught by the tides.

The central character is a young Chinese mother who is persuaded by the plausible spiel of rogue agents that within a few years she will be able to earn enough money to return home. The device of a map for the migrant journey from China shows a group going via some of the old Soviet republics to Russia and then south through eastern Europe across to Calais, hiding by night, walking, crushed in a container crossing the English channel.

While the narrative is always interesting, Broomfield capitalises on his documentary abilities to film in such a way that we feel that we are right there, a naturalistic approach of frame design, camerawork and clear colour photography that looks completely real. The crowded flats, the agency offices, the meatworks, the vegetable gardens, the supermarkets. This makes the story completely authentic.

But, we also see everything from the young woman's point of view, listen to the bully Chinese boss in England through her ears, especially as he proposes alternate work in the sex industry. At times, she prays in despair. At other times she has the consolation of ringing her mother.

Broomfield offers a final challenge to governments. He has no solutions but wants to offer a real picture of the plight of the illegals and their exploitation.

Ghosts can be seen along with a number of recent films about migration, illegals and crime: *Dirty Pretty Things*, *In This World*, *Promised Land*, *And My Name is Justine*, *Separate Parts*.

GRIDIRON GANG

(US, 2006, d. Phil Jouanou)

The title is pretty straightforward. Yes, it is an American football movie. And, yes, it is a film about gangs. And, as with this kind of film, it is based on a true story.

Actually, it is one of those strong motivational films, this time aimed at members of US city gangs (especially African Americans), offering them the possibility of another way of life, some kind of personal affirmation and an experience of achievement. To that extent, interested parties in the audience will be moved by it; uninterested parties will remain uninterested.

The violence inherent in inner city neighbourhoods is highlighted and deplored. Young men with potential succumb to peer pressure, pick up their guns and shoot or are shot. In between is prison. Statistics are given at the opening of the film about how more than 70% of young criminals re-offend.

However, this is the story of a man who works in a prison, is dissatisfied with the punishment meted out and the failures in rehabilitation. He himself has a history of clashing with his father who continually put him down. Now, he is a father-figure to many of the young men with a blend of the strong arm and the encouraging gesture.

He is a football coach. He thinks that if the young men can be trained, recognise their skills, work as a team and play competitively, it cannot be (at least) any worse than the usual styles of imprisonment.

Needless to say, he makes his points, selects a number of recalcitrant types who discover that they are worth something. There are also a number of matches where they show their skills – as well as provide some suspense as to whether they will win the match or not.

The father-figure is played with some authority and with some warmth by Dwayne Johnson, who used to be known by his nickname, The Rock. Johnson can do action (Scorpion King, Doom) as well as comedy (Be Cool, Southland Tales) and is a strong foundation for this inspirational story.

THE ILLUSIONIST

(US, 2006, d. Neal Burger)

Not infrequently, film-makers hook on to an idea for a film – and two get made simultaneously.

This happened recently with the story of Truman Capote and the writing of *In Cold Blood*. Philip Seymour Hoffman won an Oscar for his portrayal of the author in *Capote*. Soon after came Toby Jones with a very strong performance (along with Daniel Craig) in *Infamous*. Now we have two stories about magicians close together (plus Woody Allen as a contemporary magician in *Scoop*). First we saw *The Prestige* with Hugh Jackman and Christian Bale. Now we have *The Illusionist* with Edward Norton.

The Prestige reminded us that there were three parts to the performance of magic. First is *The Pledge*, the setting up of the situation. Then comes *The Turn*, the performance. Finally, there is the illusion itself, *The Prestige*. *The Illusionist* works in exactly that same way.

However, while the former film focused on the rivalry between two magicians in turn of the century England, *The Illusionist* focuses on a rivalry between a renowned magician and the Crown Prince Leopold of the Hapsburg empire in Vienna. This means that the film offers a lavish and beautiful re-creation of the city, its ordinary life, the theatre as well as the imperial palaces.

It also offers a more sinister glimpse into the last years of the Hapsburg dynasty and its increasing paranoia which contributed to the outbreak of World War I. Emperor Franz Joseph lived a long life and had ill fortune with his sons. The story of Mayerling and the suicide of his son Rudolph for love's sake has been a staple of the more romantic tales of Vienna. Wariness of uprisings and coups meant that the police were ever vigilant and agents stalked suspects and reported their findings. No one was exempt. In the film, Sophie, the intended wife of the Crown Prince, is spied on.

The first part of the film suggests three aspects of the pledge for the ultimate illusion: Eisenheim entertains the throngs of Vienna but is under suspicion by the police; flashbacks to his childhood indicate how he became interested in magic as well as his friendship with the aristocratic Sophie; the Crown Prince attends a performance and tells Sophie to go on stage to participate in the act (where Eisenheim and Sophie declare they do not know each other).

The second part is The Turn. Eisenheim performs, encounters the police chief (Paul Giamatti), does an audience for the Crown Prince who feels humiliated and commands the police to close Eisenheim down. In the meantime, Sophie and Eisenheim have begun a liaison and Sophie tells the Prince she will not marry him.

Then comes The Prestige which should not be revealed, of course, in a review. Suffice to say that most audiences will believe what they see before them and not recognise it as an illusion and so be amazed at the outcome.

The Illusionist is the second film written and directed by Neal Burger (the first being a mock documentary about a dying witness to the Kennedy assassination: Interview with the Assassin). He has made a decorous, even stately film which action audiences might find too slow for their taste. But, it is a fine and elegant piece of film-making.

Edward Norton is effective as the calm and seemingly emotionless Eisenheim but also a commanding presence. Paul Giamatti is fine as the police chief who faces challenges of career and conscience. Jessica Biehl is Sophie. A real surprise is Rufus Sewell's excellent playing of the Crown Prince, an embodiment of selfishness, ruthlessness and sadism.

This is a satisfying adult drama.

ILS (THEM)

(France/Romania, 2006, d. David Moreau and Xavier Patud)

A small terror film in the vein of storytelling like Wolf Creek where unsuspecting people, feeling safe in a different environment, are hounded, hunted and killed. ILS is not exactly designed to encourage tourism to Romania!

However, ILS does very effectively what it sets out to do: create an uneasy atmosphere, build up suspense and a mood of fear and heighten it to terror. And all without special effects or gore, which, along with the brief running time, is a big plus in its favour.

There is a typical alarming prologue with a mother and her sullen daughter driving at night, mysteriously crashing – and experiencing even more mysterious ends. Transition to the French school in Bucharest and introduction to a very nice teacher, Clementine (Olivia Bonamy) who drives home to her boyfriend, Lucas (Michael Cohen) and what should be a pleasantly ordinary evening of domestic doings, meals, TV, assignment corrections...

But, after three in the morning, they wake and quite a lot of things go bump and beyond bump in the night. The last third of the film takes place in those late dark hours, the terrorising of the couple in the house by unexplained intruders (or ghosts or what?) with their finally escaping the house and ending up chased through the stormwater drains under the city.

It's certainly eerie and those unused to this kind of terror will find they can identify with the characters and find the film really scary. Those of a more blasé temperament who have seen it all before may still be impressed by how the film-makers have put it all together.

The film announces at the beginning that it is inspired by actual events and a rational, alarmingly rational, explanation is given at the end – which does not diminish the horror of it all.

IRRESISTIBLE

(Australia, 2006, d. Ann Turner)

There are three central characters in this domestic drama (which has a kind of terror film edge as it develops). There is the wife and mother of two, an illustrator, who is married to her husband, a successful architect, who is the object of fascination by one of his secretaries who is also intrigued by the wife. But, it is not easy to say which of these characters is irresistible let alone to whom.

That description is meant to be intriguing. Who are these characters and what are the connections?

First of all, the married couple seem perfectly normal, married for ten years with two nice daughters. Both are more than competent in their jobs. However, the wife has just lost her mother and her grief sends her into depressive moods in which she seems to be imagining things. The husband meanwhile deals honourably with the advances of his secretary. She, however, does not seem to be too worried about feeling guilty.

In fact, there are several secrets which come to light gradually, especially in the explanations of the weird experiences of the wife. The hauntings have a more than very natural explanation.

The setting is Melbourne. The stars are Susan Sarandon as the wife (with an explanation for her American accent), Sam Neill as the husband and Emily Blunt (My Summer of Love, The Devil Wears Prada) as the enigmatic secretary.

Direction is by Ann Turner who has made only a few feature films during the last 18 years: Celia, Hammers over the Anvil (which starred Charlotte Rampling and Russell Crowe) and Dallas Doll. As the film veers towards the madness and violence ending, secrets are revealed – especially with one final unexpected twist that has shock emotional impact.

KENNY

(Australia, 2006, d. Clayton Jacobson)

Kenny is an ordinary, decent Ocker (that's a popular Australian term for an Aussie for those not in the know).

One of the pleasant pastimes of the last twenty years has been speculating on the 'typical' Australian, at least the typical Australian male. One of the main icons of this typical type was Crocodile Dundee. Because in those days Paul Hogan was the smiling television entertainer who used to work on Sydney Harbour Bridge and who could confidentially advise his admiring audience, 'Anyhow..., have a Winfield', people liked him. And when he surprised them in creating Mick Dundee, the genial man of the Outback, who could spin a yarn locally let alone in New York where he could say to would-be muggers, 'Now that's a knife...', he seemed to fit the bill.

The admiration for the late Steve Irwin – and the many eulogies at his untimely death – highlighted how we rather take to people with Crocodile in their name or title. Crikey, he was a national hero.

But how many of us have ever seen a crocodile in real life, in the Northern Territory or Queensland – which question gives this reviewer the possibility of a minor boast and declaring, yes, he has seen a number of crocodiles while being rowed along the Daly River (thank goodness they were small and mostly on the banks!).

This afternoon I was switching channels and lo and behold there was The Castle as the Sunday matinee movie. Now Michael Caton's Dad seems to be a fine candidate for the typical Australian male. He was genial, kind and worldly-wise in a nice kind of way, very affirming of people. I watched the bit where Dad

goes to court and the judge asks him for his argument as to why he should be moved out of his house. Righteously upset but ruffled, he urges that they just can't. 'That's my argument.'

So what now?

As Kenny might well ask, how many of us go to the toilet every day – even, how often do we go during the day? Kenny reminds us that he will never be out of a job and every major public event needs its porta-loos and plenty of them, so as one of the regular employed because of our regularity, Kenny is a solid nomination for a male icon of the 'typical' Australian male. We can identify with him one way or another.

These meagre attempts at a little toilet innuendo are quite mild when we listen, with ever broadening smiles, to Kenny's down-to-earth comments and jokes. Kenny offers toilet humour which is really quite sanitary.

His film, a self-subsidised venture of the Jacobson family, with Shane Jacobson as Kenny and co-writer, with his actor-director brother, Clayton, directing and with Ron Jacobson as Dad. And they ended up with all kinds of nominations for the Australian Film Institute awards, the Australian Film Critics' awards and they went on to win best actor and best original screenplay.

One journalist summing up the films of 2006 referred to him as 'our beloved Kenny'!

Speaking of screenplay, some of the humour seemed so funny I jotted some of it down. Maybe that will provide a clue for the typical Australian male and his type.

Samples – best to start with the often quoted one: there's a smell in there that will outlast religion.

Some more:

Dad's emotional account had two cents in it.

I'll give 150% to God when introduces himself but now I'm pretty busy.

On the plane toilet flushing: Suck yer guts out through yer bum.

On the plane: I wonder what the fine is for not wearing yer seatbelt. It's \$150.00 for a car so it must be thousands.

There's lots of money in crap. To be honest, there's a shitload. [The computer spelling and grammar check has just told me that it does not recognise this last word and suggests, 'shipload'. No, stet!]

The US: Land of bloody flags and anthems.

Commenting on the size of American meals: They must give their toilets here a flogging.

No, he's as serious as a heart attack.

Makes about as much sense as a nun at a rock concert.

For our family, it's Christmas cards at twenty paces.

The format of Kenny is mockumentary (in The Spinal Tap and Christopher Guest vein of Best in Show) as we follow Kenny around on the job – and, in close-up, he really confides in us. We feel he is really our friend. We are irritated with his obtuse co-workers with him, puzzled by his cantankerous father and disdainful brother, worried about his rather harridan-like ex-wife and hopeful for his son. We are charmed as is the flight attendant and supportive of Kenny with the Japanese businessman – and delighted when he gets a sale. It is a pleasure going on his conducted tour of the toilet industry expo in Nashville (his words of admiration are in the tradition of The Castle's Dad). Camping with his ailing father and contemplating the sunset, we like Kenny.

So, here is the average, hard-working, long-suffering but humorous, ordinary, decent (very decent in fact), respectful bloke who has found a place in life, appreciates it and is satisfied, not envious and not wanting to put anyone down.

Actually, that makes him sound like a bit of a saint. And why not? We need secular saints.

And what type is he?

Kenny is quite outgoing socially and at work but not extravert off the page.
Kenny is down to earth and detailed with humour, right here and now.
Kenny can look reality straight in the eye with a homespun logic and solid principles, but agreeably so.
Kenny gets the job done but can let people be.

There's a great theoretical yearning at times for the typical Australian male to be a bit of a 'She'll be right, mate'. But, when all's said and done, Australian's do like to get things done. That too is, she'll be right, mate.

It is difficult to gauge how well Kenny will travel. It will depend on senses of humour and familiarity with the Australian language (and how to translate that for sub-titles). But, for a toilet movie, it is delightful.

THE LAST KING OF SCOTLAND

(UK, 2006, d. Kevin Macdonald)

So far, Forest Whitaker has won all the Best Actor awards for his performance as Idi Amin. It is quite an impressive feat of impersonation and acting.

How much Idi Amin is in the consciousness of those who were not alive during his brutal leadership of Uganda is an interesting question. He is one of the tyrants of the 1970s who did not die until the 1990s, in exile in Saudi Arabia. He came up through the army, serving in Kenya during the Mau Mau era and then succeeded President Obote who was ousted for corruption in the early 1970s in a military coup. Amin was popular for a time but became almost a caricature of those local generals who get into power which goes to their head and they assume a luxury lifestyle (usually American) while brutalising the population and eliminating their enemies. Amin's toll was hundreds of thousands.

And the Scottish thing? Amin admired the Scots and their attitudes towards the English – and had two sons to whom he gave Scottish names. He also liked to wear a kilt.

The Last King of Scotland was written by Jeremy Brock (Mrs Brown, Charlotte Gray) and the award-winning Peter Morgan (The Deal, The Queen, Longford, Frost Nixon) and directed by Kevin Macdonald, better known as a documentary maker with One Day in September (Oscar, Best Documentary, 2000) and Touching the Void. Filming in Uganda and re-creating the 70s, he uses his documentarist's eye to capture the mood of the era.

One of the objections made to a number of films made by western directors on Africa (Hotel Rwanda, Shooting Dogs, Cry Freedom) is that they focus on a white character which they feel gives something of an unbalanced view of events. Maybe. This is a bit like Alain Delon's outburst at Sophia Coppola, that only the French could make a film on Marie Antoinette. Obviously, an inside view brings its own heritage, history and insights. But an outsider, especially one who is trying to communicate to the outsider audience, will bring different insights worth considering.

The screenwriters here have invented a Scots character with whom the audience enters Uganda and encounters Amin. He is a young Scottish doctor recently graduated who escapes his dominating father by going to Africa. He has some good intentions but is basically out for a good time and some adventure, not the most noble of medicos to go to Africa. While working on a medical mission (with Gillian Armstrong as the wife of a doctor), he is caught up in the enthusiasm for Amin, accidentally has to treat him as a doctor, makes an impression and is summoned to Kampala, along with enticements for a very comfortable life plus perks and a position of influence with Amin.

He is played by the up-and-coming James McAvoy (Narnia, Starter for Ten),

Interestingly, we don't see a lot of Amin's abuses on screen, though enough to horrify and disgust – a bit like the doctor who tends to avoid seeing and knowing about what is unpleasant. He does not have a strong

moral sense and has an affair with one of Amin's wives. Gradually, he becomes suspicious, then disillusioned, feeling some blood guilt for reporting gossip to Amin which leads to executions. Finally, he is offered a chance to redeem himself on the occasion of the hijacking of the plane landing at Entebbe in 1976. But, it is emotionally and morally disconcerting to be asked to side, even partially, with a lopsided hero.

Familiar outline in many ways. The power of the film is in the audience identifying with the weak Scot, discovering more and more of the truth about Amin as well as experiencing the commanding presence of Whitaker. There are glimpses of the real Amin in the final credits.

LAST TRAIN TO FREO

(Australia, 2006, d. Jeremy Sims)

Last Train to Freo is a surprisingly impressive film. However, potential audiences need to be warned that it is quite tough going. Playwright Reg Cribb has adapted his theatre work for the screen. However, he has retained the single set and much of the dialogue. While the film does indicate its stage origins, the editing and pace make it much more cinematic than might be expected.

Freo is the Aussie abbreviation for the coastal city of Fremantle, out from Perth. The last train goes through the suburbs of Perth, through central Perth to the coast. This particular night, the guards are on strike and there are very few passengers. The set is the single train carriage – which can feel a bit claustrophobic but director and editor have made sure there is such a variety of shots, close-ups and medium shots so it is as if the camera is doing our focus for us as we change our glance from one character to another.

The principal characters are two former prisoners, one middle-aged with a loud mouth and tough attitude. The other is a young drug addict, emotionally dependent on the older man. They horse around, interact with banter (which is sometimes vicious) and wait for whoever comes into the carriage. Steve Le Marquand (listed as The Tall Thug) received a well-deserved nomination for Australian Film Institute Best Actor for 2006. Tom Budge is effective as the young Trevor.

The first passenger is a young woman, Lisa (Gigi Edgely) who gets the expected treatment, the taunts, the sexist remarks, the flirting, the menace. Next comes a quiet man who sits at the back and seems to be taking notes. Then an older woman arrives with suitcases. She has left her drunken husband. She stands up for Lisa, gets told off and sits and waits.

At first this is not entirely gripping and one wonders what the film is about and (besides Freo) where it is going.

Then tables turn, surprising revelations emerge and all the characters are powerfully involved in emotional, verbal and physical interactions.

The acting is exemplary. The dialogue, very salty (to use a euphemism). The revelation of character well worth the experience. Actor Jeremy Sims has done fine work in transferring this play to the screen.

LETTERS FROM IWO JIMA

(US, 2006, d. Clint Eastwood)

Letters from Iwo Jima has been nominated for the Best Picture Oscar and Clint Eastwood has been nominated for Best Director. It is an extraordinary film both in conception and execution. It is, as a website commentator remarked, a film that the Japanese should have made.

Steven Spielberg had bought the rights to the American story of the raising of the American flag on the peak at Iwo Jima in February 1945, Flags of our Fathers. Clint Eastwood showed interest in the project and

made a compelling film that was also a strong competitor for Best Film of 2006. Not only did it portray the battle for Iwo Jima, it re-created the two episodes of the flag-raising and the celebrated photograph and spent a great deal of its running time telling the story of the three young soldiers who travelled the US in a showbiz like morale boosting tour, especially for bond raising because of the near bankruptcy the war effort cost.

Interesting to note that the flag atop Iwo Jima is glimpsed only momentarily in the second film and only at a great distance.

Letters from Iwo Jima was written by Iris Yamashita using a book of actual letters by General Kuribayashi, Picture Letters from Commander in Chief, to underpin the narrative which shows the Japanese troops preparing for the American invasion, their practical abandonment by the Japanese high command after the destruction of the Japanese fleet off the Marianas, the incessant pounding of the bombardment, the mounting defeat and final attack. Apart from a prologue and epilogue set in 2004 when excavators find a chest of documents in the caves on the island, as well as some brief flashbacks to the lives of several of the central characters, the main action of the film is straight narrative of the attack and counterattack.

For western audiences, this is an invitation to look below the surface of battle and beyond the ideology of the governments responsible for sending thousands of men to fight for them. Each side speaks of the nobility of fighting for country. Each side prays to its God. The Americans are seen as quite pragmatic. The Japanese seem to have a fierce sense of duty – and believe strongly in honourable suicide in defeat.

In fact, Clint Eastwood, with his two films, is offering an inspiration for mutual understanding and for reconciliation.

Towards the end of the battle, the Japanese capture an American. The commanding officer, who had been a member of the equestrian team at the Los Angeles Olympics, talks with him and reads a quotation from the boy's mother's letter: 'Do what is right because it is right'. One of the Japanese soldiers acknowledges that he had never met an American, had been taught that they were all savages but that the mother's advice to her son is exactly the same as his mother had given him. And the officer, before he kills himself, repeats 'doing the right thing because it is right'.

The commander on Iwo Jima is presented as a civilised man, abhorring some of his men's cruel behaviour, remembering the happy times he had experienced when in the United States. The screenplay enables us to follow his strategies and tactics even as overwhelming defeat is looming.

There are moments of equal brutality by each side, the Japanese angrily bayoneting a soldier who had wielded a flamethrower at them, an American left in charge of two surrendering soldiers simply shooting them because he can't be bothered staying to guard them.

It is over sixty years since these events. In those days, the war issues were fairly clear cut compared with current wars. Clint Eastwood has done us a great service in portraying the past to help us think more deeply about the present.

LITTLE RED FLOWERS

(China, 2006, d. Zhang Yuan)

This is a strange experience. Introduced to a small boy who is being left at a child-care centre by a father who travels extensively, we enter an institution with him and find ourselves, like him, interned in a strict and regimented daily routine – with a rather large group of little boys and girls, all of whom, it seems, have been abandoned to this centre.

We spend an hour and a half learning more about this kind of Chinese education system than we ever needed to know, about eating, about games, lots about toilet training and what seems to western eyes a

great deal of intrusive attitudes towards the children and their hygiene. So, if that is what the director wanted, he has succeeded too well.

The children seem very real indeed, especially the little boy who starts by crying incessantly, who gradually adapts to the regime, then becomes rather mischievous, especially in creating and spreading a fantasy that the lady-in-charge, wants to eat them and is a monster. It is easy to see how five year olds in this situation, with a severe principal but with kindly assistants, could get these misapprehensions into their heads.

The film is in the detail, so meticulously presented that we really feel we have been there. The film is also demanding emotionally as we might imagine ourselves in such situations, or our children, and wonder what long-term effects this kind of training and living might produce for good or for ill.

The little red flowers of the title refer to what used to be a star system whereby the child could win stars, now little red flowers, by behaving well – though here they can be taken away for bad behaviour – which makes us realise that a child could become dependent on them.

Best seen with a child welfare worker or teacher so that we can test out our reactions to the children, their plight and their behaviour.

MISS POTTER

(UK, 2006, d. Chris Noonan)

This really is a film of sweetness and light – which only an ingrained grump (and it seems there are many) could dislike.

Beatrix Potter first published her tales of Peter Rabbit, Jemima Puddleduck, Jeremy Fisher and other animal friends in 1902. Despite the publishing company's reservations, they proved enormously popular and have taken their place as the most successful children's books. Not only were the stories hers but also the illustrations.

Australian director, Chris Noonan (who directed Babe) has a gentle sensibility which enables him to interpret Richard Maltby Jr's screenplay in a style that resembles the illustrations of Beatrix Potter as well as the old-world gentility of Edwardian England and its manners while indicating that beneath the elegant surfaces there were angers and tensions. This was a period of expected gentility in the upper and middle classes. It was also an era of unbearable snobbery, especially in the nouveau riche families who had forgotten their more down-to-earth origins and the sources of their wealth. Miss Potter does not shirk these realities while still portraying the elegantly restrained and sometimes repressive surfaces.

Beatrix was a vivacious and precocious child in her imagination, her storytelling and her drawings. She grew up hemmed in by society expectations for an unmarried woman, being required to live at home with her parents who were on the lookout for a suitor, any suitor. Her father was affirming of his daughter though generally able to avoid too much responsibility in the house. This was left to his corseted and coiffed gorgon of a wife who was the embodiment of class arrogance.

This comes to a head when Beatrix publishes and mixes with 'trade' (the book company managers and the printers). It gets worse when she wants to marry 'trade' – and even her father lets her down.

'Trade' is in the form of the youngest brother of the Warne publishing company owners, Norman, an earnest fellow whose first book assignment is the potential failure, Beatrix's tales. Beatrix is delighted with the book and also with Norman. And, observing the utmost propriety (Beatrix is accompanied everywhere by an unsmiling chaperone), they fall in love.

If you don't know what happened to them, you need to see the film.

Renee Zellweger returns to the UK where she made a great hit in the two Bridget Jones's Diary films. Hers is a somewhat mannered performance but she makes the mannerisms those of Beatrix. She is more than a little fey as she talks to the animals (and some restrained animation throughout lets them gesture in return – the came alive in the ballet film of 1971, *The Tales of Beatrix Potter*, with choreography by Frederick Ashton). The animals have always been her friends, and are more reliable than adults. But, through the performance, we feel we have got to know and understand Beatrix.

Ewan McGregor couldn't be nicer as Norman Warne. He is polite, admires the drawings and the stories, delights in meeting Beatrix and falls in love with her. Emily Watson is charmingly eccentric as Millie Warne who becomes Beatrix's good friend.

Something should be said about Barbara Flynn's unnerving performance as Helen Potter. She really is monstrously insensitive to her daughter on the ordinary human level as well as not appreciating her work. Bill Paterson is good as her father.

Obviously, Miss Potter is not going to set the world on fire. But the film prettily recreates a period from which both *Wonderland* and *Neverland* emerged as well as the gentle woods where Peter Rabbit dwelt with his nicely pastel-coloured friends.

NOTES ON A SCANDAL

(UK, 2006, d. Richard Eyre)

The twenty words or less review is quite easy. Fine performances. Incisive script. Emotional and moral insights into serious issues. Sometimes obtrusive score. Effective photography and direction.

Some necessary expansion. We are used to a rather regal Judi Dench, whether it be Queens Elizabeth or Victoria, whether it be M or Mrs Henderson. Here she plays superbly against type (which was getting a touch harridan-pompous as Lady Catherine de Burgh and Lady Bracknell). She is Barbara Covet, an ageing, unmarried teacher at a run-down London school who describes herself as a battleaxe. She writes a diary (the 'notes' of the title). Living alone, though devoted to her cat, she is isolated but in need of affection. She talks to herself in her notes.

We are used to Cate Blanchett being different in every film. The same here. She is Sheba Hart, a hopeful art teacher, married to an older husband (a wonderfully sympathetic performance from Bill Nighy with no characteristic tics), with two children, the younger a jovial boy with Downes' Syndrome.

Barbara is always acerbic, often acidic, observes Sheba with disdain but then decides that Sheba will be her friend. Information about the film probably ensures that audiences know beforehand that Sheba begins a relationship with a fifteen year old student. This has a powerful effect on Barbara with potential for good and power for devastating evil.

The two fine actresses work so well together, especially as Barbara controls Sheba and Sheba, not realising she is being controlled, confides in Barbara as a friend and then confesses to her as a wise and understanding guide.

As might be expected, the film builds up to a highly emotional climax, admirably shown in what seems a straightforward scene where Barbara's cat is to be put down and she wants Sheba to accompany her while Sheba must go to her son's school play. The tension is palpable.

Both actresses were Oscar-nominated.

Playwright Patrick Marber (*Closer*) has adapted Zoe Heller's Booker-nominated novel (also Oscar nominated). There is one too quick plot development involving a waste paper basket that is, perhaps, too easy. And to have reporters and paparazzi camped outside Barbara's house for some weeks is not credible. Philip Glass's effective score (another Oscar nomination) is sometimes too loud and obvious.

It is the moral issues of the relationship between teacher and pupil, the pupil being under age, that are quite straightforwardly handled in terms of ethics and the consequences of such behaviour and its criminal aspects. However, it is the emotional context of the wilful woman lacking in self-confidence and the boy who is curious (with consequent seductive attitudes) that enable us to appreciate just how such situations actually occur.

Thoughtful and involving adult drama and concerns.

THE RETURN

(US, 2006, d. Asif Kapai)

A modest ghost story with minimal violence and very few effects. Nevertheless, it works well, more as a psychological drama. The direction is by British born AIF Kapai whose first feature was the striking Indian-set, *The Warrior*.

The setting is Texas, a rather unflattering Texas with dreary open stretches of landscape, with enormous factories, dingy hotels and bars and a mysterious house and barn.

The story opens with a little girl who has been in an accident. She is at a fair with her father (Sam Shepard) when she is suddenly terrified and hides from a strange man who seems to appear to her. Move to the present and the little girl is now Sarah Michelle Gellar, a more than competent executive who takes on a job that returns her to Texas to overcome her fears and try to find her real identity.

In fact, she is Joanna. But, she keeps having blackouts and visions. She seems to be trying to understand some events in a bar that recur in her imagination. Arriving in Texas brings on more visions and a need to return to a town which appears in her childhood drawings. She also sees a vision of a strange woman in her mirror.

You will probably work out what is happening to Joanna before she does, but that makes it all the more interesting. What will she do when she discovers what has happened to her, when she discovers the mystery of the strange woman as well as the laconic stranger (Peter O'Brien) she has glimpsed in her visions and who turns out to be real?

There are lots of disparate pieces but, eventually, Joanna and the audience put them together and the ending makes sense in a ghostly truth-and-vengeance kind of way.

SCOOP

(UK, 2006, d. Woody Allen)

It was Evelyn Waugh who wrote the celebrated satire on journalism, *Scoop*. But, this is not a film version of Waugh's novel, even though some of the characters here could well have populated it. This is a Woody Allen creation and it is said that he wrote it especially for Scarlett Johansson who had so impressed him when he made *Match Point* with her.

She is a student journalist over from the US and staying in London. She gets the chance to land a scoop – the trouble is that the information comes from the ghost of a dead journalist (Ian McShane) who received some important information from one of his fellow dead (on what looks like a dark boat ride with the Grim Reaper on the Styx). He feels an affinity for Sondra (Johansson) and appears to her in the middle of a trick on a London stage performed by eccentric prestidigitateur, Sidney (Woody Allen). He keeps returning to urge on the investigation into a wealthy son of an aristocrat, Peter Lyman (Hugh Jackman) who may have committed a series of killings, the Tarot Card Murders.

Sondra does a bit of amateur sleuthing, pretending that Sidney is her father – and Woody Allen has a high old time pretending to be nouveau riche American while still eager to show his card tricks to the nobs. Peter Lyman is charming. Sondra falls for him. Did he or didn't he?

Woody Allen knows how to do comedy but his plotting for a serial killer mystery is not too expert. Nevertheless, it is a soufflé of a comedy drama with the cast enjoying their characterisations and the opportunity to enunciate some Allen one-liners.

This is Woody Allen's second British film and, while there are some satirical moments, his screenplay seems to be in some awe and reverence for the 'upper classes' and their lifestyle. Only an American...

After less than memorable turns in *The Prestige* and *The Black Dahlia*, Scarlett Johansson reminds us that she can act. Hugh Jackman has no trouble in being debonair.

This is a moderate helping rather than a scoop.

SMOKIN' ACES

(US, 2006. d. Joe Carnahan)

Mess, mayhem and mystery.

There is a card motif running through this post-Tarantino crime caper and Aces is the nickname of the Las Vegas magician who is the target of Mafia, assorted contract killers, bail bondsmen and the FBI. Aces is forever looking at his cards and tricks to interpret what he will do next. He is always pulling aces – except that he often pulls the Joker and, ultimately, the jokes of fate are on him.

In the early 90s there was *Reservoir Dogs*, then *Pulp Fiction*, then any number of similar kinds of thriller like *Things to Do in Denver When You're Dead*. This rather late entry into the field is something like a *Things They Do in Tahoe to Make You Dead*.

It's a complicated plot on the surface, although the main clue to the mystery is given fairly early and fairly obviously.

The dialogue is that black, ironic kind of commentary on crime, life, death and the fickle finger of fate. The characters are larger than life ciphers, representing all kinds of criminal types and investigating types. The action and language are loud and obvious. The body count, especially of some of the leading characters, is on the high side.

So, the last, dying Mafia chief sets killers on to the magician. He is under protection as a federal witness but he has to be collected by the bondsmen and handed over to the FBI who are also in on the act. Everybody seems to eavesdrop, so four groups of killers decide they want to do the hit. As they converge on the hotel in Tahoe, there is a lot of mess and mayhem.

Ryan Reynolds has the opportunity of a better role than his witless and crass comedies (*Van Wilder*, *Waiting*) as an FBI agent. Ray Liotta is his partner and Andy Garcia his boss. The bondsmen are more than a bit inept and are played by Ben Affleck, Peter Berg and Martin Henderson. In the meantime, there is a vicious Neo Nazi kamikaze-like group of assassins, a black female couple, a master of disguise and a torture expert all converging on Aces (Jeremy Piven). Joel Edgerton has a different role as a dumb European bodyguard who is killed and a mask made of his face to disguise a killer so that Edgerton plays both characters.

Director Joe Carnahan (Narc) gave notice of his interests with his first film title: *Blood, Guts, Bullets and Octane*.

It's all smartly done with some panache – but it's an ugly and violent world.

ZWARTBOEK (BLACK BOOK)

(Holland, 2006, d. Paul Verhoeven)

Director Paul Verhoeven made his name in his native Holland with such films as *Turks Fruit*, *Spetters*, *The Fourth Man*. He then went to the United States in the 1980s and made a number of significant films – in a rather in-your-face Dutch style: *RoboCop*, *Total Recall*, *Basic Instinct*, *Showgirls*, *Star Troupers*. He has now returned to his country to make this memoir of Dutch participation in World War Two.

While the film is very reminiscent of the big-budget war memoir and action films of the 1960s (*Operation Crossbow*, *The Dirty Dozen*), it is reminiscent also of the tribute films made in the 1950s. MGM's *Betrayed* (1954) with Clark Gable, Lana Turner and Victor Mature is very similar in its plot outline.

The film begins and ends on an Israeli kibbutz in 1956, also giving some insight into the consequences of World War Two and Hitler's treatment of the Jews. The kibbutz has been set up with moneys confiscated by the Nazis from Jews. However, the film goes back in time to focus on a young woman who is being hidden by a Catholic family when their house is destroyed and she discovers that her parents are on a boat to be taken to freedom. She joins them – but Dutch traitors have sold out and the Jews are murdered and their goods confiscated. She joins the Dutch Resistance.

The film is also a portrait of the Dutch Resistance, the relentless leaders, the raids, the dangers experienced. The young woman, using her wits very quickly on a train, is able then to infiltrate Gestapo headquarters, have a relationship with the chief. This leads her to be able to plant a microphone in the office. However, there is a traitor amongst the Resistance and the plans go awry. With some detective work, especially after the end of the war, the traitors are revealed. There are some very powerful sequences at the end where the young woman, branded as a traitor herself, is humiliated by angry Dutch citizens and officials after the war.

The film does not paint a black and white picture of Dutch participation in the war – some people are heroic, others are traitors and greedy for their own gain, not scrupulous in betraying their fellow Dutch and, especially, Jewish citizens.

While Paul Verhoeven evokes memories of past films, his own franker style of film-making means that some of the sexual implications of the stories as well as scenes of violence are much more explicit in this film.

Carice van Houten shows great versatility in the central role. Sebastian Koch is a more sympathetic Gestapo leader. Thom Hoffmann (who had appeared in Verhoeven's *The Fourth Man*) is a resistance leader.

The film always keeps the interest, is an example of the work of somebody who is able to help a nation examine its conscience and look again at the history of the past without romanticising it – or, while romanticising it, look at some of the realities and the darker side as well.

VENUS

(UK, 2006, d. Roger Michell)

The poster for *Venus* shows a reclining nude in classical pose swigging a bottle of beer. That gives something of an indication of what this film is about. The screenplay is written by British novelist, Hanif Kureishi, who has written a number of films over more than twenty years, including *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Sammi and Rosie Get Laid*, *London Kills Me*, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, *Intimacy* and *The Mother*. It has been noted that Kureishi is interested in unusual and offbeat relationships.

Which, with the poster, is a useful way of reviewing *Venus*. The unusual relationship here is between an ageing actor in his seventies and a naïve young twenty something who has come up to London from the country looking for a job. In the meantime she is caring for her uncle, another ageing actor. While the presentation of the relationship indicates the sexual implications, it is very reticent in its plot line and visuals. Where it goes overboard (and potentially alienating some of the older audiences for whom the film was made) is in its too-frequent four letter dialogue which draws attention to itself rather than enhancing plot or characters.

Despite that objection, *Venus* has a lot going for it. It is something like a contemporary version of *Pygmalion* as the actor tries to develop the character, culture and self-confidence of the girl. She is played by theatre actress Jodie Whittaker in her screen debut. This is one of those auspicious debuts since she is completely convincing in her naivety, her general insensitivity (symbolised by her quaffing beers and being unaware of who wrote lines from *Macbeth*) as well as the gradual (and partial) transformation.

The star of the show is the actor, one of those perfect roles for Peter O'Toole. If this were to be his acting swansong, he could go out happy. He uses all his familiar mannerisms as well as his deliberate delivery of lines. Since he portrays an actor, this fits. But he brings an intelligence to his role of a self-centred, philandering thespian who never quite made the headlines, so that his attitude towards the girl, whom he nicknames *Venus* as he tries to instruct her about art and his behaviour, remains interestingly challenging. There is a great deal of pathos in the performance as O'Toole does look weather-beaten and his character is quite unwell.

The surprise of the film is the performance of Leslie Phillips as the uncle. Phillips is familiar from decades of movie roles as a debonair rogue. This is the debonair rogue in old age, now a hypochondriac, yet relying on his theatre memories and his friendships – but unable to stand the young girl who is looking after him (in a slapdash way). Phillips is very good indeed. In the supporting cast are Vanessa Redgrave and Richard Griffiths.

Direction is by Roger Michell who had made Kurosawa's *Buddha of Suburbia* and *The Mother* and who has made a variety of films including *Persuasion*, *Titanic Town*, *Notting Hill* and *Changing Lanes*.

WELCOME TO DONGMAKGOL

(Korea, 2005, d. Kwang-Hyun Park)

A big-budget Korean war film that is strongly anti-war. It combines realism (especially in the combat sequences and the troops stranded in the mountains trying to survive) with touches of the fey and magic realism. This latter is evident right from the start, a focus on a mentally simple village girl and hosts of butterflies or moths (who reappear at crucial times to protect the villagers).

The setting is the Korean War just at the time the Americans become involved. They appear in takeover style and take a rather ruthless stand (which seemed the big thing in its day but, with citizen deaths in collateral damage, with the abuse of Iraqi prisoners and the experiences of Guantanamo Bay, audiences these days will be much more wary).

However, the point of the film is that underlying the ideologies that soldiers fight for there is a common humanity which is the basis for peace. Like *Hell in the Pacific* decades ago, where an American and a Japanese find themselves stranded together on an island and they have to forget their war in order to collaborate and survive; like *Joyeux Noel*, that picture of German, French and Scots troops laying down arms and joining together to celebrate Christmas 1914 in the trenches, *Welcome to Dongmakgol* highlights some of the futilities of war and urges peace.

Dongmakgol is an isolated village in the mountains where genial villagers live in harmony. For those who have seen James Clavel's *The Last Valley* (1971), there is a similar theme with a peaceful Alpine village the last outpost of peace at the end of the Thirty Years' War, only to be invaded. Their peace is first interrupted by the crash landing of an American pilot whom they look after. Next, three North Koreans and

two South Koreans find themselves there confronting one another with weapons drawn (and standing all night trying to outstare the other until their eyelids droop). This is all a bit mystifying to the villagers who really don't know too much about the war at all.

As we might guess, barriers break down between the three military groups. They help with the harvest, join in the celebrations and find life in the village congenial.

We know each of the soldiers has a back story, with combat experience as well as personal moral challenge, some of which we have seen in the earlier part of the film. Friendship leads to confiding in one another and discovering what each has in common. This becomes important when the troops land, assuming that this area is a hotbed of Communism and the valley has to be strategically destroyed.

These developments are not quite as predictable as one would have imagined on the way through. There is both tragedy and hope. This film, coming from a Korea, divided for more than fifty years, is a plea for meeting on the human level and for peace.

SIGNIS FILM REVIEWS MARCH 2007

300

ALPHA DOG
ARTHUR AND THE INVISIBLES
BAMAKO
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BLOOD AND CHOCOLATE
EPIC MOVIE
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FAUTEUILS D'ORCHESTRE (ORCHESTRA SEATS)
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MATERIAL GIRLS
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REEF, THE
SCHOOL FOR SCOUNDRELS

300

(US, 2007, d. Zack Snyder)

This has to be one of the most macho films ever. It also has to be one of the most bellicose ever. For the net surfer, it is worthwhile (and alarming) to read the rave reviews from the fans within a few days of its first screenings.

Of course, it has to be bellicose in some ways since it is the story of the 300 Spartans under the leadership of Leonidas to delay the advance of Xerxes and his thousands of Persian troops at the battle of Thermopylae. (However, it does have the claim at the end that the film bears no relation to any actual persons or incidents and any similarities are coincidental!!)

What makes 300 different from other stories from ancient Greece (like Oliver Stone's Alexander) is that it is based on a graphic novel. The author is Frank Miller who wrote Sin City. In fact, the visual and editing style of the film is like that of a graphic novel. The framing is generally like the panels of a comic. The actors are photographed to look like graphic figures as are many of the action sequences. It is the same with the editing as we move from one incident to another, a panel-like edit cuts. So, it is not meant to be looked at like a re-creation of actual history.

There are lots of computer effects, especially for the Persian hordes and the overwhelming numbers, the real/mythical tactics with a charging rhinoceros, elephants, giants and monsters. This is all adrenalin pumping stuff.

The film opens with the birth of Leonidas and the warrior culture of Sparta, taking the boys from their parents, training them to fight at the earliest age, sending them out of the community to survive an initiation experience, overcoming the onslaughts of savage beasts. Leonidas becomes ruler of Sparta which operates on an immediate graphic novel kind of morality. When the admittedly obnoxious delegates from Xerxes arrive in Sparta, they are dispatched without a qualm. Before Leonidas goes to battle, he has to climb a sheer mountainside and deal with the conservative and money grabbing priests who claim the gods are against his immediate going.

When he goes with his 300, despite the ritual objections, Sparta is under the control of Theron (a dastardly Dominic West) and Leonidas' wife, Lena Headey, who is both valiant and beautiful and dedicated to the ethos of Sparta.

The battles are sometimes interesting with the phalanx formations pushing back the Persians, the shields saving them from deluges of arrows. But, the slashing and cutting goes on and on with an enormous body count (with a mound of bodies at one stage used to stop the Persian advance). Gerard Butler (last seen as The Phantom of the Opera) is buffed and built-up but retains his Scots accent. The accent of David Wenham who fights but survives and returns to Sparta to tell the tale might be described as 'broken-mythical'.

As regards the macho emphasis, that was what Sparta was like and these Spartans go into battle in their minimal uniforms and oiled chests and biceps. Judging by some reaction at the screening, 300 could become a cult classic for members of gay body builders clubs (especially if they have a hankering to be mercenaries) – there were wolf whistles when the tall, oiled and bechained and pierced Xerxes arrived.

Some of the dialogue sounds very US hawkish, the noble goodies from the West who are not to be cowed by advancing enemies from the middle east so that Greece is saved from the uncivilised and the mystical. That is uncomfortably bellicose as well.

ALPHA DOG

(US, 2006, d. Nick Cassavetes)

Based on a true story. In fact, there were legal difficulties during 2006 and the film was shelved for some time. The central character had been on the Most Wanted list (the youngest) since 1999 and was discovered in Paraguay in October 2005. Lawyers claimed that the film would prejudice his chances of getting a fair trial. Well, looking at the film, we see he is certainly guilty.

Watching the film is often a very unpleasant experience so unpleasant are practically all the characters. Who would really want to spend time with these young men and women of Los Angeles, all part of the drug culture, often with affluent families, who pass a lot of time in their real lives and in the first part of the film, partying, drugging and drinking – with an incessantly expletive vocab? The rationale is that this is what they were like and, if we are going to understand their world, we have to be immersed in it, albeit in the comfort of our cinema seats.

When the film goes into action, re-creating the actual events of the abduction of the 15 year old brother of a really strung-out and violent addict and dealer, we experience a cumulative sense of menace as the boy (who is indulging in and enjoying the partying, drugs and sex aspects of his kidnapping) moves unwittingly towards his death.

Emile Hirsch (the deceitful boy in *The Emperor's Club*) is Johnny Truelove (in fact his real name was, believe it or not, Jesse James Hollywood – maybe destined to his life of crime), who wheels and deals in drugs and money, has a loyal following of hangers-on and who has virtually been set up in business by his father (played by Bruce Willis). His friends include Justin Timberlake in a crucial role and with a fine performance and Shawn Hatosy as the most servile and dangerous of the friends.

But, one of the main points being made by the film as we watch Johnny and his swagger, his hold over his gang, his demands and the abduction of the boy, is that he may be seen as the Alpha Dog but he is a really weak character, frightened without his backup, sexually impotent and no brainwave at all. These young men are really quite dumb with their violent behaviour and reliance on drugs and drink, which is a peer pressure way of trying to deal with the fact that they are not all that bright. And it has disastrous results.

The performances, apart from Hirsch who stays rather low-key and slow, are often frantic, erupting performances, especially Ben Foster as the dealer who causes all the trouble. Anton Yelchin, who has appeared in many television series and telemovies, is impressive as the abducted boy. In the background are Harry Dean Stanton as an old barfly and Sharon Stone as the boy's mother.

Depressing when you think of how the characters take this kind of dead-end life for granted and as the real thing.

ARTHUR AND THE INVISIBLES

(UK/France, 2006. d. Luc Besson)

Luc Besson is better known for his science-fantasy films of the past like *Subway*, *The Last Battle* or *The Fifth Element* and for his recent producing role in a collection of violent actioners like the *Taxi* series, *Unleashed* and the 13th District. To find him making a children's film, a blend of live action and animation comes as something of a surprise.

It begins with Arthur, Freddy Highmore (*Finding Neverland*, *Charley and the Chocolate Factory*), a confident and genial young actor, and his grandmother, Mia Farrow, are trying to save their house from being reclaimed. Grandfather has disappeared on expeditions in Africa. With the possibility of finding gems that would solve all the problems, Arthur is reduced in size and finds himself in the land of the Minimoys under the ground.

This is the longer animated section which moves at a fairly rattling pace as the Minimoys are trying to defend themselves against the tyrant, Maltazard. The adventures involve a princess and some characters who get themselves into tangles – only for Arthur to reappear just in time to save the day and Grandpa turning up again.

This is one for the younger audiences, though adults listening to the voices in the English version may be distracted with Madonna as the princess, David Bowie as Maltazard and an assorted supporting cast including Robert de Niro, Harvey Keitel and Emilio Estevez.

BAMAKA

(Mali, 2006, d. Abderrahmane Sissako)

Bamako provides quite a demanding challenge to its audiences.

Director Abderrahmane Sissako has received many awards for his two previous films, *Heremakono* and *La Vie sur Terre* (including an Ecumenical Award). They have been described as poetic and political. Those are the words that are relevant to Bamako.

On the poetic side, the audience is immersed in the day-to-day detail of life in the capital of Mali. It ranges from the markets, homes to night clubs. Lots of the characters are found sitting around, observing life and people, part of the local African colour. Suddenly the credits and scenes from a Western set in Timbuktu starring Danny Glover are parachuted in to disconcert us – Westerns in Mali? Shootouts and the sudden deaths of innocent bystanders?

On the political side, the focus is on an outside court (the legal representatives dressed in traditional garb) with judges presiding over a hearing where some locals are making an appeal against the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The action moves between the court action and the events in the lives of the characters – especially a young singer at a club whose marriage is under stress.

The court sequences offer quite a number of speeches, both formal and informal (especially when an old man does not know the protocols of procedure and feels he must speak when he feels the urge). The speeches are defences of Africa, condemnations of colonialism and the highlighting of the disastrous consequences which still determine the fates of most African countries. Many examples are offered to critique the effects of globalisation as well as the presumptuous presuppositions of the international money organisations. A French barrister does get the opportunity to make a speech in the defence of these institutions, but it is clear where the intellectual as well as the emotional arguments are leading.

This is a cinematically eloquent piece of African storytelling but even more eloquent polemical challenge to the West and its governments and business organisations.

BECAUSE I SAID SO

(US, 2007, d. Michael Lehman)

On the whole this is a very trying experience.

If you are devoted to Diane Keaton and like anything she is in, well it is yours. The same if you like Mandy Moore. But, this is one of those family and domestic comedies where Diane Keaton gets to dominate everyone and everything – volubly, incessantly, loudly, screechingly. She did it recently in *The Family Stone* and this is more of the same (only more so!).

Diane is Daphne, a matriarch who has seen two daughters off in marriage but who is desperate to get her youngest, Millie, hitched. While she really is personable, in the form of Mandy Moore, she is prone to excessive chatter, has a neighing laugh and lacks all self-confidence. With a nagging and criticising mother like that, why wouldn't she!

Daphne is not above putting an internet ad on line to vet potential suitors. Wealthy Tom Everett Scott turns up and seems the goods, though he is something of a narcissistic gourmet architect. It seems he might go for Millie. However, observing all this is musician Jack (an agreeable Gabriel Macht). He has a precocious son and an eccentric father (Stephen Collins) and he tries his hand.

Meanwhile, Daphne is celebrating her sixtieth birthday and feeling desperate about getting old – she is lucky that she has lived so long without being murdered!

Well, it all works out well with reconciliation all round and Daphne having to give up her *raison d'être*, 'Because I said so'.

BLOOD AND CHOCOLATE

(US, 2006, d. Katja von Garnier)

If you have seen *Them (Ils)*, then wait a bit before seeing *Blood and Chocolate*. Neither of them would be the favourite film of the Romanian tourist board. While *Dracula* might be alright in Transylvania, these two films introduce terror and horror in Bucharest itself.

Blood and chocolate sounds like a horror movie recipe. The chocolate belongs to Vivian (Agnes Bruckner) who works in a sweets shop in Bucharest though she has had to flee her native Colorado when hunters killed her parents. The blood belongs to most of the rest of the cast!

This is a 21st century werewolf story, *loups garoux*, who, according to their leader, played in dictatorial style by Olivier Martinez, combine the best of humanity and the best of the beast. The only trouble is that they have many chips on their shoulders about the way they have been treated for centuries by humans. At full moon, they turn into wolves and relish their freedom – though it often takes the form of capturing a human and taunting him to run to the river for safety with the metamorphosing wolves in pursuit.

Vivian is, of course, a good werewolf, especially when she is attracted to a young American, Aiden (Hugh Dancy) who is in Bucharest researching a graphic novel. Given the number of films, including this one, based on graphic novels, this is seems to be a wisely lucrative thing to be doing. When he clashes with the most obnoxious of the wolves, Rafe, the son of the leader, who hunts in a pack of yobs who hang out at a club for the *loups*, the blood starts to flow. He outwits the pursuing wolves and finally confronts the leader and... off to a happy ending, while being careful on full moon nights, one hopes.

So, this is what happens in Bucharest these days! Was the European Union warned!!

EKLAVYA: THE ROYAL GUARD

(India, 2007, d. Vidhu Vinod Chopra)

Films from India, from Bollywood or the more serious Bengali film-makers of Eastern India, are getting more attention around the world these days. With the biggest number of films made in any country in the world, India could flood the market. The question arises: which films make more impact for a non-Indian audience? *Eklavya* is one that can be considered.

This is a lavish production, widescreen and colour, artfully composed images, atmospheric score rather than an emphasis on songs (which are included but sometimes as background), emotional force with love, violence and betrayal.

At first one thinks that the tale is set in ancient, even mythological times, as a mother tells her son the story of the guard *Eklavya* who was the best archer in the land. The envious prince that he guarded asked him to obey him in one command: he was to chop off his thumb, that eliminating himself as a rival to the prince as an archer. Obedient, he did this.

However, the setting is actually contemporary. We realise that the story has been told to the modern *Eklavya* who is now a royal guard. Actually, the surface looks very dignified, the emotions very moving as the queen is dying with her grieving husband at her bedside. And then...

There is plenty of melodrama and some unexpected plot turns (for those brought up in the demanding moral tradition of the American Motion Picture Code) as the story turns into the equivalent of Greek or Shakespearean tragedy – of the revenge and blood-spilling kind. Innocent-looking characters surprise us with their malice or their motives. But, *Eklavya* stands firm. Finally, he is presented with some moral dilemmas himself, with questions about where his loyalties lie – with the old king who is murdered, with his hero son who has more bonds with *Eklavya* than he knows...

It is another world and *Eklavya* takes us into its exotic political and social dimensions as well as the religious rituals and mythical traditions.

EPIC MOVIE

(US, 2006, d. Jason Friedberg and Aaron Seltzer)

Films like Epic Movie (and its predecessors Scary Movie and Date Movie) are critic-proof in the sense that no critic in their right mind would consider them works of cinema art – and they don't, especially the easily disgruntled critics. These films are pop entertainments for the movie-going crowd. They are always hit-and-miss in terms of their jokes and their senses of humour. They are usually slapstick in style with some crass bodily function jokes de rigueur. They are spoofs of the kind we expect on television, throwaway satires.

And, it always depends on whether you have seen the films they are sending up, otherwise why bother! You won't see the point. Since the films always start at the top of the US box-office when they are released, it is clear that there is a viable market out there.

The makers of Epic Movie have been part of the team for the Scary Movie series and Date Movie.

When you think of it, there have been quite a number of epic movies in the last year or two to parody. Narnia (or Gnarnia, with a silent G for legal reasons!) provides the framework of the plot. Four orphans gather – from the murder in the Louvre, pursued by a flagellating albino monk; from an epidemic of snakes on a plane where a young African woman is on her way to Namibia to be adopted by Angelina and Brad; a bullied reject from the X Men academy and a reject from the monastery of Nacho Libre. They also find golden tickets to the Wonka factory where Crispin Glover does an effective Johnny Depp take-off.

They are set upon by Captain Jack Swallows from the Caribbean (and Darrell Hammond does an even better Depp-Sparrow impersonation). Harry Potter and co are no help.

Meanwhile Narnia gets the full treatment with skits on Mr Tumnus, on the badger, with Jennifer Coolidge (always good) as the White Bitch and Fred Willard (doing a variation on his Christopher Guest films) as a very unsaviour like Aslo).

The film is quite up to date with a Borat impersonator turning up at the end.

It needs to be said for those who have a compulsion to leap out of their seats as soon as the first of the final credits appears that the credits last for 15 minutes of the 85 minutes of the film. They do break for a rather long, colourful song from the Oompa Loompas and a poke at Mel Gibson, drunk and insulting in prison.

Yes, it's pretty corny and juvenile but, if you've seen all the reference films, you might enjoy tracking the spoofs.

GOAL 2: LIVING THE DREAM

(UK, 2006, d. Jaume Collett-Serra)

The original Goal was a film with some heart and even some charm as a British scout in Los Angeles discovered a talented football player and brought him to Newcastle where he made the team and fell in love with a local nurse.

Living the Dream is the subtitle for this sequel – but the dream is something of a nightmare and, despite the triumphs, especially in the UEFA cup, there is something of a sour tone in this picture of the celebrity life. Santi (Kuno Becker) should be content in Newcastle (despite it always being shown as raining there), should be marrying Roz (Anna Friel) and getting on better with his agent (Stephen Dillane) and his mercurial friend Gavin Harris (Alessandro Nivola). That should be living the dream.

However, his agent gets Santi an interview with Real Madrid and off he goes (to Spain where it is always bright and sunny). Will he get a match? That depends on his training and the decisions of the coach (Rutger Hauer). Will Roz want to go to Spain like Victoria Beckham or will she find it too difficult?

Speaking of the Beckhams, David Beckham appears (very frequently) as himself which makes the film at times seem like a Beckham promotional exercise. Other players like Zidane and Thierry Henri do appear but it is Beckham who counts. There is a lot of actual football footage.

The trouble with the dream is that it can go to one's head. Celebrities are pursued and caught in compromising positions. Fans are extremely demanding. (But, at least, Goal spares us shopaholic millionaire football wives and girlfriends.)

While Santi is trying to cope with all of this, some new elements appear from his back story, including discovering his mother (Elizabeth Pena) living in Madrid with a husband and son. This makes for some human interest beyond the football pitch.

And, just when it looks as though everything is going to be all right and Roz is glimpsed pregnant, the film stops. This is an interim episode and we will have to wait for Goal 3. But Goal 2 has somewhat dampened the original sense of enthusiasm and Goal 3 is not one of the most anticipated of trilogy endings.

GHOST RIDER

(US, 2007, d. Mark Steven Johnson)

Every so often a film appears (usually from the United States, although the Mad Max series from Australia had a worldwide impact in the 1980s) that gets the popular commentators talking about the links between spirituality, religion and cinema. It happened in the late 1990s with The Matrix. Even classical directors like Poland's Krzysztof Zanussi declared that everybody should see The Matrix for its philosophical/transcendent dimensions. The two sequels reinforced this opinion, especially with the range of references to religious traditions and mythologies, including Christianity. Neo was the One, a saviour who died and rose again and was loved back into life...

While not recommending Ghost Rider to all but the stalwart fans of films based on comic books, especially the Marvel comics, Superman, X-Men and Daredevil, it must be said that there is a lot of religious language and symbolism here that might well offer discussion points for younger audiences, as well as adults, who like to see the links between spiritual values and the movies.

Ghost Rider has been filmed by Mark Steven Johnson (who made Daredevil, a moderately successful venture but one which also had Catholic resonances) and no effort has been spared with top of the range special effects and computer work. Since the hero rides a motor bike, the effects enhance his carnival leaps through fire, over vehicles and helicopters. When he becomes the Ghost Rider (a superhuman being topped with an immense burning skull) his bike is aflame, leaving fire trails, not dust, in its wake. Ghost Rider is strong on contemporary thrills. (It should be added that its US box-office opening weekend in February 2007 was over \$44,000.000, a sum which many contemporary films struggle to reach in total.)

Ghost Rider is a pop version of the Faust story. Mephistopheles appears in the form of the icon of bike riders, Easy Rider's Peter Fonda. He buys the soul of the teenage stunt rider John Blaze (who grows up into Nicolas Cage) in exchange for his father's recovery from terminal cancer. Needless to say, John does not realise what he is doing. And his motives were kind. Mephistopheles, however, puts him on hold until he is an adult in order to do the devil's work.

Meantime, the son of Mephistopheles (a malevolent Wes Bentley) is doing a Lucifer turn and raising demons to help him take over the world. As he absorbs the souls of these damned, he says, 'My name is Legion for we are many'. It is time for John to follow in the footsteps of a legend of the American west, that of the Ghost Rider who defied Mephistopheles and stole his contract for the whole population of a town.

Already, the film raises issues of good and evil, the devil and hell and selling one's soul – though John realises that the devil has bought his soul, 'but not my spirit'. There is a lot of talk about God giving people second chances especially if their motivations were good.

One sequence that is religiously arresting is the Ghost Rider's saving a young woman from a mugger. He judges that the man is evil and, gazing into this man's eyes with his own fiery skull, he enables the sinner to see and experience all the hurt he has inflicted on innocent people. This look is referred to as 'The Penance Gaze'. It is a flame-filled purgatorial experience – and would be useful in discussions as an image of the need for purgation and atonement which we call Purgatory. Eventually, Black Heart (Mephistopheles' son) also experiences this purging but opts for Hell.

All of this is narrated solemnly by that rugged icon of so many westerns, Sam Elliott. Here, he plays the Caretaker of a cemetery (with cross on a chain) who explains to John and to us the role of legends: that we interpret and understand events that are beyond us through legend. He himself is part of the legend and there is a dramatic journey with the caretaker and John riding fiery horses and bikes to their destiny.

Eva Mendes is a TV reporter of the more proactive Lois Lane variety.

There is quite a deal more explicit religious language and references to the Gospels. The first Vatican Council is not quoted so often these years. However, it suggested back in pre-cinema days that to understand revelation and the teaching of the Church, one of the most important means was by way of analogies. They may not have had analogies like Ghost Rider in mind. But, in the context of popular culture, they work.

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

(US, 2006, d. Robert de Niro)

The Good Shepherd is not a religious film, despite the overtones of the title. Rather, it is a story about the origins of the CIA, its activities during the 1940s and 1950s up to the invasion in 1961 of the Bay of Pigs in Cuba.

Robert de Niro is the director. It is a project that he has been interested in for many years, but now it has emerged at a critical time for the American government and its policy in Iraq and the Middle East. One of the tasks of the CIA is counter-intelligence, false information disseminated in order to destabilize antagonistic governments.

Patrons need to be warned that the film runs for over two and three quarter hours. It has an unhurried pace which might make action audiences impatient. Given its topic, it also needs concentration – which means that it is a film of intelligence about intelligence.

The ensemble cast won a special award at the 2007 Berlin Film Festival. Indeed, it is quite a starry cast. The responsibility for the film's success, however, lies with Matt Damon in the leading role. Damon has proven himself a very effective screen presence in The Rainmaker, the Bourne films and Syriana. Here he plays Edward Wilson, a senior official in the CIA, during crucial days in April 1961, assessing the failure of the Bay of Pigs and the attempts to overthrow Fidel Castro. However, this narrative is frequently interrupted by flashbacks covering the two decades from Wilson's initiation into Yale's prestigious secret society, through his work in London and Berlin during the war to the establishment of the CIA at the end of World War II and activities during the Cold War.

Most of us are intrigued by espionage stories. They are frequently larger than life, of the James Bond variety or a Robert Ludlum intricate world conspiracy. With the Good Shepherd, the principal spy is basically an introverted bureaucrat, frequently seen with his hat and overcoat, a slow and stooped walker (very different from Damon's Bourne) who observes interrogations, listens attentively, makes life and

death decisions with little outward emotion – and is accused, rightly, of lacking a sense of humour. He is one of the faceless men who are totally committed to their view of the United States and patriotism.

The recruits of the late 1930s who served in the OSS had to learn methods of counter-espionage from the British (here represented by Michael Gambon and Billy Crudup) and then learn administration in the ruins of post-war Berlin. They were tested by Russian double agents in the 1950s as well as connections with the FBI (here represented by Alec Baldwin).

There are some interesting cameos for characters in the agency, Robert de Niro himself as the founder General Sullivan, William Hurt as a chief and John Turturro as Wilson's right hand man who develops literal strong arm tactics as the years go by.

Because this is a drama rather than a documentary, there is an underlying personal story. There is Edward Wilson's trauma at the suicide of his father, his being asked to spy on his poetry professor at Yale (and his doing it), his being trapped into marriage with a senator's daughter (Angelina Jolie) because of a pregnancy while he really loved a hearing impaired girl, his not seeing his son until the boy was six, his stern parenting and his son's wanting to measure up to him.

A recurring episode concerns a taped bedroom scene where the information about the Cuban invasion is passed on. Throughout the film, the CIA staff use all kinds of means to isolate sounds, to identify the place – which leads to a somewhat melodramatic finale.

The Good Shepherd offers challenges to concern about espionage and its morality.

A GUIDE TO RECOGNISING YOUR SAINTS

(US, 2006, d. Dito Montiel)

No, this is not a film about saints or holiness. In some ways, it is the opposite, although by using this title, the writer-director of this semi-autobiographical piece is asking audiences to look at who the influences for good and bad in one's life really are. It is an independent American film acclaimed at the Sundance Festival and then at Venice.

This is a small-budget independent film, a first film by Dito Montiel. He takes the liberty of employing all kinds of techniques and experiments in shooting and editing to make it more offbeat than the standard studio production and to provide audiences with a broken narrative and different ways of looking at and reacting to the events in his life.

Dito Montiel grew up in Brooklyn, one of the kids in the 1980s in New York City, full of talent but pressured to conform to the low expectations of the neighbourhood. School was a drag. Clashing with gangs, graffiti gangs, was taken for granted. Sexual experimentation, sometimes brazen, sometimes tentative, was expected. Life was hanging-out. If you had a good family, you were lucky, but there was a culture of violence, especially from fathers.

His novel of the same name and this film are autobiographical although Montiel stresses that the Dito of the fiction is fiction. Be that as it may, he captures the rough and never-ready lives of his friends in those days, the saints he is guiding us to recognise, their waywardness, their language, their pressures, the sudden eruptions of violence and the need for some to get away.

When a film is set on the streets of New York, there is the temptation to refer to Mean Streets or Kids. So, that is done!

These mean streets are in Queens, in Astoria, in the summer of 1986. Dito (Shia LaBeouf) has friends, tough friends, especially the abused Antonio (Channing Tatum) who is welcomed in the Montiel household and who finds a father figure in Dito's father (Chazz Palmentieri). The friends growl. They are becoming sexually aware and active. They clash with gangs in the neighbourhood – and the ever-present drugs. But

Dito dreams of getting out – and eventually leaves for California to become a writer. He has clashed deeply with his father and stays away for twenty years, returning only when his father is ill.

The film captures the gritty atmosphere of Queens in those days and immerses the audience in it.

Shia LaBeouf (Holes, Bobby) plays the teenage Dito with sensitivity. The middle-aged Dito is Robert Downey Jr who brings intensity and anguish to the adult who has avoided his family, especially his father, for fifteen years while attaining celebrity in California. The friends are well cast with Channing Tatum as the ultimately tragic figure who cannot escape the brutality of his own father, his brother's violent death in a prank in the subway, despite the support of Dito's father and mother. Amongst the girls, Rosario Dawson gives another sympathetic performance as the adult woman whose life turned out so drably and not as she might have imagined it.

Chazz Palminteri is very good as Dito's father who is kind to the kids in the neighbourhood. We see him as loving his son. However, Dito does not see this and they have a terrible falling out. When he returns as an adult, his father is ill and he has to deal with how he handles meeting him again, his resentments from the past and the possibility of some kind of forgiveness and reconciliation. Antonio (Eric Roberts) is in prison. Can he come to terms with his past? What loyalty has he to his friends? Can he reconcile with his father? His mother is played with feeling by Dianne Weist.

While this is a film that is firmly set in a particular time and place and captures the feelings of people in this environment, it is able to move to more universal understanding of human nature. These themes are played out in an unvarnished and deeply emotional way.

HANNIBAL RISING

(France/UK, 2006, d. Peter Webber)

Terrible reviews from critics. Better responses from the public. I would prefer this one over Ridley Scott's Hannibal any day! Of course, it needs to be said that the Lecter story is quite distasteful (a bad pun!) for many audiences who would not want to see it.

It seems that Hannibal Lecter has become something of a sacred icon. As embodied by Anthony Hopkins in *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Hannibal* and *Red Dragon*, he is firmly in the consciousness of moviegoers and even beyond. He won an Oscar as did Jodie Foster, director Jonathan Demme and the film itself for *The Silence of the Lambs* in 1991. Sequel, *Hannibal*, was a mixture of the spoof and the horror. *Red Dragon* was an interesting remake of Michael Mann's *Manhunter* with Brian Cox as a very alarming Lecter.

With that history in mind, Thomas Harris was persuaded to write *Hannibal Rising* and incurred the wrath of literary reviewers and film critics for selling out to commercialism in capitalising on the popularity of his villain and creating a prequel. And, yet, nobody seems to have made these criticisms of *Batman Begins* or the origins of James Bond in *Casino Royale*. Yes, these were better films than *Hannibal Rising* but that does not necessarily make *Hannibal Rising* bad.

It's not bad at all and suggests plausible reasons for Hannibal's madness, his violence and his cannibalism. It's all done in a rather heightened Gothic style rather than in a naturalistic mode, although that is how it begins.

Near Kaunas in Lithuania, we find Lecter Castle. With the German retreat in 1944, roving Nazi collaborators want to evade the advancing Russians. They trap the Lecter family in their country house, kill the parents and, in their hunger, dispose of Hannibal's little sister, Mischa. This trauma haunts Hannibal in the orphanage set up by the communists in the family castle. However, escaping to France to find his uncle, he discovers his widow (Gong Li) and stays with her, becoming a medical student. She is Japanese and is skilled in martial arts and possesses a sword. Hannibal is consumed by revenge and returns to Lithuania to confront his sister's killers.

It is easy to see where this is all leading. And it does. Meanwhile, a Nazi-hunter policeman (Dominic West) keeps dogging Hannibal.

The film is designed as a psychological thriller rather than a gory horror story. The visuals of the fate of Mischa are kept until later in the film in a series of stylised flashbacks. Once Hannibal starts eliminating the villains (with initial practice on a racist butcher who insults his aunt), the film is violent, though less so than the average slasher thriller.

Rhys Ifans (opposite to his presence in so many films, especially Notting Hill) is the leader of the pack which includes Kevin McKidd. Since they have escaped to France after the war and made illegal fortunes, they are deserving prey for Hannibal.

However, the moral point is made by his aunt and by the inspector. Hannibal Lecter could have made a choice not to be his sinister self, but he does. He is also tormented by the fact and is in denial that he too ate some of Mischa's flesh to survive.

Gaspar Ulliel is gaunt, introverted and quietly menacing, relishing his cruel streak more and more. Gong Li, a surprise presence in a film like this after her career in Chinese classics, makes the aunt credible despite the improbability of her being in France at this time. Director Peter Webber is best known for quite a different film and film-making style, The Girl with the Pearl Earrings.

Well, now we know what Thomas Harris thinks made Hannibal Lecter the monster he became.

HOT FUZZ

(UK, 2007, d. Edgar Wright)

The Americans have regularly tried to spoof popular movie genres. They come up with Scary Movie, Date Movie, Epic Movie. They are parodies, usually fairly crass and obvious, of recent popular films. In the past, Leslie Nielsen used to appear in send-ups of particular genres: Naked Gun (TV police shows) Repossessed (exorcisms!), Wrongfully Accused (court murder mysteries), Spy Hard (James Bond and co). They were corny but amusing with Nielsen being the main drawcard. Mel Brooks began well with Blazing Saddles, Young Frankenstein, Silent Movie and High Anxiety but his Robin Hood and Dracula spoofs were sometimes quite lame.

A few years ago, British actor Simon Pegg and director Edgar Wright came up with a spoof of the living dead genre, Shaun of the Dead. They played it for all it was worth – and more. They took the genre seriously but enjoyed doing the spoof, taking many of the conventions to their logical illogical conclusions. Shaun of the Dead was grotesque in a very funny way.

The police thrillers, the buddy cops and the serial killer might seem obvious targets for spoof. And so they are. But here are Pegg and Wright again. And they are successful again. This is a very enjoyable (continual smiles more than lots of belly laughs) and comically exaggerated take on American cops, British bobbies and the dark side of a Miss Marple village. (And they probably had more than one eye on The Wicker Man for their basic plot.)

Simon Pegg has been very wise to play his role straight even when he is in the most ludicrous of situations. He is the perfectionist, the humourless perfectionist, who has shown up the London forces because he is so successful at apprehending criminals and making the rest look lackadaisical. (Bill Nighy, Martin Freeman and Steve Coogan have a good cameo condemning him and exiling him to a country town.) Pegg sustains his character well throughout and when he has to become that bit more heroic and that big bit more human.

What a village. Everything seems so nice, except the young thugs around the place. The local committee keep things in order. And a lot of character actors from the British screen appear here. You need to look closely and you will find Edward Woodward, Billie Whitelaw, Paul Freeman and others. Jim Broadbent,

with hearty tones, is the local police chief. Nick Frost is his large and ineffectual policeman son. He has to partner Pegg and they form a kind of Laurel and Hardy (maybe more Abbott and Costello) team. And Timothy Dalton is there as the smarmy, smiling owner of the supermarket.

When the serial killer starts striking, Pegg goes into action. Once again, the writers seem to have been looking at Agatha Christie novels and *Murder on the Orient Express* for plotlines which work quite nicely and give the opportunity for stunt work, comic mayhem, some gore and heroics.

Shawn of the Dead and *Hot Fuzz* make a good track record for what Pegg and Wright do next.

INLAND EMPIRE

(US, 2006, d. David Lynch)

If ever there was a film where you could use the old joke, 'What's it about?' 'About three hours', this is it. One could list some of the aspects of the plot but that would not really tell you what *Inland Empire* is about at all. The answer is simply, 'this is a David Lynch film'.

For more than thirty years Lynch has tantalised and exhilarated his audiences. In the 1970s, it was the puzzle in black and white of *Eraserhead* (and its reverberating sound engineering). In the 1980s, it was the darkness under the suburban garden surface in *Blue Velvet*. In the 1990s, he took television audiences into the weird state of *Twin Peaks*. He also developed parallel worlds in *Lost Highway* and continued that into the 21st century with parallel and contrasting worlds in *Mulholland Drive*.

Where is the Inner Empire located? Geographically in the US and Poland, with filming done in both places. But that is only external topography. The *Inland Empire*, or Inner Empire, is the interior world of David Lynch as storyteller, creating an inner empire of storytelling of the mind and the emotions, showing facets of an inner empire of the central character's psyche and evoking an inner empire response from each viewer, a world of response that will differ from person to person.

Obviously, Lynch is not interested in direct narrative. There are the elements of narrative there if we want to get some hook onto the three hours' experience. Laura Dern is an actress. She is offered a part in a film to be directed by Jeremy Irons and is to star with Justin Theroux. She is interviewed on TV by a brassy reporter (played by her mother, Diane Ladd). The film is a remake of a film that was never finished because the leads were murdered. It is based on Polish myths. The actress has her own life, the life of the character she is playing and alter egos which emerge at different times. Julia Ormond also appears as, perhaps, another alter ego but in a weirder and more violent world. These are the major suggestions, but there is a great deal more detail.

Lynch is not concerned with narrative logic. Time fluctuates because it is multi-dimensional (after all, we imagine, we remember the past, we fantasise about the future, we dream – the narrative of our inner empires moment by moment has little narrative logic). And what is space? Is it a continuum (after all, we are present in one place and our memories and imaginations have us in other space dimensions). Our day-by-day imaginative lives are quite surreal if we examine them, so why not use this experience for a film? It engages our mind in a pursuit of reason, logic and truth but it works on the level of consciousness and feelings.

What Lynch is interested in is the experience of possibilities, alternate states, parallel worlds. With his use of digital cameras, he is freer to move the point of view around much more fluidly, capturing more effectively emotional and imaginative events.

The experience of watching *Inland Empire* is more than a touch mesmeric. It does run for almost three hours and, unless the experience is so confusing or disturbing that one cannot surrender to it, it draws us in and gives us, in images, movement, sound, speech and music, a truly cinematic experience.

Laura Dern appears in almost every sequence and gives a wonderful performance with quite a range of emotions. She remarked before the screening at the 2006 Venice Film Festival that she was looking forward to seeing the film to find out what it was and what it was about. Her version of the answer would probably be quite different from yours and yours and hers from mine. But that's all right. We all have our own Inland Empires.

MATERIAL GIRLS

(US, 2006, d. Martha Coolidge)

They certainly are!

This is a film which has a very specific and limited niche market: younger teenage girls (and anyone older who shares this outlook on life). For a review, it would need to be done by one of the intended audience, so this can only be a report with some observations.

Watching the film with a group of critics (almost all men on the far side of 50 who may well have forgotten – or suppressed the memories – of what their own daughters were like at this age) I was rather stone-faced throughout the proceedings. What we have on screen are the Duff sisters, Hilary and Haylie (who has written some songs for Hilary). We see them at once in a glamorous commercial for skin products, for a company founded by their recently deceased father whom they idolise. Then we see how spoilt and pampered they are as they go to socialite events around LA. But, then, disaster as a TV expose program reveals enormous cover-ups in testing that has gone wrong. They lose everything, accidentally burn down their mansion, lose their car as they give their keys to thugs whom they think are valets, have to do with their own hand-me-down clothes and beds as they take refuge with their Hispanic servant. Then they have to take the bus (exceeding trauma)... etc, etc.

There is a takeover of the company involved (by Angelica Huston enjoying herself hamming it up). And the girls? They have to discover real life, what it is to be poor. They then decide to investigate the claims and prove fraud and cover-up – with the help of an ordinary young man they think is a valet but is really a lab researcher and a pro bono community lawyer. All is revealed as expected. They learn some lessons – and the new products are advertised as affordable! Each has a love interest. And, of course, the brief flirtation with poverty and ordinariness over, they are rich again.

Sitting beside the reviewer for the Communist paper, I was empathising more and more with him against this teenage magazine mentality, celebrity and glamour obsession, this rather blatant exercise in American capitalism!

MIDDLETOWN

(Northern Ireland, 2006, d. Brian Kirk)

This is a sombre piece of work, a glimpse into an even more sombre world. This is a small country town in Northern Ireland in the 1950s, Middletown. It is atmospherically filmed in dark tones and colours.

Religion is the dominant theme and, while the love of God and the love of Christ are mentioned every so often, that is the last thing one associates with the kind of vengeful religion dramatised here. The denomination is called 'The Church of God'. It is a far cry from the Catholic Church (though one might think of Trevor Howard's irascible parish priest in Ryan's Daughter) and it is a far cry from the Anglican Communion. One reviewer, facetiously remarked at the end of the screening, 'Four stars, Ian Paisley'!

The Church of God is that kind of Reformed church which has no images in the church itself, gives prominence to the lectern with the scriptures opened on it, does not focus on an altar or a crucifix, a kind of extreme Cromwellian place of worship.

The film opens with the pastor singling out a young boy, Gabriel, as chosen by God to be set apart for a special mission. His local businessman father, a dominant presence in the village, agrees. Meanwhile, outside the church, Gabriel's younger brother, Jim, and his friend taunt and fight with a boy on crutches. His father gives him a mighty blow on the face for such behaviour in front of the church. The scene and the mood are well and truly set.

15 years later. The pastor is retiring and his successor, coming from mission work in Africa, is Gabriel (Matthew Macfadyen from *In My Father's Den* and *Pride and Prejudice*). Meanwhile, Jim (David Mays from *Vera Drake*) is living with his pregnant partner, Caroline (Eva Birthistle from *Ae Fond Kiss*), is in debt, can't pay the builders of his house while they live in a caravan, bets on the local pub cockfights despite Caroline's disapproval and has to be a money collector for his still severe father. Caroline and her mother own the pub.

This is a rather ordinary village that could be anywhere in all of Ireland. However, the film makes it a segregated enclave: no police, no doctor, no fire brigade, no other churches, which diminishes the credibility of the setting. However, when Gabriel arrives, unsmiling and stern, he quickly brands it a new Sodom and Gomorrah, verbally attacking the people, denouncing Caroline and her lack of faith, burning all the books in his house, wringing the necks of the fighting cocks and smashing the pub – all the while quoting the scriptures. He does mention the love of God but his behaviour shows he has had no experience of it. He is more convincing when he quotes a wrathful God.

Things go from bad to worse for Jim and his relationship with Caroline, with his ill father concerning the inheritance, leading to Gabriel erupting in mad and violent behaviour. Some of this is so extreme, along the lines of hell-and-brimfire preachers, that some non-believing audiences will be tempted to laugh in disbelief.

However, *Middletown* is a cautionary tale about literal, puritanical and vengeful religion.

MUSIC AND LYRICS

(US, 2007, d. Marc Lawrence)

In a shrewd marketing ploy, *Music and Lyrics* was released on Valentine's day. Apparently, it paid off and charmed a large number of audiences.

It is not hard to see why. It is a very entertaining romantic comedy with some witty and ironic asides and some tears of happiness at the end. One difficulty is foreshadowed in the film itself. When has-been singer with an 80s group, Pop, Alex Fletcher (Hugh Grant) performs at a High School reunion, the fortyish women crowd the stage in raptures, singing and swinging along – then the camera pulls back to show all their men still sitting at their tables looking bored and/or resigned!

Hugh Grant proves to be a very good sport. He sings, thrusts and expertly spoofs the 80s style, making funny deprecating remarks and generally doing well what fans recognise is uniquely Hugh Grant's style. He participates in a mock music video that plays during the credits both at the beginning and the end. When his agent (Brad Garrett, the very tall brother from *Everybody Loves Raymond*) takes him to the recording of a video with the newest popular singer, Cora (Haley Bennett), he is commissioned to write her a new song within the week. The allotted lyricist is still lost in punk style.

The substitute plant lady, Sophie (do New Yorkers actually have plant ladies to come in and care for their plants?), a touch absent-minded and hypochondriac, quietly mouths lines as she works. Since this is Drew Barrymore, we know that she is going to work on the song and the team will have great success. Of course, they do but there are a few showbiz and emotional complications along the way.

Grant is very good and has no qualms in looking foolish and sending himself up – except that he still remains the charming hero. Drew Barrymore is relaxed, sweet and engaging and provides a very sympathetic foil for Grant. There is also a special plea for popular songs and their entertainment value,

with melody being the equivalent of an introduction and lyrics being the equivalent of getting to know someone and communicating. Can novels do this, they ask!?

Writer-director, Marc Lawrence, has recently worked for Sandra Bullock, especially with the Miss Congeniality films and the romantic comedy she did with Hugh Grant, Two Weeks' Notice.

Cheerful (and some funny sequences with Kristy Johnson as Sophie's literally big sister who runs a weight loss clinic and has an engaging way of bossing her husband as well as swooning for Alex Fletcher), nice (even Cora overcomes her pretentiousness at the end and plays Cupid), it succeeds in being pleasant, funny and charming.

THE NUMBER 23

(US, 2007, d. Joel Schumacher)

This is a very bizarre thriller which has a certain amount of intrigue value but which stretches credibility by the end. It is a brave attempt by Jim Carrey to do something different (which he did to good effect in The Truman Show, Man on the Moon and Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind), to be in a serious role. Perhaps the fans will be supportive but they might be convinced that he stay with comedy.

While he uses a number of characteristics of his funny roles, he gives a sustained performance as a man who is haunted by puzzling and horrifying dreams and who becomes desperate to know the truth about himself.

Who would have thought that the number 23 could be linked to so many strange phenomena – some of it does seem fanciful with combinations of 9 and 14, 19 and 5 etc. But, there is always the 23rd Psalm. There is a reference to Numbers 32:23 (now there's a mysterious, mystic palindrome) which in fact, notes that our sins will find us out

Carrey is a happily married father of a young son, an animal catcher. On his birthday, one dog bites him and leads him to a cemetery and on a chase which upsets his equilibrium. Then his wife (Virginia Madsen) buys him a book, The Number 23, which he begins to read. The book, chapter by chapter, invades his life as well as providing something of a déjà vu experience. But, the book has no final chapter...

If it had stayed in the realm of the terror/horror genre, its over the top dreams and hauntings, paranoia and fears might have been satisfyingly mysterious, but the finale leads to a rational explanation (even though it seems also somewhat over the top).

Director Joel Schumacher is a set designer who moved into direction in the 1980s and has often ventured into these realms (The Lost Boys, Flatliners) while also directing some John Grisham adaptations (The Client and A Time for Killing) as well as two garish Batman films. His previous film was The Phantom of the Opera.

(FAUTEUILS D'ORCHESTRE) ORCHESTRA SEATS

(France, 2006, d. Danielle Thompson)

One of the easiest ways to introduce a review of a film from France is to say that it is very French or very Gallic and presume that everyone knows what you mean: that the film has a romantic air, characters who are more slightly fey than you would find in, say, a British film, who talk a lot, eat often and who rely on audience response to la vie and l'amour more than to action or melodrama. Needless to say, this is the perfect introduction to a review of Orchestra Seats.

At the centre of all the goings on around a café adjacent to a theatre, a concert hall and an auction room, is the attractive Cecile de France. She is fey personified – no job but charming her way into being a waitress; nowhere to stay except slipping into theatre rooms; no friends but able to meet anyone anywhere and have

them eating out of her hand; wide-eyed when it comes to concerts, theatre and auctions; and with a delightful old grandmother who used to work at the Ritz, which fulfilled all her dreams of living in class, style and luxury. It is certainly not difficult for Cecile de France to work the same kind of magic on the audience.

And she does it with the rest of the members of the cast, although she finds it an uphill battle with the rather misogynist manager of the bar who takes her on only because it is a very busy time.

There is the highly histrionic, bipolar actress who feels Feydeau farce is beneath her although she is appearing as a no-nonsense mayor in a very popular soap-opera but who longs to portray Simone de Beauvoir in a project to be directed by an American (Sidney Pollack). Valerie Lemercier is believably exasperating in this role.

Then there is the accomplished pianist (Albert Dupontel) who is sick of all the celebrity demands and trappings which his wife (Laura Morante) is committed to. He would prefer to play for patients in a hospital – and in shirtsleeves during a formal recital (which he does).

And there is the taxi driver who built himself up to be a tycoon (Claude Brasseur) now auctioning his valuable art collection so that he can enjoy life and not be a museum custodian. He has a young girlfriend whom everyone sees as a gold digger (including himself) and his professor son (Christopher Thompson who co-wrote the screenplay with his mother, the director) who has a few secrets of his own and who is smitten by Cecile (and vice versa).

Add to that Dani as the dresser and assistant to the stars who is being farewelled after many decades.

That's about all we need to know – because it all plays out with Gallic charm and finesse just as you like it.

THE REEF

(US, 2006, d. Howard E. Baker and John Fox)

The popularity of Finding Nemo meant that audiences were comfortable with animated films set under the surface of the ocean. It was a pleasing film of a lost son and the search by his father – and there were a lot of comic characters both in the sea and in the dentist's waiting room fish tank in Sydney. Then came Shark's Tale which was popular enough but a bit too adult in its plot, characters and references to the movies, especially gangster movies with Robert de Niro and a Martin Scorsese lookalike fish.

The Reef is much more simple than both these films but is clearly indebted to Finding Nemo. And its original title was Shark Bait. The Reef is a better title because that is where the orphaned Pi (voiced by Freddie Prinze) takes refuge from the net that took his parents in Boston harbour. Some friendly dolphins take care of him. At the reef, he sees the love of his life, Cordelia, all pink (voiced by Even Rachel Wood) being photographed by divers. But, a nasty young shark Troy (voiced by Donal Logue) is also infatuated with her and confronts Pi.

There are several old fish codgers around and a walrus, several voiced by Rob Schneider. Pi's oddball aunt has the unmistakable voice of Fran Drescher.

Of course, we can imagine the rest. Love triumphs and Troy finishes up in the net.

The film was criticised as being derivative of the other films. I'm not sure the very young audience I saw it with wanted to make these film criticism connections. Rather, they seemed rapt – and not going out to toilet breaks. In its less sophisticated way, it was entertaining the littlies. Which is what it intended to do.

SCHOOL FOR SCOUNDRELS

(US, 2006, d. Todd Phillips)

Once upon a time there was a modest British comedy (1960) with Ian Carmichael (usually the pleasant foil for the dastardly), Terry Thomas (who could twirl a moustache as the best of pantomime villains) and Alistair Sim (who could be ingenuously or sinisterly dithery). It was called School for Scoundrels. It showed the innocent how they could be really caddish.

Now there is an American remake (why?) with the dorkish Jon Heder (Napoleon Dynamite) and the bad-mouthed suave bully Billy Bob Thornton (Bad Santa).

What can be comic with a British cad fails to cross the Atlantic and the same behaviour seems simply mean-spiritedness combined with an overweening desire for brutal oneupmanship.

This means that this is a very broad comedy of a gawk who enrolls in a school for self-assertiveness (at the expense of anyone else) run by a two-timing manipulative exploiter. As they begin to eyeball each other, the results are far from pleasant. It just looks like the worst of American me-firstness. The advertising tagline tells us that nice guys finish last.

It was adapted and directed by Todd Phillips who made the rather crass Old School.

SIGNIS FILM REVIEWS APRIL 2007

AFTER THE WEDDING
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CHANTEUSE, La (THE SINGER)
FACTORY GIRL
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SHERRYBABY
SLEEPING DOGS
STOMP THE YARD
TMNT (TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES)
ULTIMATE GIFT, The
ZODIAC

SIGNIS STATEMENT: DELIVER US FROM EVIL

AFTER THE WEDDING (EFTER BRYLLUPPET)

(Denmark, 2006, d. Susan Bier)

An Oscar nominee for Best Foreign Language film of 2006.

The opening is arresting as Jacob, Mads Mikkelsen (the junkie in the Pusher films and Le Chiffre clashing with James Bond in Casino Royale) is a dedicated and popular worker in an orphanage in Mumbai. The immediate emotional appeal is very clear.

However, the plot proves less predictable than one might have thought. Jacob has to return to Denmark to consolidate funds for the orphans. His benefactor is a wealthy businessman who has built up his empire from nothing. Seeming rather indifferent to Jacob's presentation and video of activity in Mumbai, he invites Jacob to his daughter's wedding the next day.

Here matters become very complicated and the storyline is best left for audiences to find out for themselves. Needless to say, Jacob has to fight for his projects but the industrialist has more hidden motives in mind.

The material is more than a touch soap-operatic but rises above this through the powerful performances of the principal cast. There are domestic issues as well as questions about philanthropy, foreign do-gooding in countries like India and collaborating with Indians to effect their own development.

AMAZING GRACE

(UK, 2006, d. Michael Apted)

It is said that the hymn Amazing Grace is the best known in the English-speaking world. Most would not know that it was written by a ship's captain, heavily involved in the 18th century slave trade, who experienced a conversion and devoted his later life to prayer and reparation. His name was John Newton – and he is played most movingly here by Albert Finney.

However, the focus is on the anti-slavery campaigner, William Wilberforce. He is played with intensity and conviction by television's Captain Horatio Hornblower, Ioann Gryffudd. And he is supported by a fine and extensive British cast including Michael Gambon as Lord Fox, Benedict Cumberbatch as the young Prime Minister, William Pitt, Rufus Sewell as the activist the Rev. Thomas Clarkson, Ciaran Hinds as the arrogant Lord Tarleton of Liverpool and Romola Garai as Barbara Spooner who eventually married Wilberforce.

Most audiences will find Amazing Grace a significant cinema experience. Its style is very much the British heritage recreation of a period, a meticulous presentation of period, costumes, décor and the atmosphere of the times – which culminates in a moving brass band rendition of Amazing Grace.

But, what will be important for audiences is the theme of the inhumanity and injustice of slavery and the fact that the plantations of the West Indies and the Americas depended for their prosperity on slave labour and the urban wealth of the 18th century metropolises, especially those in Britain and America, was based on slavery.

2007 sees the 200th anniversary of the Act for Abolition of the Slave Trade throughout the British Empire, although the final Slavery Abolition Act was not passed until 1833, the year of William Wilberforce's death. This makes the film immediately relevant, especially as questions about the need for apology from government, of justice for those who still live the consequences of this trade, are canvassed and argued.

The movement against slavery was not something that cropped up and achieved its goals over night. It took decades. And this is what this film portrays.

One of the arresting features of *Amazing Grace* is its presentation of Christian faith, convictions and action. Wilberforce as a child knew John Newton and his history and repentance. There are two moving sequences when Wilberforce visits the ageing and later blind Newton (who declares that he once was blind but now he really sees). Amongst the movement for the abolition of slavery were a number of religious ministers and Quakers. Wilberforce himself contemplated moving out of parliamentary life for prayer and solitude but was persuaded by Newton that faith needed action.

Wilberforce is a fine example of something that is very difficult to find these days, a man who brings his faith into public life.

The film opens in 1797, fifteen years after he began his crusade. He is unwell, is prescribed laudanum to ease the pain of his colitis. But, it is at this juncture, he meets Barbara Spooner, a strong-minded subscriber to his ideas and ideals. She encourages him to go on with his campaigns and he finds his voice again.

The film moves back to the 1780s and traces the collaboration between William Pitt who was to become Britain's youngest prime minister and who, in principle supported his friend from Cambridge days. While there are sequences showing some of the horrors of the slave ships and the sometimes frantic meetings conducted by Wilberforce and his group, some of the most interesting sequences are in the parliament with the heat of debate illustrating the self-interest and lack of compassion of so many members, many of whom were indebted to slavers and businessmen.

Wilberforce was a statesman, a man of honour – and a prophet for his times.

THE ASTRONAUT FARMER

(US, 2007, d. Michael Polish)

What to make of this rather odd piece of Americana which tantalises with the juxtaposition of the two occupations of its title? The title, by the way, is like *Good Will Hunting* – it looks as if it means something but it is the name of the central character. Here he is Charlie Farmer, played by a genially obsessed Billy Bob Thornton.

A strong caution is in order – not a moral caution because the film is quite a wholesome tale of family, hopes and dreams and values. No, the caution is a warning to hyper-realists. You will not like this film and probably think that the plot is not only implausible but impossible. Actually, the caution could well extend to ordinary realists as well. While it is all filmed as a realistic, even naturalistic, story, it is an American fantasy: anybody can achieve their dream, no matter what.

So, this is the story of Charlie Farmer, his wife Audie (Virginia Madsen) and their three children who live on a farm in a small Texas town. So far, so ordinary. But, Charlie, with the help of his son Shep, has built a rocket in his barn and intends to go into space. When he rides around his property, he dresses in his space suit.

Not only is the audience sceptical, so are some of the folksy townspeople although they come to embrace him and his cause. The media descend on the town as well. Most sceptical are NASA and the federal aviation officers. The FAA man to confront the would-be-astronaut Farmer is the no-nonsense, J.K. Simmons. He wants to forbid the whole project. More congenial is the NASA expert who has been in space. He is played by a nice Bruce Willis who tries to dissuade Charlie by reason and common-sense.

If this sounds improbable, then this is not your film. Even trying to be sympathetic to characters and situations, it does seem highly unlikely that a farmer and his son could build a spaceworthy rocket in their backyard, so to speak. When they build another one (and keep it secret from the officials, though two men do stay in the town to report back but they are presented as clowns, with the *Darth Vader* theme for their mobile phones), credibility is more than strained. Father and son have also developed a successful system for radio contact.

It's not giving away too many secrets to say that the mission is a success. Charlie has had a peak experience and shown that any dream is achievable. In searching for what American reviewers thought of the plot, I noticed that one used a word that I would not normally use, but one which does seem apt. Despite the niceness, it is 'wacky'.

BECOMING JANE

(UK, 2007, d. Julian Jarrold)

Jane Austen continues to be ever popular. There have been new television versions of *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey*. The Keira Knightly-Matthew MacFadyen *Pride and Prejudice* proved a winner with audiences in 2005. Emma Thompson won an Oscar for her screenplay for the 1995 *Sense and Sensibility*, the same year as the Colin Firth-Jennifer Ehle television version of *Pride and Prejudice* became one of the most avidly followed series. Emma was portrayed by Gwyneth Paltrow in 1996 and Frances O'Connor starred in *Mansfield Park* in 2000. Quite a collection of films and television adaptations.

Now, the question is what about Jane Austen herself?

The answers offered in *Becoming Jane* are insightful rather than historically accurate.

First, an alert to the title and its play on words. The film suggests the influences on Miss Austen that led her to becoming the great author admired for the last two hundred years. However, the Regency period in which she came to adulthood and did her novel-writing was one of surface wealth, elegance and propriety. Jane fitted into this world (even as she looked at it and described it with ironic wit) and was a very becoming woman. Both these aspects are present in this lightly entertaining journey back into British literary history.

However, one needs to do a bit of googling to check how the screenplay has played with dates. At the end, an ageing Jane (though she was only 32 at the time of her death) does a public reading of *Pride and Prejudice* (which had been published only four years earlier; *Sense and Sensibility* preceded it in fact and both *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey* were published posthumously).

But this film is something of a fantasy. What if...? And how could Jane have written so insightfully into the emotional details of the human heart (both male and female) without having some experience of love herself?

Historian Jon Spence acted as adviser to the film. He gave a kind of blessing to the speculation that the Irish Thomas Lefroy may have served as something of an inspiration to Jane. The screenplay posits that, after a short period in which she detests his manners, his manner of sleeping during her reading at her sister, Cassandra's engagement party, his derogatory remarks and his somewhat profligate reputation, she falls in love with him. And, eventually, he with her. But, as we know, it was not to be.

Actually, the screenplay is often quite close to *Pride and Prejudice*. Her parents, the Reverend Austen (James Cromwell) and Mrs Austen (Julie Walters) bear a number of similarities to Mr and Mrs Bennett. Lady Gresham (a pinched-mouth Maggie Smith) is, of course, a Lady Catherine de Burgh type. The family of an impecunious family, the local balls, the church-going are all familiar Austen themes and reflect her life. The film also suggests that when she writes of Lydia and Mr Wickham eloping, she knew from first hand what it was like, though her motives at the end are highly noble.

Anne Hathaway is very pretty as Jane and she is placed in very pretty surroundings. She makes a fair fist of assertion (though she played more assertive characters in *Brokeback Mountain* and *The Devil Wears Prada*). James McAvoy (after Narnia, *Star Trek*) plays a character who is not entirely unlike his character in *The Last King of Scotland*. He starts as a would-be man-about-town indebted to his humourless, rigorous and snobbish judge uncle (Ian Richardson in one of his final roles). An unwelcome

summer exile to Hampshire turns him into a devoted but weak suitor. McAvoy's is quite a strong performance.

Becoming Jane takes us back two centuries for a pleasantly light and rather slight exploration of Jane Austen.

BREACH

(US, 2006, d. Billy Ray)

This is a very interesting drama. In fact, it is more than interesting. It broaches not only the issues of national security and espionage, treason and treachery in the American context, it takes us further into the complex psyche of the traitor. The traitor is a patriot with a twist, but he is also a surface outspoken religious man whose dark side is not limited to lies and betrayal but involves some sexual deviance. He is a proselytiser for his Catholic faith and a devout member of Opus Dei.

We are told immediately that Robert Hanssen was arrested in 2001 for the worst breaches of American security ever, information given to Russian contacts over a period of 22 years. At the end we are told that he is serving a life sentence in a Florida maximum security prison with 23 hours a day isolation.

There has been a succession of films, fact as well as some fiction based on fact, especially about English spies like Kim Philby, Guy Burgess, Donald MacLean and Anthony Blunt. Timothy Hutton appeared as American Aldrich Ames who is referred to in this film by Hanssen as the most destructive spy up to that time.

This film, directed by Billy Ray who directed the fascinating story of serial plagiarist, Glass, Shattered Glass from the New Republic, delves into the character of Robert Hanssen, showing him in the two months prior to his arrest, caught in the act of making a drop of documents. The FBI appointed him to a fake task to keep an eye on him and get enough evidence for the arrest. They assigned an ambitious young employee, Eric O'Neill, as clerk to Hanssen to keep an eye on him because of the sexual issues. They soon have to reveal the truth to him when he finds that he admires Hanssen – at which stage both he and the audience are quite shocked. We have seen the earnest, ultra-serious Hanssen in action, know him as personally unsympathetic but a rosary-praying, mass-going grandfather, supported by a similarly devout and devoted wife.

The young assignee is a careless Catholic with an East German wife whom Hanssen wants to convert. This Catholic theme is well explored although the enigmas and contradictions of Hanssen's life are not solved. The final words in the film are a request from the haggard Hanssen for Eric O'Neill to pray for him.

Chris Cooper has proven himself a versatile and persuasive actor in many roles (including his Oscar-winning *Adaptation*). He communicates the surface as well as the depths so that we are continually astonished by his inconsistencies of attitude and behaviour and continually scrutinising him to try to grasp and understand more. It is a fine performance.

Ryan Phillippe also proves that he is developing as an actor (after *Flags of our Fathers*) showing the blend of ambition and naiveté that makes him credible to Hanssen as well as reliable to his Control (played with ice and intensity by Laura Linney). He grows into the job even though it is in danger of ruining his marriage. He is able to make Hanssen believe him and exercises great shrewdness to lull Hanssen and lure him into a trap. O'Neill finally leaves the bureau and the credits' information is that he is a practising lawyer in Washington – he would be a formidable performer in court.

The screenplay does not make much overt reference to Opus Dei – Eric complains at one stage when Hanssen explains the society to his wife – so there are no Da Vinci sinister overtones. Rather, the religious theme is shown in action. It contributes to those insightful films which show the extraordinary inconsistencies in the behaviour of respectable Catholics (like *Looking for Mr Goodbar* or *Priest*).

This is a well-written and intelligent drama for adult consideration with challenging psychology and themes.

CATCH A FIRE

(UK/South Africa, 2006, d. Phillip Noyce)

Shawn Slovo, daughter of the anti-apartheid activists Joe Slovo and Ruth First, wrote the award-winning film, *A World Apart*, which was released in 1988, a memoir of her girlhood when her mother was in prison. Now she has written the story of Patrick Chamusso who went to South Africa from Mozambique as a 15 year old, worked hard in the mines and rose to be foreman in a refinery. When arrested for sabotage of the refinery and tortured, as was his wife, he became bitter against the South African regime and the Security forces, went to train with the ANC in Mozambique and Angola and returned to blow up the refinery. He was arrested and served ten years on Robbin Island.

There have been many films highlighting the hardships and the atrocities of the apartheid era. One thinks of the story of Steve Biko and Donald Woods in *Cry Freedom*, the court cases in *A Dry White Season*, the American reporter in *Country of my Skull*.

One complaint by social activists is that these films, geared for a Western audience, focus on white characters or characters from the West as well as black. *Catch a Fire* offers a balance with its story of Patrick Chamusso. The white characters are Afrikaners, especially the security officer, played by Tim Robbins.

Australian Phillip Noyce discussed his suitability as director with Chumasso who told him that there was an advantage in the story being told by an outsider. Noyce has shown interest in race issues from the time of his short film *Backroads* (1977) to his world-acclaimed *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002). As a craftsman with both Australian (*Newsfront*, *Heatwave*, *Dead Calm*) and American (*Patriot Games* and *A Clear and Present Danger*) experience, he is able to tell a story with excitement along with passion for the issues.

Patrick Chumasso is a decent man, able to support his wife and family, but is not a saint. He has another child to support. In doing this secretly, he becomes entangled in the accusations of sabotage and interrogation by the Security officials – including a rather bizarrely quiet and surface-friendly scene where he is invited to eat with the official and his family.

Humiliating treatment and torture change his whole attitude and he sees himself as a freedom fighter while the government brands him a terrorist. This raises the perennial issue of the difference between a member of the resistance in war, a freedom fighter and a terrorist. We have seen in the 20th century how yesterday's resistance member or terrorist can become tomorrow's statesman and politician, be it in France, Israel, Palestine or in the countries of Africa. The parallels with contemporary problem areas are quite clear whether they be in Iraq or in the border stations between Israel and Gaza.

The film is involving, evokes some responses of outrage. But, it finishes with the actual Patrick Chumasso appearing genially along with the actor who portrayed him so well, Derek Luke (Antwone Fisher). Chumasso reflects on his time on Robbin Island, the impact of Nelson Mandela, the end of apartheid and the impact of the whole movement for Truth and Reconciliation which is marked, as is Chumasso, by the spirit of forgiveness along with hope for the future.

CATCH AND RELEASE

(US, 2006, d. Susannah Grant)

All the ingredients of an American romantic comedy. However, there is a pervading tone of seriousness that tempers the romantic touches. It is a star vehicle for Jennifer Garner after her success on television with *Alias* and her films, *Electra* and *13 Going on 30*.

The film starts with sadness, Gray (Garner) speaking tearfully to her recently deceased fiancé and regretting the final things she said to him. Her friends (Kevin Smith and Sam Jaeger) are supportive but, at the funeral, she encounters Fritz (Timothy Olyphant) her fiancé's best friend whom she finds obnoxious. The fiancé's mother (Fiona Shaw) has a harsh streak.

The film continues with the sadness but changes tack when she looks into the financial dealings of her fiancé and discovers he is paying child support. The mother of the child (Juliette Lewis) wanders into the proceedings, not knowing about the death. Needless to say, a lot of emotional complications ensue. And, it should be said, the ending is a happy one, though not all the angles could be easily anticipated.

This is one of those popular pleasing stories that most people don't mind seeing but would not necessarily choose to watch. It is an opportunity to see Jennifer Garner in a more emotional role. It also offers Jay and Silent Bob fans a chance to see more of Kevin Smith. Since Jennifer Garner is married to Ben Affleck, she is like a kind of sister-in-law to Smith who has had Affleck in most of his films. Smith is no Silent Bob here. In fact, he has a lot to say as an always-eating, size-challenged friend who is always putting his foot in his mouth but humanises, especially in his caring for his friend's little boy. (And most of his dialogue sounds more like what he writes for his own films rather than the dialogue in this one.)

Susannah Grant has been a successful screenwriter (Erin Brockovich, Charlotte's Web). This is her first film as director. It is one of those films offered as typical slice of life where limitations are initially to the fore but the characters have matured a little by the end.

QUAND J'ETAIS CHANTEUR

(France, 2006, d. by Xavier Giannoli)

Gerard Depardieu is something of a miracle! How can someone who looks so ungainly, not so handsome at all, and not as young as he used to be, still appear so charming and engaging? This is one of his most pleasingly accessible films – and suggests that he could have an alternate career as a singer.

This is very French in story, characters and relationships. He is still a band leader and singer in these days of karaoke. She is a somewhat repressed estate agent with a son. He falls for her. She takes quite some time and then we are not always certain whether she falls for him. In between there are many songs and musical interludes, a lot of looking at prospective houses for him, some moodiness on the part of each, the prospect of a big concert gig – as well as a bout of vocal chord inflammation and other expected ingredients.

But, it all works nicely. Depardieu will consolidate his fan club and Cecile de France is a striking screen presence. It is the kind of story that Hollywood likes – a remake with Nick Nolte and Cate Blanchett?

FACING THE GIANTS

(US, 2006, d. Alex Kendrick)

A preface to this review: some years ago I was invited to be part of a panel discussion; the theme was 'What can Protestants learn from Catholics about film and what can Catholics learn from Protestants?' Rob Johnston from Fuller Theological College said that Protestants need to learn about the Catholic tradition of images as well as a deeper incarnational theology (and has developed this theme in his book *Reel Spirituality*). In responding about the Protestant tradition for Catholics with its emphasising the Word of God, I mentioned that Catholics are rather reticent in their overt professions of faith and are not prone to confess publicly that Jesus Christ is their Lord and Saviour or to quote the scriptures as if they were written this morning with today's readership in view for a literal interpretation.

These memories came to mind while watching *Facing the Giants*. It has been made on a small budget by a Baptist community and church in Georgia and is set in a Christian community college. It is definitely not reticent in the characters continually quoting the scriptures (rather incessantly from an ordinary Catholic

sensibility). It is strongly confessional with characters proclaiming their faith in their Lord and Saviour, interpreting every event, including the football competition which is at the core of this film, in devout and explicit God-language.

A glance at the Internet Movie Database blog comments indicates that the audiences made up of the kind of characters portrayed have been genuinely and sometimes profoundly moved by the film and its 'clean' treatment of its theme in contrast to the language and innuendo (and more explicit treatments) of mainstream films. Violence is not a concern because this is a very muscular Christianity. The football competition stands as a symbol of applying one's gifts and talents to a competitive combat ('play hard'). The training is particularly tough and physically demanding but seen as a rigorous, personalised kind of asceticism. The blog comments mention applause during screenings, laughter and tears as well as admiration for traditional values, especially obedience to parents.

But, beyond this niche audience (which is not inconsiderable given the push in the years after *The Passion of the Christ* to provide films for this mainly American religious audience), how does the film come across?

More mainstream Christians, especially of the more reticent sensibility about professing faith in public or in the ordinary happenings of life, will find the religious dimension often cringe-making. It is very much American religious heart on sleeve. The reaction is not because they themselves do not pray or share some of the beliefs, but that this extremely earnest piety is very didactic, preachy and, at times, seems motivated more by proselytising than by trust in the power and persuasiveness of dramatic cinema storytelling. And some of the interpretations using the scriptures as metaphors (like the assistant coach applying Jesus' saying about the narrow gate to the hero's not kicking soccer style but aiming at the American football goal posts) are taken to limits.

And if this is the response of the mainstream, the wide audience who does not use this kind of language, who do not have these mindsets, will feel alienated by the explicitness and the style.

This is a football film about underdogs having faith (and Faith) in themselves and God and going on to win because God is on their side and, even though they would praise him in defeat, defeat is not on the prayer and action agenda. The opposing team is the Giants (a rather boorish and secular group) and the key player-hero is called David! The screenplay moves along the expected lines and conventions of the inspirational sports film.

One blog writer did dissent from the praise and saw a danger in the somewhat blind faith exercised by the characters who really do expect God to help them because of their faith and his being on their side and that everything is possible. The writer asks about the potential for disillusionment when with, say, a child dying of cancer, the child is not healed and dies. A significant question about faith and presumption.

Associate pastor, Alex Kendrick co-wrote, produced, directed and acts in the central role of the coach. His performance and those of others are frequently stilted. Many performers are not professionals and act accordingly.

Facing the Giants did get a theatrical release in the US and does show there is a market out there – but, more by its style and explicitness and its conversion aims, it is limited to more evangelical Christians.

FACTORY GIRL

(US, 2006, d. George Hickenlooper)

No, this is not another workplace social action drama like *Norma Rae*. *The Factory* was not that kind of factory. The Factory was the New York studio of artist Andy Warhol and his followers in the 1960s and 1970s.

As we watch the lives (and deaths) of the Factory people – and there are also quite a number of films in which Warhol appears like *Basquiat* and *I Shot Andy Warhol* – we might well wonder whether it is really

worth our time. They belonged to another world that most people might find curious for a short visit and an opportunity to be close to celebrities for a moment or two, but you wouldn't want to live there.

Factory Girl is an ambiguous film. It celebrates the short life of a woman with whom, for a brief time, Andy Warhol was infatuated, escorted her and included her in a number of his 'underground' films. Edie Sedgwick was from a family that traced its lineage and wealth to ancestors aftermath of the Revolution and in the writing of the Constitution. However, there were traces of insanity in the family as well. Edie, all bright-eyed, goes off to New York for art work but is almost immediately welcomed into The Factory, into the films, into the glitzy Warhol art world. She is also introduced to drugs and becomes desperately dependent, squandering her money. For a short moment, she is involved with a Bob Dylan like musician, but he marries. Warhol loses interest in her and, drug-dependent, she goes to an institution in her home town of Santa Barbara. A few years later, she died of an overdose at the age of 28. It was not exactly a life to celebrate. Rather, it is a wasted life to regret.

Sienna Miller brings some verve and vitality to the role but, as with Edie Sedgwick's life, we might ask, to what purpose?

Guy Pearce immerses himself in the role of Warhol and demonstrates his versatility. Hayden Christensen, on the other hand, may be imitating Bob Dylan, but he comes across as singularly colourless as the musician.

There is some interest for those in the know in the re-creation of life at the Factory, the penny-pinching making of the films, Warhol's skills at graphic design which, with his soup cans and Marilyn Monroe pictures, influenced art, and the bizarre personalities who frequented the Factory. Warhol himself seems an odd personality, fidgety and reticent yet a limelighter, confident yet quite diffident in manner, especially in the sequence where he tries (or does not) to direct the musician for a film. At the end, there is an excerpt from an interview with the actual Warhol where he speaks of his detachment from people which highlights his seemingly callous embracing of and then discarding Edie Sedgwick.

L'AMICO DI FAMIGLIA

(Italy, 2006, d. Paolo Sorrentino)

This is very much a mood film, an unpredictable blend of naturalism, dream and surrealism. Liking it will depend on moods. It is also a rather creepy film. The central character and his behaviour are definitely creepy.

According to the press release, everybody likes Geremia. That was not my impression from watching the characters interact with him. And this review is a dissent. Geremia is creepy and unlikeable.

He is seventy, ugly, lives with his dominating and invalid mother, runs a tailoring business but is a moneylender, exacting and demanding. We see a number of his victims, including parents borrowing for their daughter's lavish wedding. Geremia is a constant womaniser and takes advantage of the bride to be – whose psychology throughout the film is inconsistent and baffling. The same is true of his longtime friend who helps set up money lending targets.

Pride comes before a fall and Geremia falls hard but it is very difficult to generate a modicum of sympathy for him. Geremia demands full interest from his customers – but he has a hard time getting interest from the audience.

GONE

(Australia/UK, 2006, d. Ringan Ledwidge)

Some tourist bureaus must be getting alarmed. After Them and Blood and Chocolate, who would dare go to Bucharest? After Wolf Creek, who would want to go to the outback of Australia? Apparently, Alex and

Sophie, the two central backpackers in *Gone* have not heard about Wolf Creek. The title, *Gone*, indicates that not everyone is going to survive this story.

Actually, it is something like a B picture of the past, a hitchhiker story, not so much with horror, as a drama which builds up suspicion and ends in death and terror. While it finishes in the outback of central Queensland, it treats the audience to glimpses of Sydney, northern coast beaches and Byron Bay and some coastal Queensland settings before our travelling trio make for Longreach.

Brit Alex (Shaun Evans) gets off the plane in Sydney intending to catch up with his girlfriend Sophie (Amelia Warner) who is already in Byron Bay. A chance encounter on his first night in Sydney with a nice young American man called Taylor (Scott Mckelvie) who was mean in *Mean Creek* but heroic in *Peaceful Warrior* leads to Taylor him offering a lift, doing kind things (though he has a bad habit of snapping compromising photos) and then suggesting that they travel together.

As expected, bad idea. Not that Taylor is so obvious or blatant. He is able to persuade people to give him the benefit of the doubt. But, he is bad news, deep down malevolent.

We see a lot of Australian scenery but practically no Australians. They are in bars drinking or performing in a local band and dancing – or a dead kangaroo on the highway. Acting and directing are not going to win any awards. It's another of those threatening tales that provides a movie pastime.

THE GOOD GERMAN

(US, 2006. d. Steven Soderbergh)

Patrons wandering into *The Good German* unprepared might be taken aback, thinking that they had come into a retrospective of Hollywood 40s films by mistake. They would see the standard box size screen, black and white photography, hear a swelling Warner Bros old time score and notice the costumes and hair styles of the period. But, that is what director Steven Soderbergh intended. The word that so many critics decided to use is 'pastiche'. *The Good German* is a pastiche of the style and post-war themes of such films as *Casablanca*, *The Third Man* and *Notorious* (two of which starred Ingrid Bergman). It even has a *Casablanca* ending – which is definitely not the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

So much comment has been given to the style of the film – and so high are the reputations of the films that have served as inspiration that critics spend a lot of time regretting how this one is not as good as the old classics. (Would they have recognised them as classics at the time or given them a few thumbs down?)

This means that not enough attention is given to the themes of the film. Sixty years after the end of World War II and a history of the more noble stories that emerged from the war, some of the darker stories of victory and occupation now emerge. It is interesting to note that Robert de Niro's *The Good Shepherd* appeared very recently with some explorations of and ugly stories of war espionage and the establishing of the CIA.

The Good German provides a complex plot based on the fact that men and women who have survived a war can be mistrustful and likely to lie in most of their responses simply to protect themselves. The setting of the film is Berlin just after the May German surrender until the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima on August 6th 1945. The occasion is the Potsdam conference where Truman, Churchill and Stalin met to decide the fate of post-war Germany, of divided post-war Berlin, and the Eastern European countries.

George Clooney, in a rather laidback performance, is a journalist who had spent time in Berlin before the outbreak of war. Toby Maguire, in a rather brief role, plays a frighteningly callous young GI who tells us that the war has been great for him. Maybe a nice young man back home, in Berlin he is revelling in the black market profits where, as he says, having money can enable you to be your real self. But, he is naively self-confident and no match for the intrigues of both the Americans and the Russians.

A sudden thought at this point in the film is wondering what is happening now in Iraq, who is doing the wheeling and dealing in plans and contracts for reconstruction, in black market activities. If then, why not now? A sobering distraction from the events of 1945.

The other central character is, as in each film noir of the mid-40s, the femme fatale. She is the woman of mystery who obscures the truth, tempts men only to destroy them. This time it is Cate Blanchett in yet another very different role. She is an actress who immerses herself, appearance, accent, look to play convincingly a London teacher or a reformed Sydney drug addict – or Queen Elizabeth – and always be convincing.

Here she is the wife of an SS officer who is linked with a notorious concentration camp which exploited prisoners in labour for the development of rockets and nuclear bombs. History reminds us that both Americans and Russians were desperate to get hold of these scientists to compete in the Cold War arms race.

Director Steven Soderbergh admires the classic styles and themes of the past. While his film might be a cinematic experiment, it offers war themes and deceptions to be pondered.

THE HILLS HAVE EYES II

(US, 2007, d. Martin Weisz)

Warning. If you find the credits difficult to sit through, then it is best to go. A screaming imprisoned woman is in birth pangs, delivers her baby and is killed. There are a number of far more gory deaths to come.

That is the nature of The Hills Have Eyes films which have now become a franchise. Wes Craven wrote and directed the original in the 1970s, a gruesome tale of a cannibalistic family who preyed on people for food. The story was given quite a classy update in the 2006 re-make, more restrained visually but also more evocative with a lot of emphasis given to the social implications of the atomic testing past which created the mutant cannibals.

Craven and his son Jonathan have written this sequel, moving away from the theme of a terrorised family and writing a 'lost patrol' story where the members of a small squad are picked off one by one. At this level, the film is routine except for the brutality and nastiness of the deaths and torture. There is also a constant barrage of tiresome crass language. The mutants and their behaviour are particularly repellent. Performances are not altogether persuasive with a gallery of the usual suspects: pacifist hero, strong combat heroine, mother type, responsible leader types, the soldier who wants out and offers to go for help (who has obviously not seen enough movies to realise that he is the next to go in ghastly fashion) and an irritating complainer critic who lives far longer than he needs to!

On the other hand, there is also a political subtext that we are quickly alerted to. The group in the film are rookie National Guards who are seen on a training exercise, which they bungle – the location is called Kandahar. Later there are some references to contemporary Middle East conflicts. This means that the story is one of amateur Americans, not fully trained, having to fight unseen monstrous enemies in desert and mountainous cliff terrains, some courageous, some panicky, some fearful, involved in battles they cannot win. At the end, the producers pay tribute to National Guards and their courage but express a hope that the battles they have to fight will be worthy ones. So, the terror film becomes a mirror symbol and critique of American military policy.

I WANT CANDY

(UK, 2007, d. Steven Surjik)

A lightly lewd jokey British comedy about film students, desperate to make a movie, who get tangled up with some gangsters and porn film-makers. You can guess the rest and you would be generally right: lots

of mix-ups, filming in the family home, criminal threats, hopes for a career and their being dashed, culminating in a happy ending and the equivalent of the Oscars for the porn industry.

It would be silly to take this one too seriously – it doesn't take itself very seriously although the cast work earnestly and with energy. There are some crass moments but nothing like scenes in the early Scary Movies and the sex scenes are brief and mild, less explicit than in the British comedies of the 1970s in the Confessions of a... series.

It has the Ealing Studios logo which could mean that some veterans of the heyday of the 1950s might be turning in their graves!

KARDIA

(Canada, 2006, d. Su Rynard)

Su Rynard is a Canadian documentary maker and video artist. This is her first feature film. It is a moving experience.

The focus of Kardia is, as the derivation of the title suggests, the human heart. A voiceover prologue reminds us that the heart is the fundamental organ of the human being. Before the developments of understanding of the brain, many functions were attributed to the heart. Our language is full of heart phrases. While there is myth that the soul should weigh 21 grams, it was said that the worthy heart of a dead person should be as light as a feather.

This prologue introduces us to Hope (Mimi Kuzyk) a pathologist who investigates the heart and causes of death. After leaving her lab, she collapses, her heart stops and she dies. The film is principally a flashback to her childhood as well as to her immediate life before she dies.

Hope is an abandoned baby, found by a war veteran who takes care of her and rears her like a father, including volunteering to give blood in a pioneering operation to save Hope's congenitally damaged heart. Intercut with this story from the 1950s and 60s is the adult Hope's work, her preparation for a lecture on physical data and its relationship to emotion and love. Her two assistants are initially sceptical preferring to consider only the relevant physical facts. Hope also investigates her own operation through archives and newspaper reports of the time.

The contemporary story raises a number of issues concerning a holistic approach to the human being and the relationship between speaking one's mind and listening to one's heart and the psychosomatic effects of emotion on the heart.

The continual flashback's to Hope's childhood are often lyrical, Dad being one of the nicest characters one could see on screen, a completely loving and dedicated man who opens Hope's vision in a range of sequences, including imagining the joy of flying, reading from Dante's Inferno, and explaining that she must set a salamander free so that it can live in its own environment. One can see how profound his influence has been on the mature Hope.

And yet, as Hope asks at the end, how much of this story is memory and how much wish. She feels an interconnection with the man who volunteered his blood for her. His blood is part of her blood, his story part of her story. This shifts the level of the narrative from a memoir to a kind of fable about the heart, blood and interlocking lives and mysterious, even mystical connections.

To say that this is a very feminine film is not merely to state that the film was written and directed by Su Rynard but to say that it is feminine in the best Jungian sense of Anima, that feminine principle, that is an integral part of women and men.

THE LAST SINEATER

(US, 2007, d. Michael Landon Jr)

One of the Fox Faith department films that were promised at the end of 2006. This one is based on a popular novel for children and so the film is geared to the family audience. It has been directed by Michael Landon Jr who also directed the Love Comes Softly series about the pioneers of the west, some of which are part of the Fox Faith program.

The Sineater is a creation of Welsh and Scottish Christians, a creation that has all the hallmarks of dark superstition but which also sounds akin to tenets of the doctrine of Purgatory.

In the Appalachian mountains in the 19th century, the Welsh migrants nominated a sineater from their community who would attend the funeral and by symbolically eating and drinking at the graveside would offer to take on himself all the sins of the deceased.

In this story a young girl feels that she has been responsible for the accidental death of her younger sister. She breaks the custom of looking at the sineater at a funeral and then seeks him out for him to absolve her.

The community is a God-fearing one but dominated by a brutal patriarch, harsh on his own son, and the secret of the past brutal dealings with the Indians. Into the village comes a Christian 'Man of God' (Henry Thomas) who challenges the beliefs and explains that Jesus is the original sineater. He pays for his convictions with suffering but is able to bring peace to the young girl and the son of the patriarch.

This is a particularly American story with a strong focus on children. There is a surface house on the prairie atmosphere but the hidden dark side needs exposing and healing. It is a film about different kinds of faith.

MR BEAN'S HOLIDAY

(UK, 2007, d. Steve Bendelack)

There is very little a review can say about Mr Bean and his movies. One either loves them or loathes them.

For the loathers, it is important to note that Mr Bean is far more benign in this film than in the past. He is not nearly so mean or downright nasty. He does have a few of these moments, as when he slides all his uneaten oysters into a lady's bag at a fashionable Paris restaurant. But by and large, he is far more kind than we might ever have expected him to be.

For those who love him, this incipient niceness may be a put off. His self-satisfied oneupmanship or his desperate trying to save himself in awkward situations may have been part of his past appeal.

Mr Bean wins a raffle at the local church which sends him off to Cannes for a holiday with a videocamera and an envelope of euros. The video camera features in a lot of the gags and amusing use is made of the footage during the Cannes film festival.

Basically, Mr Bean has troubles on his way to Cannes, getting on and off trains and entangling himself with the stranded son of a Russian director whom he had persuaded to film him getting on the train and who subsequently found the doors shut on him. After various mishaps, after busking with the boy to an operatic aria to great acclaim, he finds himself on the film set of a commercial using the Nazi invasion of France. Needless to say he causes mayhem for the pompous director. He gets a lift from the actress, is reunited with the boy and then gate crashes a premiere where the star has a cameo in the pompous director's film.

There are a lot of sight gags which fans will enjoy. Mr Bean, at this stage of his life, seems a cross between Jacques Tati and Jerry Lewis.

Film buffs will enjoy the scenes with the director, Willem Dafoe, especially the screening of his pretentious, existentialist arthouse film which he wrote, produced, directed, starred – and basked in self-

satisfaction during its screening while everyone else slept or fidgeted. When it is interrupted with Mr Bean's visuals along with the director's voiceover, it is a hit!!

Director, Steve Bendelack, has a twenty year history of directing much satiric television including Spitting Image, The League of Gentlemen, French and Saunders, The Royle Family and Little Britain.

Rowan Atkinson used to be more acerbic as Mr Bean and, especially, as Blackadder. Since the Johnny English shenanigans, he has become more benign, aiming at a broader audience.

NORBIT

(US, 2007, d. Brian Robbins)

Definitely an Eddie Murphy film. He co-wrote the story and screenplay, produced and takes three major roles. It obviously has a huge audience on home ground and has been very successful in the US. But, whether it travels well is another question.

A distraction during the screening was to wonder who was the most irritating, screeching character in films recently, whether Diane Keaton as the mother in *Because I Said So* or Eddie Murphy as the humungous and monstrous Rasputia here. It's an almost impossible decision. Rasputia is at first a helpful little girl, well a rather big little girl, who helps the harassed orphan Norbit, also Murphy. They grow up and marry and she turns into a dominating harridan in collusion with her brutal brothers who have the town under control. Norbit is a pleasant nerd who loves orphans and pines for his childhood sweetheart, Kate (Thandie Newton) who turns up to bring some sweetness and light.

There is quite a lot of plot, plenty of crass jokes and innuendo which puts it beyond the younger audience who might relish the slapstick. It is with great relief to read at the end that the characters bear no similarity to any real person – so, we are reassured there is no such real Rasputia.

OUTLAW

(UK, 2006, d. Nick Love)

The immediate reaction to a film like *Outlaw* from most people would be to find the plot and some of the brutality repelling. But, there is much more to it than that. It is a film about vigilanteism in contemporary Britain but it is not necessarily advocating it – though some alarmed viewers might think it is.

Rather, it can be seen as a social and moral case study, something of a practical fable whereby audiences can test out their beliefs about law, justice, the ineffectual administration of both, especially when police officials are in league with criminals.

There used to be a device for seminarians studying moral theology, a fictitious case set up with arguments on both sides of an issue so that the students could understand, discuss and draw moral conclusions about the complexities of human behaviour and wrongdoing. This is how *Outlaw* could work for a thoughtful audience.

Writer-director Nick Love is familiar with this kind of process. His two previous films attempted something like this: *The Football Factory* and the thuggery among fans; *The Business*, about gangsters, their setting themselves up in comfortable lives and the inevitable falling out.

Outlaw introduces as to a random group of men who experience violence in today's London. Danny Dyer (who opens the film with a premonition dream) is bashed in front of his fiancée. Sean Bean is a seasoned military man who returns from service in Afghanistan after a court-martial, finds his wife unfaithful and is consumed by bitterness and his inability to fit in again. His friend (Rupert Friend), son of one of his commanding officers, has been savagely beaten by gangs who have served minimal gaol sentences.

Meanwhile, a successful black barrister is threatened by the standover men of a drug-dealing club owner and his pregnant wife is murdered.

By this stage of the film, audience emotion is high. Vengeance, especially in the face of official indifference, leniency and corruption, seems a tantalising option. The atmosphere is powerfully highlighting an eye for an eye. In the background are television broadcasts on the role of the government, the home office, reports of cases and echoes of the situation in Iraq. On the street and in the bars and clubs racism is rampant.

Through a security guard (rejected from the army) (Sean Harris in a chilling performance), all these people come together. The barrister's chauffeur (Bob Hoskins) resents his treatment by the police after so many years' service and has access to names and addresses and the authority to collect CCTV surveillance tapes. The army man offers to train the men to fight back.

This is where the screenplay will not be comfortable for those who are vociferous against the victimisers and treat vigilantes as heroes (with the suggestion that this is what the tabloid press tends to do). At first, the men (soon to be referred to as the Outlaws by the media) are hesitant about committing themselves to such brutality. While they are won over (peer pressure, the demands of the leader and the psychopathic rantings of the security guard, who embodies everything that is wrong with vigilanteism), there are still some hesitations.

The film asks us to look closely at the emotional and moral effects of their actions on the group as individuals and as members of society. No matter how urgent the drive for vengeance, it has in itself the power to destroy the vigilante, especially, as happens here, when they take other's lives into their own hands.

While the final moment of the film might look as if it is ultimately endorsing such violent action, we are left pondering what the consequences will be for the man involved. He has virtually lost everything except his hatred.

This is not so much a film to be enjoyed at a multiplex where indiscriminating audiences might identify with the thuggery and strong arm tactics. It is a film which mirrors within two hours any number of today's headlines which need well thought out law and justice answers.

PREMONITION

(US, 2007, d. Mennan Yappa)

We all know what a premonition is, a sense of the future and, generally, a dread of what will or could happen. There are plenty of premonitions here. And it is a challenge to the audience to try to work out what is premonition and what is real in the experiences of Linda Hanson (Sandra Bullock). She is married with two daughters, has a husband with a good job, a comfortable house, friends and a congenial way of life that has become routine. When she wakes up one day and is informed by police that her husband has been killed in a car accident, she is grief-stricken, trying to console her daughters.

The only (only!) trouble is that she wakes up next day to find her husband is downstairs having breakfast – nothing has happened.

Then she wakes up again and he is dead again... and then...

So, what is real and what is premonition? Even though Linda does a diagram trying to work out what is the chronological order to her experiences, it is not easy to come up with a clear and logical synopsis of what has happened – and what is about to happen in the following week.

Now we know where we stand, but are still confused as to what is happening around this point. We see Linda going to a psychiatrist and getting medication that she had previously found mysteriously in her

bathroom cabinet. We see the funeral and her mother's care for her as well as the presence of her husband's business associate. Then she meets the assistant in real life. Her older daughter's face is disfigured with cuts – and is then healed. How and when did this happen?

Eventually, the fatal day built up from the premonitions of death arrives and Linda intervenes to change what might happen. Can she? Does she? Is there a happy Hollywood ending as expected? Should there be?

This is a Sandra Bullock vehicle. We see her as the ordinary housewife and mother which makes her dreams more strange but plausible. She is a strong screen presence and keeps us involved in her bewildering premonitions and reality. Her husband is played by a suavely suburban Julian Mc Mahon.

This is a PG thriller, avoiding the problems of explicit language, sexuality and violence, so that most audiences can become involved and experience the suspense and general eeriness of such premonition happenings.

SHIETAN

(France, 2006, d. Kim Chapiron)

Shietan means Satan.

In recent years French film-makers have shown a greater interest in what seemed a particularly American genre, the kind of film exemplified by the several Texas Chainsaw Massacres and their many derivatives. Young people go on the road. Something holds them up in their journey. They are taken in by some locals who turn out to be murderous and things turn to torture and blood when they fight for survival. They have titles like Cabin Fever, Wrong Turn...

Two French examples are Haute Tension (the director of which went to the US to do the remake of The Hills Have Eyes, also in this genre) and Calvaire. The protagonists of these films tended to be in their 20s and 30s rather than the teenagers in many of the US films.

It is Christmas and the caption for the film says, 'Forgive them for they know what they do'. With this introduction, we are asked to spend what seems an interminable time with a group at a nightclub, not particularly interesting or attractive characters. Eventually, not before time, they go out to a country house of one of the group where they come across the gardener/caretaker (Joseph) and his pregnant wife.

All is not necessarily well because Joseph, played with leer and verve by Vincent Cassel, has a mad grin and white but diabolical teeth. After being taunted and terrorised by some louts at the local swimming hole (Joseph joining in), they go back for a Christmas dinner where things become even more bizarre and violent, including an odd birth, an evil Christmas and the victimisation of the central character, even to his having to supply his eyes for the Christmas doll.

During the dinner, however, this is a dramatic pause as the characters discuss life and death and the meaning of life, the existence of God and evil or not. This does supply some reflective foundation for the film.

However, it is basically a young group terrorised by maniacal types in the country melodrama, a terror movie.

SHERRYBABY

(US, 2006, d. Louise Colyer)

A small independent film, a brief slice of life. While it is a common and familiar story, it is acted and presented with thought and care, a stimulus for audiences to respond to and think about the characters, their hopes and their disappointments.

Basically it is a story of a 16 year old who got hooked on drugs, became pregnant, stole and finished up serving some years in jail. Now she is out, is clean (despite her cravings), has to find a place to live, get a job (especially with children with whom she works well), re-establish her relationship with her daughter who is being raised by her brother and his wife and who have become the parent figures for the little girl. She is also under the strict and fairly unsympathetic supervision of her patrol officer.

It all plays out much as you would expect. She takes up with a reformed addict whom she meets at a 12 Step meeting. Her brother wants to do the right thing but will not step in to save her if she goes back on the drugs. Her sister-in-law is sometimes helpful but has become rather possessive about the little girl. The daughter herself does not always warm to her mother.

What makes the film better than others is the effective plainness of the plot and the writing. The screenplay is well served by the cast, led by Maggie Gyllenhaal as the Sherry of the title. She won a Golden Globe nomination for this performance.

Nothing new, nor anything conclusive. Rather, a small case study presented in ordinary and humane terms.

SLEEPING DOGS (STAY)

(US, 2006, d. Bob Goldthwait)

This is a film which needs careful reviewing. The conclusion would be that anyone interested in moral issues and moral cases could well see the film and find matter for a great deal of worthwhile discussion on moral responsibility, choices and consequences, the proportion between mistakes that seem gross but isolated and really evil decisions. Understanding and forgiveness are also themes which would emerge.

How could this come from a brief, serious comedy by a writer-director best-known for some raucous performances, especially in three films of the Police Academy series?

The opening sequence, where an 18 year old girl, bored and immature, contemplates some aberrant sexual behaviour (not graphically shown but suggested) and acts on her impulse, tells us where we stand. We, like the girl, are disgusted. But, the film asks whether that should be the end of the story and whether this be held against her forever. Is regret enough? Is revealing this secret a helpful therapy? How does one cope with the reaction of loved ones? How important is reticence and confidentiality? Does this disgusting one-off immature act mar a person's life from then on? What about proportion, understanding and, where needed, forgiveness.

The story itself is rather simple. Amy and John don't want to have any secrets between them as they prepare to marry. Should Amy tell John her secret? He tells her some from his boyhood and sexual activity. It is clear that she is eventually going to tell him and we are kept wondering when and how, especially as we have seen how John has lewdly reacted to a story Amy made up to get her out of a situation. And what if others know about it?

As the film goes on, we find ourselves more and more identifying with Amy. This is where the film, although it has the light touch and some comic moments, is really a moral case study. What would we do? What would be our regrets for similar behaviour – or lesser behaviour of which we are ashamed? Can we confide – but, in whom? And what if people act in a condemnatory and judgmental way? Is this merited? Who forgives – and who is entitled to forgive?

Maybe Bob Goldthwait was not thinking all these thoughts and simply wanted to make an offbeat comedy about truth, family and relationships (and there are plenty of funny and bizarre episodes with Amy's

parents and her jealous addict brother, with her fiance and with a co-teacher). But, given the issues his characters keep raising, it would seem he really did.

STOMP THE YARD

(US, 2006, d. Sylvain White)

The formula remains the formula but the motivation is different.

Just as there have been, over the last twenty years, films of Breakdancing, Salsa, Rap and all kinds of dance competitions and putting on a show, so Stomp the Yard has its 21st century types who are skilled at an energetic and gymnastic style of street dancing and stomping.

It starts with fierce rivalry in a performance in front of cheering crowds, like the kind of taunting rivalry in rap battles (as in Life and Lyrics). But this is also gang LA competitiveness where fights lead to gun deaths. At the university where our hero, DJ (Columbus Short doing all his own dancing), studies, two fraternities are practising for national championships. The film climaxes with some spectacular and athletic performances in the finals.

Where the film is different is in the emphasis on education for African Americans. DJ attends (the fictitious) Truth University in Georgia which boasts of a heritage which includes Martin Luther King, Coretta King, Rosa Parks and Esther Rolle. There is an appeal to young African Americans to value education and its potential for personal and social empowerment.

The campus setting is a change from the ghettos and the 'hoods. While the rivalry is strong and the personal conflicts emotionally violent, energy is put into the dancing and into ambitions.

There have been a lot of this kind of 'inspirational' sports or dance films in recent years: Gridiron Gang, Coach Carter, Pride... Which means that they are still needed.

TMNT (TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES)

(US, 2007, d. Kevin Munroe)

During the 1980s two writers, Peter Laird and, decided to create a spoof of the hero genre popular at the time. The thought up the unlikely title of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. These alternate heroes became something of a cult very quickly in print, on television and in the early 1990s, three live-action features.

Obviously, they have not died out because here they are in 2007 in animated form (in both senses). Four hundred animators in Los Angeles and Hong Kong worked for over two years on this action adventure.

For those not in the know, there is an introduction to each of the Turtles (graced as they are with Renaissance names: Leonardo, Raphael, Michelangelo and Donatello). Their history is outlined in sonorous tones by Laurence Fishburne. He also takes us back to an alignment of the stars 3000 years ago when power was absorbed by a warrior and 13 beasts were left to roam the earth. Another alignment is about to occur, so it is the perfect time for the Ninja brothers to regather under the leadership of their master, Splinter.

Plenty of action from then on in sophisticated animated style. A strong voice cast as well including Mako, Patrick Stewart and Sarah Michelle Gellar.

It offers what you expect.

THE ULTIMATE GIFT

(US, 2006, d. Michael O. Sajbel)

The Ultimate Gift is one of the earliest releases from the Fox Faith department, announced at the end of 2006, for the release of faith-based films. This one is more accessible to the wide audience as it does not wear its faith credentials on its sleeve (as, for instance, in the Baptist-church produced Facing the Giants which has an explicit, almost proselytising screenplay).

Rather, this is a moral fable.

James Garner plays a very wealthy oil and businessman who leaves minimal wealth to his sons and daughters (all materialistic, selfish and extravagant) and the widow of another son (she is a flighty socialite). What he does do (and it is all presented on DVD so that the tycoon can speak directly after his death) is offer a chance to his disgruntled grandson who resents his grandfather for his own father's death in Ecuador. The grandson, Jason (Drew Fuller from Charmed) is a spoilt, insolent, self-centred, pleasure-seeking young man with no regard for anyone. Taunted by his mercenary girlfriend, he succumbs to the temptation to try to find out what his grandfather had in mind for him.

The bequest is something akin to the labours of Hercules. Jason is given tasks, step by step, which he unwillingly participates in. But, as we know, ultimately they will have their effect on him and he will learn the value of the gifts of work, money, friendship, family, sacrifice... and of a life of value with values.

Early in his quest he comes across a precocious young girl in the park (who, for some unexplained reason, was also at his grandfather's funeral with her mother). The girl has terminal leukaemia. She is played – with a self-determination and self-will that outshines the redoubtable Dakota Fanning – by Abigail Breslin (after she appeared in Keane and in her Oscar-nominated role in Little Miss Sunshine). Her mother is attractive, common-sensed and not mercenary (Ali Hillis).

Jason's quest takes him to dig post-holes for Brian Dennehy in Texas, to sleeping in the open in a park in Charlotte, to the hospital and to the mountains of Ecuador for an explanation of how his father died (and to be abducted for ransom). The benign controllers of Jason's destiny are played by veterans Bill Cobb and Lee Merewether.

There is religious language and feeling in the film but it is given a 'worldly' context which makes more impact than if it were presented preachily. While this is a moralising story, it trusts in the impact of its story to move people. (The director, Michael O. Sajbel, also directed the less successful story of Esther, One Night with the King.)

ZODIAC

(US, 2007, d. David Fincher)

In the late 1960s, early 1970s, a serial killer terrorised the San Francisco area. He sent coded letters to the press. He taunted the police and boasted of his exploits. He used the sign of the zodiac and was called the Zodiac killer. The investigation lasted many years with no one arrested. There were several suspects. One of the major suspects was finally identified in 1991 but died before charges could be laid.

This is the story of the investigation, of the media response, of one individual's obsession with the case and his uncovering of the evidence which led to the principal suspect. The investigator was a cartoonist, Robert Graysmith, working for the San Francisco Chronicle who eventually published his book on which the screenplay for Zodiac is based. He served as an advisor as did the chief detective on the case and a number of other police officers.

The film uses the technique of names, places and dates to give a kind of documentary tone to the film, inviting the audience to share the experiences of the killings, the steps taken by press and police, the frustration in not being able to charge a suspect, the frustration of time passing, the intense activity of

Robert Graysmith and the final identification of a photo of the killer by one of the earliest victims who survived an attack by the Zodiac.

The film, lasting almost three hours, is continually absorbing, especially for those who are intrigued by puzzles and codes and trying to decipher them. For those who prefer straight action, Zodiac might seem too drawn out, emotional but also cerebral.

On the one hand the choice of David Fincher as director might seem strange. He has something of a reputation for stylish and stylised terror or horror with such films as Aliens 3, Seven, The Game, Fight Club and Panic Room. These are much more flourish and flair films than Zodiac. On the other hand, especially with Seven, Fincher has shown great interest in exploring the character and impact of a serial killer.

The film opens with the popular style and music of the late 1960s, fairly straightforward visuals, even with the (rather visually restrained though dramatically tense) sequences of the first murders. As the time frame moves on, the film resembles more the police investigation films of the seventies and eighties, even showing a clip and the posters for Dirty Harry which seems based in part on the Zodiac killer.

Initial contact is made with the crime reporter for the Chronicle, Paul Avery. Avery was something of a maverick and took particular interest in the case, following leads, upsetting detectives, writing articles but becoming afraid when he was threatened by the killer. He was moved off the case and began to drink, dying in 2000. He is played with his customary distinctiveness by a long-haired and goateed Robert Downey Jr.

However, in the background is a very earnest young cartoonist whom Avery befriends and who is caught up in puzzles and continues to follow the case, Robert Graysmith, played with an obsessive charm and naivete by Jake Gyllenhaal. In the latter part of the film, his character and investigation dominate.

In the meantime, the detectives begin their work. The partners are played by Mark Ruffalo and Anthony Edwards. When the film focuses on them, we follow the procedures in quite some detail. When the Anthony Edwards character resigns, then the film pays great attention to Mark Ruffalo, especially the frustrations in later years as little progress seems to be being made.

A number of quite creepy characters are seen or heard about, all of whom could be plausible candidates for the Zodiac. One of them in particular, played with a bizarre blend of arrogance, defiance, smile and sincerity is played very interestingly (and sinisterly) by John Carroll Lynch.

Over the years there have been many films in this genre. One thinks of The Boston Strangler or 10 Rillington Place from decades ago. In the 1970s there was Badlands. Television has portrayed some of the headline cases in the US like those of Ted Bundy, Mrs Harris and the Scarsdale Diet killing or the Melendez brothers who killed their parents. Zodiac is one of the most accomplished of these films.

SIGNIS STATEMENT

DELIVER US FROM EVIL

Directed by Amy Berg

Those who watched the telecast of the Academy Awards in February 2007 will have noticed that one of the nominees for Best Feature-length Documentary was Deliver us from Evil. There was a brief clip of a cleric giving video testimony in court. The film did not win. The Oscar went to Al Gore and An Inconvenient Truth.

An Inconvenient Truth could have been the title of Deliver us from Evil. The stories of clerical abuse have been with us for more than twenty years, although the wide American focus came as late as 2002. The truth has certainly been inconvenient but it has also been appalling. It has been a call for an examination of

conscience for the Catholic church and a call for compassion for the victims of this abuse. The question of how to deal with offending clergy has also been very difficult and has caused many moral, legal and financial problems.

Somebody wisely pointed out that, until the recent revelations, the sexual abuse of minors was not considered by many (most?) people as a crime. It was judged as a sin, certainly, but a sin required different handling from a crime. Events have led the Church to realise that it is dealing with a crime that has police and judicial repercussions not simply a pastoral question as to whether a priest be corrected and moved to another place of ministry hoping that he has repented and will not offend again. The traditional act of contrition may have given rise to the belief that all could be well, easily well if one made strong acts of the will: 'and I firmly resolve by the help of thy grace never to sin again and amend my life. Amen'. In reality, the abuser of under age minors, especially, has a serious psychological aberrant condition and needs treatment as well as being put out of the way of harm to children.

These themes are explored in *Deliver us from Evil*, a meticulously made documentary by a director who is not a Christian and is looking at the issues from outside the Church. Clearly, there will be argument about some of the detail included and Amy Berg's interpretation but she sought advice and legal counsel about the truth of the claims made in the film.

The focus of the film is Fr Oliver O'Grady, an Irishman who worked in Northern California, from the 1960s to the 1980s. The film has significant ramifications for the Church today as, prior to his appointment to be archbishop of Los Angeles in 1985, Cardinal Roger Mahoney was auxiliary bishop in Fresno (1975-1980), bishop of Stockton (1980-1985).

Oliver O'Grady emerges from the film as, at least, self-delusional. On the one hand, he admits what he has done. On the other, he cheerfully excuses himself and compartmentalises his behaviour. As a portrait of a priest offending over decades, the film offers an alarming portrait.

In September 2005, the BBC's *Panorama* program featured Oliver O'Grady. The film-maker, himself a victim of abuse in Ferns, Ireland, asked O'Grady to indicate how he 'groomed' a young girl for abuse. He cheerfully did so, straight to camera, an astonishing performance (and the BBC, to its discredit, featured this sequence in the promotion of the broadcast as well as including it at the head of the program as well as during it). Fr O'Grady's behaviour and comments as late as 2006 are bizarre and reprehensible.

Deliver us from Evil works dramatically and powerfully. The range of interviews with victims and their parents are placed throughout the film. They have been judiciously selected so that the audience shares the experience of the families, the initial welcome to Fr O'Grady as he took a pastoral interest in them and became firm friends, being invited to meals and becoming part of the family. Families did not realise what was happening to their children. Such behaviour on the part of a priest was unthinkable to most.

As the truth emerged and Fr O'Grady went to different parishes in Northern California, the families were surprised, dismayed and shocked. Their outbursts, especially on the part of one Japanese-American father, are kept to the end so that, dramatically, the audience shares his pain. Some of the victims are also interviewed and tell the sad aspects of their stories.

Along with the chronicle of the history of Fr O'Grady's activities are the testimonies of Cardinal Mahoney and different church officials from Stockton diocese. Since the United States uses videocameras for depositions, the film incorporates footage of the actual questions and answers.

This is where there can be some controversy. The director has selected particular sections – and they sound to the detriment of the churchmen. The cross-examination shows that, as we realise, bishops were not so well informed about the nature of abuse, especially its criminality, and made decisions to move priests around – which resulted in further abuse. On the one hand, one can argue that in retrospect, bishops made poor decisions which resulted in some disastrous behaviour. On the other, we have more clarity now than then and it is easy to be judgmental in looking back. However, what is important is what is to be done now in terms of truth, justice and reparation.

Oliver O'Grady participated in the making of this film. He has been extradited to Ireland after serving his sentence in the US. His behaviour in Ireland, especially in terms of writing to his victims, indicate an erratic personality, and his being something of a showman.

One more alarming aspect of the film is the featuring of Fr Tom Doyle who, since the 1980s and his working in Washington DC and becoming involved in Bishops Conference decisions, has been something of a whistleblower and a friend of victims. He makes some very strong and critical statements during the film which also need examination and attention.

A useful exercise is to look at the Internet Movie Database on line referencing Deliver us from Evil and read the comments posted there by viewers of the film who feel free to offer their opinions for and against. There are some intellectual arguments there, some appeals to emotion, and quite some anger. Googling Oliver O'Grady provides quite a number of entries with information about him and his offences.

SIGNIS FILM REVIEWS MAY 2007

AWAY FROM HER
BEYOND THE GATES OF SPLENDOR
BLADES OF GLORY
BREED, The
BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA, The
CURSE OF THE GOLDEN FLOWER
EDMOND
END OF THE SPEAR
FRACTURE
FUR: AN IMAGINARY PORTRAIT OF DIANE ARBUS
GOODBYE BAFANA
HALF NELSON
LIVES OF OTHERS, The
MEET THE ROBINSONS
MESSENGERS, The
RENO 911!: MIAMI
NAMESAKE, The
NEXT
ONE NIGHT WITH THE KING
PAINTED VEIL, The
PATHFINDER, The
PERFECT STRANGER
PROVOKED, The
PUFFY CHAIR, The
REAPING, The
REIGN OVER ME
SCOTT WALKER: 30 CENTURY MAN
SHOOTER
STRAIGHTHEADS
SUNSHINE
THIS IS ENGLAND
UNKNOWN
VIE EN ROSE, La
WILD HOGS

AWAY FROM HER

(Canada, 2007, d. Sarah Polley)

Would you want to see a film about Alzheimer's Disease, its onset and the effect on a woman who is not particularly old, seems fully alive, a woman of charm and vivacity? If the answer is yes, then this is a film you should see. If the answer is no, then this review would suggest reconsidering the decision.

One of the outstanding features of *Away from Her* is that it has been made by a young woman. Canadian actress, Sarah Polley (who has been in films since she was a girl: *The Sweet Hereafter*, *The Claim*) has adapted a short story by Alice Munro, *The Bear Came Over the Mountain*. The screenplay shows a maturity and insight into old age which are quite striking considering that Sarah Polley was in her early and mid-twenties when she wrote and directed the film.

It is a Canadian film but the producers have scored a coup by enticing Julie Christie across the Atlantic to play the central role of Fiona. The story focuses on a couple in their sixties. He has been a professor, now retired, who has lived an active life and may not have always been faithful to his wife. But, she is loving and forgiving, reminding him that unlike other husbands at the university, he never left her.

She has stayed at home. Now, her memory is beginning to fade. We see it in the little details in the house, while she is cooking or in lapses in conversation with guests at table. The significant thing is that she is quite aware of what is happening to her. She accepts the oncoming of Alzheimer's. She calmly decides to enter a nursing home and tries to persuade her husband that this is for the best.

Julie Christie has often been described as radiant on screen. This film comes more than forty years after her Oscar-winning performance in *Darling*, after *Doctor Zhivago* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*. She is most definitely radiant here, persuasive as a woman who accepts what is happening to her and what the consequences will be. It is a beautiful performance.

Canadian actor Gordon Pinsent is her husband. He finds it very difficult to accept his wife's situation. As a concession, he agrees to accompany her to a residence where she could stay for a month as a tryout. The director (Wendy Crewson) is business-like with efficient charm. A nurse on staff is far more sympathetic and helpful. At the end of the month, Fiona opts to stay.

This is where the meaning of the title comes in. The film is poignant in presenting how much loss there is for the spouse who has to relinquish care of the Alzheimer's sufferer and watch, almost helpless, as the partner of so many years drifts away. This is especially hard as the spouse visits the home on an almost daily basis, finds that his wife vaguely recognises him but is far more occupied in tending to a wheelchair bound patient with whom she forms an attachment (Michael Murphy).

The film also gives us another angle on this situation as the husband goes to visit the long-suffering wife of the wheelchair patient (Olympia Dukakis). He finds that she has her own problems in being 'away from him'. She also resents Fiona's interference and wants to withdraw her husband. However, the two form an alliance and a sexual liaison in a form of desperation.

However, the film is one of empathy and hope – it offers some glimpses of recognition and some declarations of love. This is an admirable film on a difficult contemporary reality.

BEYOND THE GATES OF SPLENDOR

(US, 2002, d. Jim Hanon)

At the beginning of the 1950s a group of eager and earnest young evangelical men went from the US as missionaries to Ecuador. They wanted to make contact with a group of Indians, the Waodani, an isolated tribe of warriors who lived by a violent culture of the spear. The missionaries brought their wives and established their families. One, Nate Saint, was a pilot and flew over the Waodani area and discovered their whereabouts. The missionaries also took a great deal of film footage of their lives.

In 1956, they made more direct contact and their efforts seemed to be paying off. However, internal trouble in the tribe led to an attack and the massacre of the five men.

This is the subject of this very well-made and interesting documentary.

The early part of the film offers background to the Waodani and their customs. The bulk of the film gives explanations and the characters of the men, with plenty of excerpts from their home movies. Much of the film consists of interviews with the men's wives and with Steve Saint, with the memories forty years or more on from the events. The structure of the film enables us to follow the progress of these years, the massacre, the decision by some of the women to go to live with the Waodani and give a testimony of peace and service which led to the tribe abandoning their spear culture.

In the 1990s, Steve Saint, Nate Saint's son, who had spent childhood years with his mother and his aunt, Rachel Saint, with the Waodani, returned and decided to live in Ecuador. The film also traces the history of the Waodani who knew the men and some who killed them.

While the style of Christianity is evangelical, there is a minimum of preaching or proselytising here which makes it accessible to all Christians and to interested audiences who are not Christian.

Three years later, writer-director, Jim Hanon directed a feature film on these events, *End of the Spear*. *End of the Spear* gives more of its running time to the Waodani characters than the missionaries and invites its audience into the tribal way of life and dramatises the build up to the massacre.

Seeing the documentary first makes sense of the feature. Seeing it after *End of the Spear* (as this reviewer did) means that the documentary takes on a lot more meaning.

BLADES OF GLORY

(US, 2007, d. Will Speck and Josh Gordon)

Maybe Will Ferrell's comic style is an acquired taste. I have acquired it. It is always a mixed bag but the positives outweigh the negatives. In *Zoolander*, he was comically bizarre. *Anchorman* was funny. Elf was very nice. *Talladega Nights* started with a caution but turned out to be funny. Ferrell can do straight acting as in *Melinda and Melinda* and, especially, *Stranger than Fiction*. In *Blades of Glory*, he is very funny.

The film has much of the Saturday Night Live satiric humour – and some of the sardonic comedy of Christopher Guest's films like *Best in Show*. This means that there is a lot of farce, quite an amount of innuendo, some pratfall situations. But, there is a nice pre-sentimental streak there as well.

Napoleon Dynamite's Jon Heder (who has been rather obnoxious in *Benchwarmers* and *School for Scoundrels*) has a part that suits him very well indeed. He is a figure-skating champion, Jimmy McElroy, an orphan raised by a smiling dictator who wants only gold-medal children. His main rival is a slob, Chazz Michael Michaels (Ferrell). We are given amusing bios of the two as they compete in the winter Olympics. After a tie, they are embroiled in a public brawl and are disqualified. After several years of getting nowhere, their coach (Craig T. Nelson, who was TV's Coach) has the bright idea that they could be a duo and Jimmy's mad stalker is able to show how this fits in with the rules.

What follows is a series of funny comic training episodes, fights and rivalry and, eventually, some bonding. However, lurking in the background are a ruthless brother and sister team (Will Arnett and Amy Poehler, husband and wife in real life) who set their downtrodden sister (Jenna Fischer) to spy on the team and seduce them. Needless to say, it almost ends in disaster but, in split second timing, the two achieve blades of glory victory.

There are some very funny lines, often just throwaway. There are some very funny caricatures. Heder plays the nice, really ingenuous type and is sweetly convincing. Ferrell can do loathsome in a few-holds-barred style (especially because his character is also a sex addict) and bring out the comic side.

Much funnier than might be expected.

THE BREED

(US/South Africa, 2006, d. Nicholas Mastandrea)

In the 1970s, in the spirit of Jaws, there was a whole spate of animal menace films with titles like Grizzly, Rats and The Empire of the Ants. There was also The Pack as well as Dogs. This one could be called either of those titles. It is a brief, straightforward little terror story, filmed in South Africa, with some frights and some chills – depending whether you are a dog-lover or not.

The island is remote. A couple land and the woman is pursued by unseen presences in the woods and then dragged away. There is a deserted secret installation and buildings. Then five rich young adults fly in for a weekend at the house the two brothers in the group inherited from their uncle.

Well, in a way, anybody could have written the script from then on. The genetically modified dogs who roam the island after the labs were closed down, growl, snarl, bare their fangs, leap and throttle, terrorise the group, bite them, isolate them, gnaw through the moorings of their plane – and are omnipresent.

Who will survive, and how? That is the be all and end all of the film. The characters are a bit older than the teenagers whom you would generally like the dogs to devour and the issues between them slightly stronger. The cast is led by an athletic Michelle Rodriguez and Oliver Hudson (son of Goldie and brother of Kate).

THE BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA

(US, 2007, d. Gabor Csupo)

It is a pleasure to be able to recommend this film to audiences of all ages except, perhaps, the smallest of children. One can say that it is a lovely film. It is one of the best American films for young audiences.

The Bridge to Terabithia is based on the 1976 award-winning novel by Katherine Paterson, a book that apparently is well-read in America. It has been adapted by the author's son, David. It touches on many themes that children experience and can identify with: busy families, education, school bullying, making friends, using the imagination, being creative, death and grief, peace-making and hope.

The two child actors give very mature and nuanced performances. Josh Hutcherson (Zathura, Little Manhattan) shows great talent as Jess, the central character of the story, an 11 year old boy who has two older sisters and two younger ones. He tends to be overlooked in the family or taken for granted, except to do the chores. He is closest to his little sister May Belle (Bailee Madison) who is just starting school and relies on him. Hutcherson is able to portray believably the different moods of a boy who goes through quite some upheavals in his life.

The other principal character is Leslie, a new girl at the school and Jess's neighbour, an only child whose writer-parents love her but are busy about their creative work. AnnSophia Robb (who was sweet in Because of Winn-Dixie and nasty in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory) is a breath of fresh air as Leslie

who is outgoing, friendly and imaginative. Robert Patrick, best known as the evil Cyborg in Terminator II, has to be severe most of the time as Jess's father.

The filming took place in New Zealand towns and countryside standing in for the U.S.

Where is Terabithia? In a way, it is just across the river from home, a magical place in the woods. On the other hand, it exists mainly in the imaginations of Jess and Leslie. It is their kingdom, where they can go every day after school and make believe that there are huge tree-like trolls, small warriors and nasty flying mini-monsters. Jess tends to be very matter-of-fact, except in his constant drawings. Leslie is spontaneously intuitive and has no trouble in seeing Terabithia.

One of the best features of the screenplay is that the special effects (from the WETA Company in Wellington, who were responsible for the effects in The Lord of the Rings) do not dominate the story. The story is firmly anchored in the reality of home life, family, school and classes, life in the playground and travelling to and from by the school bus. This makes the excursions into the realm of fantasy more convincing and persuades us that children do need to foster their imaginations.

There is a plot development that will take those who have not read the novel (as I had not) completely by surprise. We adults were upset and tearful with what happens so, I would suspect, would be the children's audience. But, it is handled wisely and beautifully, realistically in the best sense.

This leads to a greater bond between Jess and his father and a more generous love from Jess for May Belle – building, just for her, a real as well as an imaginary bridge to Terabithia.

The director, Gabor Csupo, emigrated from communist Hungary in 1975 to Sweden, and worked in an animation studio. Later, in the United States, his company was responsible for the first three seasons of The Simpsons and then made the Rugrats series. The Bridge to Terabithia is a fine achievement.

CURSE OF THE GOLDEN FLOWER

(China, 2006, d. Zhang Yimou)

Audiences who have enjoyed Hero and House of the Flying Daggers will want to see The Curse of the Golden Flower. It is spectacular, though it is a more serious look at Chinese history without a lot of the flair of the acrobatic choreography of the previous films. Not that there aren't some spectacular battles!

It is twenty years since cinematographer, Zhang Yimou, directed his first film, Yellow Earth, and won the Golden Lion in Venice, 1987. His impressive career has gone through several phases. With actress, Gong Li, he made a series of beautiful and profound films, Ju Dou, the Story of Qiu Ju and the powerful and beautiful Raise the Red Lantern during the early 1990s. Then his interests broadened into 20th century Chinese life, again with Gong Li, in To Live and Shanghai Triad. In the late 1990s, he directed what might be called small gems, two more simple and focused stories of country Chinese life, Not One Less and The Road Home. In these he introduced Zhang Zizi who went on to Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, Memoirs of a Geisha as well as starring in his new phase of spectacular history starting with Hero.

The Curse of the Golden Flower requires words like 'sumptuous', 'glittering' and 'opulent' to describe the visual impact of its sets. Most of the action is confined to the Forbidden City and its courtyards and the interiors of the imperial palace in the latter years of the Tang Dynasty in the 10th century of the Christian era. The décor is magnificent. When it comes to the lavish costumes for the royal family, one has to look to words like 'gorgeous'. On the level of production design, audiences will be more than satisfied.

The Tang dynasty went through a period of great prosperity but slipped into political and moral decline. There is rottenness and decay beneath the beauty and the stateliness of the imperial customs, manners, protocols and rituals. Here is a terminally dysfunctional family. As the action plays out, we are reminded of some of Shakespeare's tragedies, like Hamlet. However, as the drama progresses, and the family turns

on each other, the film becomes more like a 17th century Jacobean play with its revenge tragedy motifs and bloodbaths.

It needs to be added that when the final battle sequences do arrive, it is computer graphics which take over. Leonidas and the makes of 300 need to look to their laurels as thousands and thousands and thousands of troops do battle with swords, with arrows, with battering shields in the last forty minutes of the film. For some it will be too much – and, certainly, too many! Yet, the director says this is his favourite part of the film, where the ferocious external battles contrast with the fatal domestic drama playing out indoors.

The Emperor has a son by his first wife whom everyone thinks is dead. He is now the Crown Prince, though unwilling, preferring to stand aside for the elder of the two sons of the Empress. Meanwhile the Empress is being poisoned through her medicines and is determined to stage a coup at the feast of the chrysanthemums, the Golden Flowers, using her older son. The family is consumed by power struggles, sexual intrigues and jealousies which eventually take their toll.

Chow Yun Fat plays the Emperor and it is good to see Gong Li, after her strange appearances in *Hannibal Rising* and, especially, *Miami Vice*, back in her own history.

After his trilogy of beautiful and spectacular histories, where does Zhang Yimou go now?

EDMOND

(US, 2005, d. Stuart Gordon)

Edmond is a David Mamet play from the early 1990s. It has all Mamet's vigorous themes about American male identity and crises as well as his flair for language both classic and crass. This film is under the care and direction of Stuart Gordon who worked with Mamet in Chicago theatre in the 1980s before moving to film and television with a horror bent after his cult success with *Re-Animator*. Gordon has a great empathy for Mamet's vision and style.

The other great advantage of this film version is the presence of another Mamet collaborator, William H. Macy. He brings his characteristic intensity, leavened with humour, to a very difficult role. This is a man who between the time he leaves his office at the end of the day will have experienced his descent into hell before the next morning. Macy is supported by quite a number of character actors in cameo roles, but it is basically his film. Among these actors are Joe Mantegna, Denise Richards, Mena Suvari and, importantly, Julia Styles as the friendly waitress.

Macy is *Edmond*, a somewhat meek Everyman of New York City. However, we find that not very far beneath the surface he is quite racist in his attitudes as well as being misogynist and homophobic. This will come home to him by the end of the film in ways that he could not imagine.

When his appointment time is changed and he sees a shop with a fortune teller with the same number, he wanders in out of curiosity and an underlying anxiety. The Tarot cards are not in his favour and we see the revelation as a kind of index of what is about to happen to him.

The first crisis is his going home to his wife (Rebecca Pidgeon, Mamet's wife) and a shouting scene of their breaking up and his walking out. Mamet has said that the play was the result of his break-up with his wife of the time and its bitterness.

As night comes on and he walks some of the dark and mean streets of New York, he decides he wants a sexual encounter. By now we realise that he is something of an absurd character. He goes to clubs and peep shows where he argues with the prostitutes about prices. Generosity is not his first name. He also encounters a mugging black pimp and loses his money and cards – and is unable to persuade anyone to lend him money. However, he fights back, his testosterone unleashed. When he is continually frustrated, he befriends a waitress, tells her his story and propositions her. This is what leads to an outbreak of mindless,

angry, highly emotional violence. A visit to a revivalist meeting after a woman on the subway claims he has assaulted her leads to his arrest.

His prejudices rear themselves in prison where he is taken under the care and sexual protection of his cellmate. Has he found some peace or a touch of redemption? Or is Mamet being totally nihilistic about Edmond's life being completely destroyed? Does Edmond escape in reality or fantasy from his descent into hell?

END OF THE SPEAR

(US, 2006, d. Jim Hanon)

There is a play on words in the title of this interesting and very earnest film. The end of the spear is, of course, the point which stabs and cuts anyone on the receiving end of the thrust. However, it also implies the ending of the prevalence of the spear by those who used it as a weapon. Both meanings are very relevant to what is presented here.

In 2002, Jim Hanon made a powerful documentary, *Beyond the Gates of Splendor*. Vividly photographed in Ecuador in the forests at the source of the Amazon, it recounts some of the history of the Amazonian tribe, The Waodani, as well as the story of some young American missionaries who went to work in Ecuador in the early 1950s. They made contact but were killed by the warriors with their spears.

Now Jim Hanon has made a feature film of this material. While *Beyond the Gates* told the story primarily from the American point of view, *End of the Spear* has a great deal more about the Waodani, their culture and life and what led up to the massacre.

The early sequences (made before *Apocalypse*), will remind audiences of Mel Gibson's portrait of the Mexican Indians, their battles amongst each other and their survival. The framework, however, is a meeting in 1994 between the Waodani leader responsible for the massacre and Steve Saint, the son of the missionary pilot, Nate Saint. As they go on a river journey to find the graves, the narrative takes us back and recreates the warrior's boyhood in the 1940s and life in this rather isolated group in the 1950s.

The missionaries appear, eager young evangelical Americans (who recorded much of their activity on film which was used in the documentary) and their devoted wives.

It was the wives and some of the children who finally made an impact on the Indians. Nate Saint's sister, Rachel, and some of the women ventured into Waodani territory and lived with them, showing a peaceful witness of service, helping at a time of a crippling polio epidemic. Missionary work can be evangelisation by preaching but it is the constant witness and living with people that can lead to conversion.

The film is in the tradition of more evangelical films where characters are much less self-conscious than, say, Catholics in their talking about their faith and Jesus as their personal saviour and will have an eager audience amongst members of those churches. However, there is a heroism in the story along with an ingenuous American simplicity in the missionaries that goes beyond a faith audience.

The postscript during the final credits, taken from the documentary showing the warrior visiting the US and modern supermarkets, is genial but a reminder of the enormous cultural changes the Waodani experienced in the 20th century.

FRACTURE

(US, 2007, d. Gregory Hoblit)

Fracture is a satisfying crime thriller with a courtroom background.

The director is Gregory Hoblit who began his career in television (especially with Hill Street Blues) and telemovies (Roe vs Wade). He moved to cinema features with a striking courtroom thriller and murder mystery, Primal Fear with Richard Gere and Edward Naughton. He has not made so many films but most of them are different and exciting (Fallen, Frequency) though his war film, Hart's War was not so effective.

This time he has made not a whodunit, nor a howdunit (though that is important), not a whydunit. We know this immediately. This is more of a how-can-you-prove-it?

The murder occurs early in the film. Anthony Hopkins plays Ted Crawford, an engineering expert who tests metals and surfaces for pressures and breaking points and enjoys himself with elaborate Rube Goldberg constructions (which the audience finds fascinating as well). He is brusque, arrogant, clever and drives his fast car very fast. So, it is not such a surprise when his wife (Embeth Davidtz) comes home after a meeting with her lover (Billy Burke) and, after some ironic wordplay, he shoots her. When the police arrive, he confesses. Where to go from here?

This is when Fracture becomes really interesting because Crawford wants to defend himself since he has set up the case so that the prosecution will have no admissible evidence. Enter ambitious, arrogant young prosecutor from the DAs office (Ryan Gosling) who is about to go upmarket in the world of corporate lawyers. He is asked to take on this open and shut case. No problem. He does. And then the problems start, not only for the case itself but for his own career – and his own integrity. As the director remarked, 'he grows a soul'. In the meantime, Crawford is testing his surfaces and breaking points.

Anthony Hopkins obviously relishes this role, an evil man who is smart, articulate, sardonic, who can taunt the young lawyer with a wink or a raised eyebrow. Yes, we all think of Hannibal Lecter – but this is a quieter, more calmly calculating destroyer. Ryan Gosling (The Believer, The Notebook, Half Nelson) looks young, acts brash, prides himself on being a winner and has visions of corporate high-flying. Gosling is quite convincing as the careless and presumptuous lawyer who gets his comeuppance but whose pride and conscience are hurt and who makes some decisions which show he might have some integrity.

The screenplay is well-written with a lot of wit and plenty of edge, especially in the courtroom scenes. There is a strong cast of character actors as well. David Strathairn is the head of the department for prosecutions. Rosamund Pike is the calculating and self-serving representative of the corporate lawyers. Cliff Curtis is an earnest detective and Billy Burke is the lover and arresting officer who is also Crawford's target.

How can the young lawyer possibly take Crawford down within the legal system? The final twist is interesting and effective.

FUR: AN IMAGINARY PORTRAIT OF DIANE ARBUS

(US, 2006, d. Steve Shainberg)

The title sends us in the right direction to appreciate this film – although many audiences had difficulties with it, assessing it as a biography and finding it not only wanting but too strange. We usually have no difficulty with a photo portrait or, especially, a painted portrait if the artist exaggerates some characteristics, distorts reality in some ways, adds symbolic touches which may or may not have been part of the subject's life. Portraiture is not meant to be an exact art.

However, with a film portrait, because it is presented in moving images, within some kind of narrative, the a priori expectation is that a portrait will be real and we want accuracy of detail. Fur is a fascinating example of a portrait from the imagination of the director into the imagination of its subject. While the screenplay draws on a biography, it makes clear at beginning and end, that it is a subjective exploration and that characters, especially the key character of Lionel, as well as family details are not meant to be taken literally.

Diane Arbus had a short career as a photographer but is considered one of the most innovative of American photographers. Her subjects were frequently outsiders to society. She committed suicide in 1971. She is portrayed here by Nicole Kidman.

What writer and director Steve Shainberg (whose previous film was the psychodrama on power and sexuality, *Secretary*) has done is to provide something of a 'realistic' setting for his fantasy exploration (New York, 1958) and then pursued it as if it were his dream about Diane Arbus and as if it were really her dream.

While we see her with her husband, photographer Alan Arbus, and her children, we also meet her dominating and snobbish parents who were former millionaires. Diane is a reticent, somewhat childlike wife, mother and assistant to her husband.

One night a cloaked and masked figure arrives to live in an upstairs apartment. He is concealed like the Elephant Man. It gradually emerges that he has a condition that makes him almost totally and rapidly hirsute. He has been an attraction in a circus and mixes with his many friends who are considered 'freaks'. It becomes a Beauty and the Beast story as Diane becomes more and more intrigued with Lionel (Robert Downey Jr who suffered from psoriasis) and his life and friends become hers – though her family are self-conscious and sometimes embarrassed, except her youngest daughter.

But Lionel is no man to be pitied. He is quite strong-minded, runs a successful wig business. But his lungs are deteriorating. Diane opens up to his very direct questioning, revealing episodes of sexual awakening when she was young and some repressed feelings. This new world entices her into a different life, especially as she falls in love with Lionel to the dismay of her devoted husband (Ty Burrell).

The film dips in and out of 'reality' but spends most of its time in the exotic looking world of Lionel's apartment, like a world created by Diane's unconscious where Lionel is a strong, powerful, wild and animal-looking Animus figure for her, a figure who could lead her to wholeness – except that he is dying and wants her to be present at his death.

So, this is no biography. Rather, it is a blend of the real, the fantasy, the dream, the psychodrama – an invitation to enter into the imagination of Diane Arbus. Nicole Kidman has already played an ultrasensitive and delicate creative artist, her Virginia Woolf in *The Hours*. She brings a tentativeness to her character here that is transformed to strength and will lead her – to places she never anticipated.

GOODBYE BAFANA

(UK/Belgium/France/South Africa, 2007, d. Bille August)

Another welcome opportunity to look back at the history of South Africa and apartheid and to try to understand what happened. It also offers the opportunity to see Nelson Mandela during the time of his imprisonment and a glimpse of his personality and stature.

James Gregory was a young policeman from the Transkei when he was appointed to Robben Island in 1968. Although he had grown up on a farm and had a black friend, the Bafana of the title, he had absorbed the apartheid mentality and its racial prejudices as well as the fear of ANC terrorist activity. Because he spoke Xhosa, he was put in charge of Nelson Mandela and to spy on him. He was also in charge of censoring all mail on the island and of sitting in on the six-monthly visits from family.

Over a twenty year period, he got to know Mandela better and as a person, read something of the ANC freedom charter (which was officially banned) and began to appreciate his prisoner more and more.

When world opinion and movements within South Africa led to the government exercising a greater PR moderation at the end of the 1980s and Mandela was moved to a more comfortable internment (not that Robben Island, as we see in the detail of the film, was comfortable at all), Gregory was asked to be there. He finally prepared for Mandela's release, after 27 years, on February 11th, 1990.

This is a film about Nelson Mandela but he is not the central character. This is James Gregory's story based on his book. It is a look at the times and the characters from a white South African point of view and a way into this period for a non-African audience, something parallel to Cry Freedom and Steve Biko's story via editor Donald Woods.

Visitors to Robben Island now are taken around the sites by former prisoners. Their commentary is full of healing and forgiveness, the fruit of a mentality of truth and reconciliation which was fostered by the Committee and its hearings from the mid-1990s.

Dennis Haysbert, best known for his role as the US president in the series 24, brings strong presence to his interpretation of Nelson Mandela. How Mandela kept his composure, grace and sanity through his almost three decade internment is an example to us all – ratified by his election as president of the country in 1994 and his subsequent presence on the world stage.

The burden of the drama rests with Joseph Fiennes who gives one of his best performances. Usually somewhat buttoned up in his roles, Fiennes shows a far wider range than usual and takes us on James Gregory's intellectual and emotional journey from prejudice to understanding, respect and compassion. He begins as something of a zealot, throwing his authoritarian weight around. He gives information to Pretoria that seems to lead to deaths including that of Mandela's son in a car accident. He warms to Winnie Mandela and gives her some chocolate which causes more than ripples in the politics and press of the time. He begins to question, to ask Mandela about issues, to read and to see through the stances of the apartheid regime.

Interestingly, the screenplay puts the prejudiced views into the mouth of Gregory's wife (Diane Kruger) who takes the status quo for granted, fears black terrorism and believes that apartheid is part of God's plan where all are not equal and different 'kinds' should not mix. Despite her husband's long contact with Mandela and Mandela's help with her son and his studies, before his release, she had never set eyes on him.

The film was directed by the Oscar-winning Danish director Bille August (Pelle the Conqueror, Best Intentions and Les Misérables).

HALF NELSON

(US, 2006, d. Ryan Fleck)

A Half Nelson is a wrestling move – shown here in an arm wrestling competition - where an attacker's strength is turned back on them to defeat them. It is a kind of dialectical tactic, so to speak. And this is the kind of speak from Half Nelson's central character, Dan Dunne, a young teacher at a Brooklyn Junior High. His specialty is history but it is always from the point of view of contrasts. He explains events and movements in terms of the confrontation of opposites, the power of dialectic.

Dan relates quite well to his class – and they, unlike so many characters in school films are not prone to violence or even much disrespect. Dan also coaches girls' basketball. But this is no typical inspirational film. Dan is not really a role model at all. During class he is often tired and offhand. In fact, he is a crack cocaine addict at night and, despite a try at rehabilitation, is really stuck on drugs.

Speaking of contrasts for dialect, Dan tells the class that humans are made up of contrasts, saints and sinners. Which sums him up.

One bright thirteen year old whose father has left, whose mother works night shifts for the city and whose brother is in gaol (and she wonders whether she will finish up there), Drey (Shareeka Epps) finds Dan high and collapsed after a basketball match and tries to help him. They become friends – he trying to get her away from the clutches of a rather genial and smooth dealer (Anthony Mackie), friend of her brother, while she serves as a conscience check on his behaviour.

Dan has friends on the staff willing to support him although the principal wishes he would stick to required texts. The students are studying civil rights and are shown historical clips and quotations from Malcolm X. Dan has an ex-girlfriend who is now going to marry someone else, has some one night stands with a fellow teacher but is fairly non-committal. We also see him at home with his parents.

Moments are glimpsed. Incidents occur briefly. This is a small budget film, not crafted in the polished Hollywood style. Ryan Gosling (*The Believer*, *The Notebook*, *Fracture*) received an Oscar nomination for this performance. Shareeka Epps is very impressive and convincing. The film just stops. It is not really inspirational. Rather, there is hope.

THE LAST MIMZY

(US, 2007, d. Robert Shaye)

The title isn't the greatest drawcard for a family wanting a good film for children and families. The film is good but the title is strange unless you are an aficionado of Lewis Carroll's *The Jabberwocky*. The Mimsy was taken for the title of a short story by Lewis Padgett, Mimsy were the Borogroves on which this film is based. Anyone needing the meaning of Borogroves needs to do a bit of Googling.

This is a tale told in the future, on another planet which had almost been destroyed but was saved with the help of two gifted children in our present. Put that way, it might sound a bit jabberwockish, maybe a little mimsy.

The children, Noah and Emma, are on holidays with their parents by the sea and come across some seemingly abandoned toys. Noah's school abilities improve, especially with his science project. At home, the toys and their paraphernalia create all kinds of patterns and meanings. But, it emerges that Emma is the gifted one, especially with her rag doll, her Mimzy.

Her parents are reluctant to face the fact that they might have problem children. A kindly teacher and his girlfriend who is a bit of an expert on these matters try to reassure the parents. Before you can say Alice in Wonderland, the police are swooping on the house and take the whole family off to prison. Scientists are called in and observe with disbelief. Security agencies are suspicious about terrorist activity, especially when the children's power causes a Seattle-wide blackout..

It is Emma who is the child with the powers gained from the aliens who have come to earth to learn from the past how they can restore energy and life for the future - and the children, to the disbelief of the parents and the authorities, who are the chosen vehicles.

It is a bit like ET coming to earth for extraplanetary solutions or a Close Encounter for children.

THE LIVES OF OTHERS

(Germany, 2006, d. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck)

This is a particularly fine film.

Winner of many European awards, it also received the Oscar for Best Foreign Language film. It received a SIGNIS (World Catholic Association for Communication) award as well.

This is a first feature film from a young German, Florian, who spent some years researching East Germany's Stasi and the history of the German Democratic Republic. He sets his story in 1984-1985, just before the election of Mikhail Gorbachev and his change of Soviet policy, Glasnost. Within five years, the Berlin wall would come down and soon after Germany would be reunified. This is an intensely dramatic period in post-war German history.

Western audiences do not see many films set in the Democratic Republic. During the 1960s, there were many spy thrillers set in Berlin which were exciting but seemed fantasy-like for those who did not live through those experiences. There were such titles as *The Ipcress File*, *Funeral in Berlin* (both with Michael Caine as agent Harry Palmer), *The Quiller Memorandum*. The Cold War was particularly freezing in that part of Eastern Europe.

German cinema in recent years has been trying to come to terms with its history both during the war and after. There have been many films examining the German conscience and looking again at the Nazis and also at the Holocaust. Two years ago, *Downfall* was released, a portrait of Hitler as both human and monstrous.

Recently, there was a popular film about the end of the Communist era, *Goodbye, Lenin*. However, there are some commentators in Germany who fear that many now look back at the era of the Democratic Republic with some nostalgia, as if it were a happier, more simple and more secure time. *The Lives of Others* is a sobering reminder that this may have been a surface impression but that it was not the case.

The prologue to the film shows the bureaucrat Hans Weisler interrogating a prisoner suspected of knowing who aided his neighbour escape to the West. Weisler has taped his long sessions and plays them for a lecture he is giving to potential interrogators, analysing the responses of the prisoner and pointing out details of the techniques developed to get to the truth.

This is a film about Weisler, a dedicated, rather lonely and humourless official, respected by his superiors, but someone who seems to have reached his peak as a relentless interrogator. He is put in charge of an operation to try to find something damning in the life of East Germany's most successful playwright who is living with the republic's leading actress. The whole apartment is systematically bugged with 24 hour listening, especially by Weisler.

So, the audience is involved in two worlds. First, the world of the government minister, who has a roving eye on the actress, and wants more information against the playwright. We are reminded that basic and base human nature does not change even for a demanding socialist ideology. Second, the world of the artists who experience some cultural and political repression and who look to the west for support, even to the smuggling out of critical articles for *Der Spiegel*.

The focus of the film is a transition in Weisler who believes that people don't change. He listens in to the life of the artists. He listens to music and Brecht's poetry, opening up imagination and feelings he was unaware of. As his demanding immediate superior puts on pressure, he is faced with moral dilemmas of loyalty to a cause and human decency. Weisler's is quite a moral journey.

Ulrich Muhe is mesmerising as Weisler. He is often stone-faced and expressionless but communicates powerfully the thoughts and feelings that he is experiencing. For us, an excellent and mature experience.

MEET THE ROBINSONS

(US, 2007, d. Stephen Anderson)

Meet the Robinsons has also been released in some theatres in 3D, so best to see it in that process if possible.

This is a family-friendly animation film from the Disney Studios. Lewis is an abandoned orphan who has the makings of a scientific genius. However, he really wants to invent a machine for the memory so that he can find his mother. Unfortunately, his chattering best friend in the orphanage is only interested in baseball and, even more unfortunately, Lewis gets wound up and can't stop explaining his machines to prospective adopting parents, splattering one overwhelmed couple with the contents of his peanut butter and jelly squirter. Will he ever be adopted?

A young lad named Wilbur turns up with a time machine and whisks Lewis off to the future which is where he and we meet the Robinsons, a gallery of eccentrics and oddballs that might make Fellini envious. But, in that future is a moustachioed man with a bowler hat who wants to patent Lewis's inventions, and is aided and abetted by a malevolent hat who transforms the future into drab dinginess. When Lewis is abducted and discovers who this bowler-hatted man is, he finds he has to save the planet. Who wouldn't!

A complication arises about the Robinsons when they want to adopt Lewis. Lewis is so happy because he has never had a family. Better not spoil the rest as everything is revealed, Lewis is able to change the past where necessary and launch into the future, a master inventor. Who could ask for anything more!

THE MESSENGERS

(US, 2007, d. Danny and Oxide Pang)

The Pang Brothers made quite some impact with their horror thriller, *The Eye*, as well as their gangster story, *Bangkok Dangerous*. They were offered an American film and this is the one that they chose.

There is nothing particularly new here, nor any particular Asian style that they have brought to this film (except perhaps the way that the ghosts are visualised and go into action). Rather, they have made a quintessentially American film. It is a haunted house, ghost and poltergeist activity film, not so much horror or terror, rather one that is eerie and creepy. And most of the haunting occurs during the daylight hours.

The messengers of the title are ravens (all, in fact, plus trainer, from the Czech Republic). They hover ominously in Hitchcock vein. They stare at the dilapidated house and barn which a Chicago family have just moved into to make a new beginning (not knowing the violent history of the family who used to live there as we do). They swarm and swoop and bang against windows. Eventually, signalling the approach of evil, they swoop, peck and bite.

The directors remind us that it is said that children are more open to 'the other side' than adults, so that is what happens here. Kristin Stewart (Jodie Foster's daughter in *The Panic Room*) is a troubled teenager who is not believed when she tells her parents of her fearful experiences, along with those of her little brother, Ben. Parents are Dylan McDermott and Penelope Ann Miller. John Corbett plays a genial stranger who helps with the new sunflower crop. He is often a bland presence (as in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*) but, once the ravens attack him, he is galvanised into surprising life. The climax occurs, as is fitting, in the darkened basement.

Unlike so many of the recent horror films, this one avoids the crass and the ultraviolent, relying on characters and situations and its eerie atmosphere. The ending, after the haunting, is literally and positively sunny.

THE NAMESAKE

(US/India, 2006, d. Mira Nair)

The Namesake is well worth seeing.

Director Mira Nair has built up a strong cinema reputation since she won the Camera D'Or at Cannes in 1988 with her first film, *Salaam Bombay*. Since then, she has made films both in India and the United States, including *Mississippi Marsala*, *The Perez Family* and *Karma Sutra*. She had great success with *Monsoon Wedding*, winning the Golden Lion in Venice in 2001. She made her next film in Britain, a very lively version of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*.

It is easy to see why she was attracted to Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, *The Namesake*. It is the story of two cultures, Indian and American, and their intersections. She herself has lived in India as well as in the US for a long time. She knows the experience. She entrusted the screenplay to her three times collaborator,

Soonai Taraporevala. This background of women writers and director, as well as the very impressive performance by Indian singer Tabu, means that the film has a powerful and persuasive female sensibility.

The film opens in India in the 1970s, a crowded train where the studious Ashoke (Irfan Khan) is reading a story by Gogol. His neighbour urges him to see the world. The train crashes. He survives. Some years later Ashoke enters into an arranged marriage with Ashima (Tabu, whose character ages from 23 to 48 through the film). This is in Calcutta, with its busy life, its poor, its streets and bridges. Ashima sees her marriage as a way of escaping to another world, the United States where Ashoke will study.

The other world is wintry New York with its isolation, loneliness and its non-comprehension of what it means for an Indian woman to be transplanted. The film continually evokes this sense of isolation even when the characters become more and more at home in their new world with its openness, its surprising freedoms, its more casual approach to life.

This comes to the fore after Ashoke and Ashima have two children. The older is a boy whom his father names Gogol. We understand why but his son does not, even when his father tells him that it is a meaningful name. Gogol (Kal Penn showing a talent one would not expect if he had been seen only in Van Wilder Party Liaison, Harold and Kumar, and his Narnia take-off in Epic Movie) is the teenage Gogol, graduating in the mid 1990s, mocked by his schoolmates because of his name, smoking pot, ignoring his father... The audience understands the attitudes of the Indians born and educated in the US but feels sad that they do not comprehend, or want to comprehend, their parents.

Ashima still wears her sari, mixes with Bengali families and makes traditional meals. However, she works in a library and makes some friends. Ashoke is a prominent engineer and lecturer. Gogol studies at Yale and takes up with a wealthy American student and ignores home – to his detriment.

The latter part of the film shows Gogol coming to terms with his name and his heritage, making a disappointing marriage and having to learn his identity and the traditions of a double culture.

Audiences will identify with Ashima through Tabu's dignified and powerful presence and performance. Irfan Kahn is moving as Ashoke. Mira Nair offers audiences the opportunity to learn, understand and feel the struggles and resolutions of men and women of two cultures.

NEXT

(US, 2007, d. Lee Tamahori)

Philip K. Dick has become more and more popular over the last quarter of a century, especially since the release of Blade Runner which was based on one of his stories. In recent years, we have had quite a few film versions, especially Steven Spielberg's Minority Report. Most of the versions seem to be aiming less at being a classic than offering conventional entertainment with a dash of science-fiction and futuristic reflection. There was Imposter, with Gary Sinise and John Woo's Paycheck with Ben Affleck.

Next is in this category rather than a chapter in the science-fiction movie books. It is directed by New Zealand director, Lee Tamahori, whose excellent Once Were Warriors gave him an entrée to Hollywood where he went into slambang and smasheroo mode with The Edge, the James Bond film Die, Another Day, Along Came a Spider and xXx: The Next Level. This is what he does well and this is how he presents Next.

Nicolas Cage is a small-time Las Vegas magician and mentalist but we soon learn that he is a Philip Dick character because he is able to see two minutes ahead (no more) of what is going to happen to him. This works well on stage – and in the casinos. It also helps him avoid punches and bullets. However, with a nuclear bomb about to explode somewhere in America, his ability comes to the attention of the FBI. They want to recruit him to prevent the detonation. All would be well but he is involved with the woman of his dreams (or of his, by exception of the two minute rule, long term vision), Jessica Biel. The foreign agents are after him so they will use her to stop him working with the FBI.

This description sounds a bit slow in comparison with what is up there on the screen. Editing is fast paced. There are explosions and chases, confrontations and shootouts and plenty of effects and stunt-work. What is inventive is the sudden insertion of deadly situations followed by what really happens two minutes later. When the magician has to quickly search a warehouse at the end, he splits into many versions of himself (like the villainous Mr Smith of The Matrix).

Julianne Moore is the tough and almost relentless agent. This 2007 film seems to relish role reversal and feminist achievement. In the past, the Cage character might well have been a woman with visions and the Moore character a tough and macho male, so it is interesting to see the vice versa.

The written story is set in the future. The producers (rightly) saw that it might play more effectively on screen in the present.

ONE NIGHT WITH THE KING

(US, 2006, d. Michael O. Sajbel)

A provocative title – especially when one learns that this is a film about Queen Esther, based on the biblical book, and that it was produced by a Christian company and marketed for Christian audiences (and released by the Fox Faith enterprise).

Way back, there was a version of this story with Joan Collins in her heyday and Richard Egan as the king. The project of filming the stories of the major Old Testament characters has also made a more recent version of Esther with Louise Lombard and F.Murray Abraham.

How does this one stand up?

It is certainly beautiful to look at, filmed, as it was, in India using the magnificent architecture of local palaces and cities. It is not so well acted with Tiffany Dupont speaking and sounding much like her name, too contemporary American sounding to be convincing as a heroine from the past. The dialogue also tends to be contemporary (American style) which again strains credibility.

King Ahasuerus (Xerxes) is played by British singer, Luke Goss. The villain, Haman, one of the king's officials, is played with relish in British style by James Callis. There are also some big names: John Rhys Davies is strong as Esther's uncle Mordecai who saves the king's life; Omar Sharif is a sympathetic general and, Peter O'Toole, despite his prominent billing, has a few minutes in the prologue as the prophet Samuel, who slays king Agag. (Haman is a descendant of the survivors of the ban against Hagag and so is virulently anti-Semitic and uses his power in Persia against the Jews).

On the whole, the screenplay stays close enough to the text of Esther, so audiences will be able to appreciate the plot and the characters.

It is some of the subtext of the screenplay which raises questions. And the added title of the film is: The Call of Destiny. It was written by Stephan Blinn, whose credits include the fundamentalist, apocalyptic screenplays for The Omega Code and its sequel, Megiddo: The Omega Code 2. It was produced by Matthew and Laurie Crouch and their company, Gener8xion X Entertainment. Matthew is the son of Paul and Jan Crouch of Trinity Broadcasting Network which made the even more fundamentalist and apocalyptic Left Behind series. These films interpret the scriptures as referring directly to the present times as if texts of Ezekiel or Matthew's Gospel were actually written with today in mind.

So, in looking at king Xerxes and the Persians (who, of course, are in what is now Iran) and their ideology of the divine right of rulers and their hostility to those who advocate democracy and want to promote it for all peoples, we can discern aspects of some American foreign policy. It is the Greeks in the west who are the advocates of democracy and the Persians the enemies. Along with this, because of the story of Esther,

Mordecai and the Jews, it is the Jews, because of their worship of the one God who sees all people as equal, who are the natural/religious allies of the pro-democracy west.

(For a Hollywood look at the defenders of democracy against a Persian invasion as well as a look at the effete Xerxes and his troops, we have the recent box-office bonanza, 300.)

THE PAINTED VEIL

(US, 2006, d. John Curran)

A film for an adult audience that can be recommended both for its fine technical qualities and for its explorations of themes of infidelity, reconciliation, forgiveness and atonement.

W. Somerset Maugham created several strong female characters in his novels. (Films and telemovies from his writings already number 98,) There was Sadie Thompson in *Rain* (portrayed on screen by Gloria Swanson, Joan Crawford and Rita Hayworth) who, in isolated and tropical settings, tormented a man of God. There was the unfaithful Leslie Crosbie of *The Letter*, again in the tropics, (portrayed on screen by Jeanne Eagels, Bette Davis and Lee Remick). There was the unfaithful Mildred Rogers of *Of Human Bondage* (portrayed on screen by Bette Davis, Eleanor Parker and Kim Novak).

His Kitty Wane in *The Painted Veil* is a less forceful character than these – and she has been portrayed by Greta Garbo, Eleanor Parker and, now, Naomi Watts. However, she too is unfaithful but she has the opportunity to redeem herself – and be redeemed by her husband and his work among cholera victims.

Maugham, who trained and qualified as a doctor, was also interested in religious and spiritual themes in such works as *The Razor's Edge* where a man goes in search of himself in the East.

This version of *The Painted Veil* was filmed in China. The cinematography of Shanghai and of the mountains and rivers of South China make a magnificent background to the plot. Alexandre Desplat's evocative score won a Golden Globe award.

The setting is 1925, China. Flashbacks build up the story of the western man and woman being carried through the countryside on chairs. He is a shy and rather uptight bacteriologist from England (Edward Norton most persuasive in the role) and his socialite and spoiled young wife, Kitty (Naomi Watts proving that she is an actress of skill and substance). We soon learn that she did not love her husband despite his devotion to her and has had a dalliance with a worthless diplomat (Liev Schreiber) in Shanghai. Her husband volunteers to go to a remote village to help in a cholera epidemic and, quietly vengeful, forces his wife to accompany him.

The film develops the themes of colonialist presence in China and the growing resentment and violent protests as well as the themes of Chinese need for contemporary medical practice and hygiene. In the village are a group of French nuns who run an orphanage and who are helping in the crisis, many of them dying. Diana Rigg plays the superior, a practical and devout woman who delivers some very moving dialogue about her vocation, her love of God, her passion for God and how as she has grown older, they are like an old married couple sitting together, taking each other for granted, a maturing up and down love.

The plot develops as might be expected, especially in the tense relationship between husband and wife, in the hard work of the doctor, in the passive aggression of the military chief who finally breaks through the rituals and pride of the local warlord to change the practices of the people concerning the dead which are contributing to the spread of the disease.

The end of the film is moving, showing that hard circumstances and shared self-giving can transcend bitterness and hurt and that love and forgiveness are not impossible.

Ron Nyswaner (Philadelphia) can be proud of the screenplay he has written and John Curran (Praise, We Don't Live Here Anymore) proud of the film he has directed.

PATHFINDER: AN UNTOLD LEGEND

(US, 2007, d. Marcus Nispel)

This is one for the '300 brigade'. It is based on a Dark Horse graphic novel and features warriors, battles and some mini-massacres. However, since it is set in the cold mountains of the northern American continent 600 years before the coming of Columbus, the warriors have to be fairly well clothed!

Actually, the film took its origins from a Norwegian Oscar nominee of 1987 of the same name. That Pathfinder film was set in Lapland and was part of the history of struggles in those Arctic regions.

This one moves the location. Vikings (indistinguishable from one another in huge horned helmets and masks) invade these icy territories massacring the inhabitants. When a little Viking boy is left behind, he is found (like Moses) by the local leader's daughter. The local leader is the Pathfinder. The little boy grows up amongst the Indians. When the Vikings return, he fights against them, a lot of perilous adventures and battles. The daughter of the Pathfinder assumes her father's role and Ghost (the grown-up boy) becomes their Watchman.

It is all done (a bit like 300) in bleached colours and graphic novel tones. Which makes it all a bit hard to see – they could have done with a bit of global warming and light in that part of the world in those times.

Dialogue is minimal. Performances are ordinary. Events are a bit hard to follow in their detail. But there characters are not particularly engaging and neither is the film.

PERFECT STRANGER

(US, 2007, d. James Foley)

A bit of a surprise to see on the poster that Halle Berry is billed before Bruce Willis. But, these days he appears in quite a few films in cameo roles (Alpha Dog, Fast Food Nation, The Astronaut Farmer). This time it is a supporting role to Halle Berry. It is definitely her film.

This is a glossy whodunnit – and it is best to suggest that one should wait to the end before being too sure that you have worked out who is the murderer! It is something like a mixture of a New York Mills and Boon romance, something out of Cosmopolitan or its like by someone who had been reading their Agatha Christie.

There is a problem for older audiences – it presupposes a great deal about computer literacy, chat rooms as well as hacking which may be a bit bewildering for those on the older side of the computer use divide. They may find the chat sequences a little tedious. However, this is 2007 and this is what many people do.

Halle Berry as Rowena looks very glamorous as an investigative journalist who has no scruples in exposing double standards politicians and their sex scandals. She feels victimised by the male world order. When her childhood friend is brutally murdered, she targets bullying and womanising advertising executive, Bruce Willis. She is aided and abetted by her technical whiz, Giovanni Ribisi.

There are some flashbacks to some brutality in Rowena's past which may explain some of what goes on and her motivation. Actually, we find that anonymity for chat rooms and false identities means that people have many secrets and lies.

Not particularly startling except for Halle Berry's screen presence and Giovanni Ribisi's eccentric and manic character – and the ending.

THE PROVOKED

(UK/India, 2006, d. Jag Mundhra)

The Provoked is based on a true story. In 1989, a wife set fire to her husband and he died from severe burns. She was arrested, interrogated and sentenced for murder. This might not sound like a very different case from others. However, it was.

The first aspect was that the wife had been physically and mentally abused by her husband for ten years.

The second aspect was that the couple were of Indian origin. She was a reserved and modest young woman who was not accustomed to speak out against her husband, feeling shame because of her situation.

Her case was taken up by volunteer groups for abused women and it went again to the courts with the plea concerning her mental and emotional state and its cumulative effect when she finally attacked her husband. This was then recognised in British law as mitigating the responsibility for the act.

As is evident, this is a very important theme for the truth about abuse in marriage. However, Provoked has been made in England with an audience more used to Bollywood styles (and dramatising of emotions) than more reserved British styles. Many British reviewers dismissed the film because of this, failing to respect the different ways of presenting drama through different cultural sensibilities. (After all, Indian audiences may well be puzzled by the reserve shown by characters in British films.)

Sometimes, however, the casting and performances militate against the overall effectiveness of the film. A number of the supporting cast, especially in the court sequences and some of the prison stereotypes, inmates and guards, declaim their lines rather than act them – with Robbie Coltrane, by contrast, in a performance that shows how well it can be done.

Another difficulty is that the star is Aishwarya Rai (Bride and Prejudice and many films from Bombay). She was an acclaimed Miss World of 1994 and brings great beauty and glamour to her screen presence. She does seem too beautiful for the role, but she moves through it quietly, almost passively, until she finally learns to be self-assertive. Naveen Andrews (The English Patient, Lost) is convincing as her brutish husband.

In prison she meets up with another prisoner (Miranda Richardson) who has killed her husband and who is instrumental in changing her and bringing the case to an appeal. Rebecca Pidgeon plays the defence lawyer and there are several British Indian actors, Ravi James and Nandita Das, who bring an authentic feel to their roles as lawyer and volunteer social worker.

This is a case of special pleading, Indian style.

THE PUFFY CHAIR

(US, 2005, d. Jay Duplass)

Some of the small-budget American independent films are an acquired taste. You sometimes feel that you have suddenly become like a bus passenger inadvertently listening in to a conversation. You don't know quite what it is about. It is younger adults absorbed in their own lives and problems which may or may not be particularly interesting to those who don't know them – or to those who do.

But, The Puffy Chair is not like that. Yes, these are twenty-somethings and they do tend to be rather self-absorbed but the characters are well-written and well-played that we don't mind spending the time with them, even putting up with them when they are irritating or act stupidly.

This is a kind of Duplass family film. Mark is the main actor and co-writer. His older brother Jay is the director and co-writer. Their parents are executive producers and act as well – and may have put up some of the money for the small budget.

It is a slight story where the Puffy Chair (here a second-hand LazyBoy) serves as both a quest and a sign of contradiction. Josh and his girlfriend Emily love each other but have their tense moments. He can be crass and insensitive. She can be oversensitive and demanding. When they go to collect the puffy chair, bought on EBay, as a gift for Josh's father's birthday, they pick up younger brother Rhett, who tends to live in the clouds. A number of humorous and serious episodes happen along the way – and quite a number of frustrations to do with the puffy chair.

Because the characters, despite their faults, are played with feeling, the audience does share the journey and the tensions and some insights into human nature.

THE REAPING

(US, 2007, d. Stephen Hopkins)

Audiences will sit up and listen at the scene where sceptical scientist, Hilary Swank, is asked about the miraculous nature of the ten plagues of Egypt. She begins with chemicals in the river Nile and gives an extraordinarily fluent, comprehensive and logical explanation of all the plagues following on from each other. Actually, this probably makes far more sense than explanations given for strange goings on in the contemporary bayous of Louisiana.

The Reaping is one of the many films that rely on modern audiences' interest/faith/lack of faith. In fact, these days audiences, as *The Da Vinci Code* proved, are tempted to believe in all kinds of pseudo truths, invented hypotheses while all the time expressing themselves as not believing in God, religion or church. It was Chesterton, of course, who noted that when people lose their faith, it is not that they believe in nothing but that they will believe in anything.

The British Hammer Studios, in the 1960s and 1970s, used to make a lot of these religious horror films starring Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing and many popular character actors. *The Reaping* is a bit like a 21st century American successor to these films. It is highly crafted and has some eye-popping special effects, especially for a plague of locusts.

Speaking of plagues, it should be said that the main biblical reference for *The Reaping* is the book of Exodus, the early chapters which describe the ten plagues wrought by God on the Egyptians through Moses so that Pharaoh would let the people of Israel go. This time, the plagues are reproduced in this remote corner of Louisiana. A bayou is turned into blood. Frogs burst out of the contaminated water. Locusts swarm. Darkness shadows the land and lightning flashes and sets off explosive fires. The firstborn are destroyed.

Katharine (Hilary Swank) has already been seen as disproving a miracle site in Chile, finding industrial chemicals to be the cause of body preservation and of giving pilgrims a drugged high rather than a cure or spiritual ecstasy. She has now been called in with her assistant (Idris Elba) to investigate the blood water. She (and we) are certainly wondering why the plagues have come. When she hears that it is Satan who is causing them and that a young menstruating girl (AnnaSophia Robb who was so nice in *Bridge to Terabithia*) is to be killed as a sacrifice, she wants to save her. The strange occurrences are enough to lead anyone to some kind of faith – or fear.

You will need to see the film (well, need is a bit strong) to find out what the twists are, whether it is God or Satan who is venting wrath, and who is really telling the truth – especially when Katharine's old friend, Fr Costigan (Stephen Rea) warns her that her face in his photo collection is being destroyed by a symbol of a fiery sickle and he looks up books that no priest in real life possesses, but which most priests in films like this have in every clerical library. The movie priests can also read ancient languages and interpret pre-biblical myths (though most would be hard put these days to deal with Latin).

Entertaining religious hokum if you enjoy this kind of thing – especially with a *Rosemary's Baby* ending.

REIGN OVER ME

(US, 2007, d. Mike Binder)

There is so much in this film to recommend.

Adam Sandler's comedies tend to be an acquired taste, especially those early airhead movies like *Happy Gilmore* and *Billy Madison*. But, over the years, Sandler has built up his reputation with stronger comedies and with attempts to do serious roles. He was effective in *Punch Drunk Love* and *Spanglish* and could hold his own with Jack Nicholson in *Anger Management*. He made 2006's *Click* an above average comedy with dramatic edge. In *Reign over Me*, he is very good.

Why the title? Writer-director Mike Binder says that The Who's album, *Quadrophenia*, was a favourite and that he listened to it while writing. Pete Townshend wrote 'Reign o'er me', that is 'love reign o'er me' and it is sung throughout the film. This is a film about love and friendship.

While we see Sandler's character, Charlie Fineman, riding a motorised scooter through the night streets of New York City during the credits, the initial focus of the film is on Don Cheadle's character, dentist and family man, Alan Johnson. One day Alan glimpses Charlie and tries to make contact. They had been roommates together while studying dentistry. We learn that Charlie's wife and three young daughters were all killed in the flight from Boston on September 11th 2001. He has now dropped out of life and blocked his memories.

This is a film about deeper than surface friendships. Charlie obviously needs friendship and love. His in-laws are too imposing. His best friend and lawyer is rejected because he reminds him of his former life. He is protected by his dragon-lady landlady, plays drums in a band and watches Mel Brooks comedies and television. He is unkempt, keeps remodelling his apartment kitchen (a sad reason for his emerges towards the end of the film) and plays a magic-themed computer game. How can his life be reclaimed? Should it be? Should friends intrude? Should they organise therapy?

Adam Sandler makes a convincing character of Charlie, of his grief, pathos and self-pity.

Alan tries to help. As they resume their friendship, it is clear that Charlie actually helps Alan. He is a successful dentist and has set a corporation practice – which, despite the efforts of his sardonic dragon-lady receptionist – is under threat because a mentally disturbed patient (Saffron Burrows), who has her own sad story of betrayal, makes advances and threatens to sue Alan for sexual harassment. At home, his devoted wife (Jada Pinkett Smith) is something of a controller and he feels the need for some kind of breathing space. Don Cheadle is persuasive and very watchable.

The interactions between Charlie and Alan have their moving (as well as funny) ups and downs. Mike Binder has written his screenplay so well that we are often torn in our responses: exasperation with Charlie's outbursts, admiration for his courage, empathy with his traumatised condition; wanting Alan to succeed with Charlie, hurt by some of Charlie's responses to him, wondering whether Alan is being too much of a do-gooder, hoping that Alan will find better ways of communicating with his wife.

Liv Tyler appears as a young psychotherapist in Alan's building to whom Charlie eventually goes for help. The sessions are awkward. He holds back. But, the scene where, unexpectedly for the audience, Charlie starts to unburden himself to Alan is most moving.

It doesn't end there. It starts to go the American way of the gun as Charlie becomes both aggressive and suicidal. But this provides the occasion for plot development where Charlie is examined for his mental state and the courts have to decide what is best for him. This is a very fine part of the film, full of decency and humanity, help immensely by one of Donald Sutherland's best cameo performances as the presiding judge.

Some British reviewers, of the stiff-upper-lip school of endurance, scoffed at Charlie's mental state and wondered how he would have coped with the Blitz. Yes, Americans are more heart on sleeve people and

their traumas are less concealed or repressed than those of their British counterparts. And..., that was then, this is now and the events of September 2001 were a shock of unforeseen magnitude.

RENO 911!: MIAMI

(US, 2007, d. Robert Ben Garant)

Well, you can hardly get more popular lowbrow than this one – although Supertroopers of some years ago was more stupid, less funny but crasser.

The Comedy Central channel in the US has promoted a lot of talent – and not. This film is based on a series Reno 911 that is going into its fifth season. It started as a parody of the realist show Cops, with cameras accompanying the cops into the worst of violent moments and privacy invasion moments. This is one thing that Reno 911 does well. It sends up the intrusive style.

In its parody of the Police Academy series, which was in its turn a parody of police thrillers, its characters are dumb and dumbest. At home in Reno, they are dimwittedly inept. On the loose in Miami (where all local convention going police are trapped by a threat of a toxic attack), they create havoc (or it follows them) wherever they go.

It is funny now and then (well, perhaps, not as often as that). A cameo from The Rock was funny but the Danny de Vito bit wasn't. The American bishops conference review began by saying it was over-raunchy. What could that mean? Well, yes, it is, especially for a comedy aimed at a wide audience. Writers and director (who did write Night at the Museum) act in it as well and seem to be energetically sex-gag obsessed, sexual-orientation joke obsessed and stupid sex jokes obsessed.

SCOTT WALKER: 30 CENTURY MAN

(UK, 2006, d. Steve Kijak)

This is a very interesting and striking documentary, even if you do not know anything about its subject, Scott Walker.

While it uses the usual elements of documentary: history and background of the subject, archival material, interviews, it puts them together in a way that keeps the interest, is informative but also stimulates a lot of reflection on characters, issues and the music scene in the UK and the US in the latter 20th century.

Scott Engel was a young singer from Ohio who joined the group The Walker Brothers whom some saw as a rival to the Beatles in the mid-1960s. They went to England and achieved some success, with Scott writing songs and eventually some solo albums. Then he seemed to vanish from public sight.

In 2004, he was persuaded to be interviewed. And an interesting and genial interviewee he turns out to be. He is private, quite unassuming in many ways, but quite a Renaissance Man in terms of music, literature, history and culture, poetry, language.

We learn about his past and some songs, like The Sun Ain't Gonna Shine Anymore, that are there in the consciousness from the sixties. Lulu and others turn up to talk about him and there are TV clips of the period. David Bowie, who produced this film, also turns up to give an impression of Walker's subsequent musical talent. Producers, sound engineers and others offer interesting background.

In the 1990s, Walker spent some years scoring the French film, Pola X, but his energy has gone into an art piece called Drift. We are shown workmen setting up boxes and casings that will be used for a variety of sounds (as is raw meat for punching effects). We see percussionists, conductors, orchestra members. We are offered some excerpts. This is a symphonic experience: singing, sometimes to music and sound, sometimes a cappella, instruments, effects and lyrics of the symbolist kind. This is a long way from the

rock'n roll of forty years before. Walker is also a demanding perfectionist with an extraordinary sense of rhythms.

Walker is a man ahead of his times.

SHOOTER

(US, 2007, d. Antoine Fuqua)

This thriller is generally so fast paced and edited accordingly that you barely have time or space to think: action, adrenalin, chases, body count, politics, conspiracy theories, The Fugitive but, towards the end when gunner Bobby Lee Swagger (Mark Wahlberg) lays siege to a Virginia homestead and is besieged himself by a large military force, the thought does come, 'Eat your heart out, Rambo'.

John Rambo in First Blood (before Rambo became the Ramboesque warrior of the sequels) was a Vietnam War veteran, trained as a Green Beret in all kinds of lethal and survival skills. He is turned on by authorities and then manipulated by government officials to do some of their dirty work.

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

It is a quarter of a century later. The battleground is Ethiopia and the Eritrean border. Special squads of highly trained snipers are in action to safeguard American forces. The only trouble is that these troops should not be there. They are in the pay of Washington politicians who tell the hero that there is no more Sunni or Shia, no more Democrats or Republicans, there are only the Haves and Have Nots and that is the be all and end all of power.

This means that we are watching one of those morally ambiguous thrillers that are exciting to watch – director Antoine Fuqua is no slouch with action, Training Day, Tears of the Sun, the grim King Arthur – but which make moral senses uncomfortable. We are exposed to an evil world, greed and abuse of power at the top, protected from law and justice by connections and friends in high places. (And the screenplay has some explicit shots at the current US administration.) It is easy to tut-tut from an armchair far away from this kind of world.

Bobby Lee Swagger, our 21st century Rambo-figure, has shown his skills in Ethiopia and was abandoned by superior officers. His best friend and partner was killed. Retired and hidden in remote mountains, he is approached by some Washington officials and asked to assist them in preventing an assassination attempt on the president. This is reverse Manchurian Candidate material. Bobby Lee is a victim of smooth talk and appeals to patriotism rather than obvious brainwashing. But, all is not at all as it seemed and he finds himself shot, then pursued by government and FBI alike – and he is a fine advertisement for the effectiveness of survival skills training.

The junior FBI officer that he chances on as he begins his flight (Michael Pena, one of the trapped firefighters in World Trade Centre) becomes curious, investigates more and more anomalies that turn up in the investigation and ultimately finds himself on the run with Bobby Lee who has also enlisted the help of his buddy's widow (Kate Mara).

The film is very well crafted so that it is hard not to be involved, even when the only way to find justice is to adopt the gunfighting ethos of the 19th century West.

One of the surprises and strengths of the film is that we can scarcely believe that the patriotic and always-so-noble-on-screen Danny Glover could be such an unredeemable villain.

STRAIGHTHEADS

(UK, 2007, d. Dan Reed)

Revenge is sweet – but what is it after it has been achieved?

There have always been revenge films (a theme that comes down to us from Shakespeare's days where it seems to be more acceptable when it belongs to another time and done in period costume, thus making it somewhat 'unreal'). But, what about revenge when it is right here, right now? The British film, *Outlaw*, dramatised this very strongly, audiences identifying with the vengeful anger but faced with the challenge of what to do with these emotions.

One of the stars of *Outlaw* was Danny Dyer. He appears here as a surveillance technician who is picked up by an older client, Gillian Anderson, and taken to a party. They begin an affair. On the way home, they hit a deer and then are set upon by a group of locals where he is bashed and loses sight in one eye and she is raped. By chance they get a lead as to the identity of the perpetrators. They plan revenge.

'Straightheads', apparently, is a gangland term for those who have never been involved in a crime. This man and woman are straightheads who take the law into their own hands, presuming that official justice can never be truly done.

The violent scenes are brutally presented. We know what these people have experienced and suffered? We can identify with the drive for revenge. As we sit in our seats, we are asked whether we agree with them or not? What do we see as the effects of vengeance being wrought, not just on the offenders but on the victims.

SUNSHINE

(UK, 2007, d. Danny Boyle)

This is a powerful piece of film-making, all the more creditable that, with all its marvellous technological effects, it was produced in East London studios, a more than respectable effort compared with Hollywood craft.

Sunshine is a contemporary science fiction tale, a kind of 2057: *A Space Odyssey*, this time set a half century in our future. It should give great satisfaction and pleasure to science fiction aficionados. Those who find space films too technical, too frightening, too different from our mundane experiences, may find it somewhat bewildering and overwhelming.

The parallel with 2001: *A Space Odyssey* is not just as an easy reviewer's comparison (along with both *Contact* and *Alien*) because director Danny Boyle showed these classics to his cast and has commented that at times he made decisions to nudge his story in the direction of these films. What he has done is to make a fresh narrative that is a compendium of the film tradition of space exploration.

Whereas 2001 was something of a cinema poem or a cinema essay with some mystical dimensions and religious implications, *Sunshine* is more of a narrative humanist film although mystical and religious questions are raised.

One of the main effects of the film will be to ask of its audience to respond with a profound sense of awe, sharing the crew's contemplation of space and the sun. For those who do not believe in God, the universe and its vastness and beauty command some respect and humility. For those who do believe in God, there is admiration for the wonders of creation and the workings of such an enormous system of planets, suns and galaxies.

The basis of this story is that in 2057 our sun is dying. Already an expedition has tried to take a powerful bomb to the sun to explode it in the sun's nuclear reacting core so that the sun is re-generated. That mission failed. Now a second expedition is on its way, towing a payload the size of Manhattan. Whether God made the world or it exploded into being by chance, humans have the custody of creation and to conserve the world. This is a powerful motivation for the eight members of the *Icarus II* (an ominous name

for an expedition when we remember that the mythical Icarus flew too near the sun, his wings melted and he fell to earth).

By 2057, nations have combined to send this mission so there is an Asian contingent from Japan (Hiroyuki Sanada), Malaysia (Michelle Yeoh) and China (British Benedict Wong). The rest (from accents) are American although stars Cillian Murphy is Irish, Rose Byrne Australian, Cliff Curtis a New Zealander. Chris Evans and Troy Garrity (incidentally, Jane Fonda's son) are the genuine Americans.

The psychological dimensions are important. Despite training, human tensions strain relationships. Male competitiveness erupts. Human error in crisis also takes its toll. Then there is the responsibility of trying to save the human race, especially in the experience of approaching the sun, its light, heat and energy. The crises also send the crew into their deeper selves, their consciences, fears and heroism.

Just as astronaut Dave, in 2001, had to contend with a malevolent computer and then journeyed through the psychedelic dimensions of space, finding the monolith which symbolised the presence of the transcendent, so Capa (Cillian Murphy), the physicist who knows how to detonate the payload, experiences the worries of computer failure (a sympathetic computer here) but also the haunting presence of the commander of the previous expedition (Mark Strong).

Capa's heroic journey takes him – and us - into the very heart of the sun in the hope for new life on earth.

THIS IS ENGLAND

(UK, 2007, d. Shane Meadows)

If this is not England today – and that is the interesting question the film raises – then it is the England of a quarter of a century earlier. The opening provides a collage of images of the period, ranging from miners and strikers to skinheads, to Mrs Thatcher and the royal family – and always the Falklands War.

This is more than a semi-autobiographical story by writer-director Shane Meadows. This is a personal memoir, something of a confession and a document of hope that one need not be trapped forever in one's past.

Sean (played by Thomas Turgoose, a believable young newcomer who acts with an attractive and off-putting blend of charm and defiance) lives in the area around Nottingham with his widowed mother. His father, whom he loves and misses, has died in the Falklands action. His mother tries to cope. Sean is picked on at school by bullies and by the authorities. A group of skinhead lads and their girlfriends take a liking to Sean and he becomes part of their group, even to having his head shaved and putting on approved clothes. He delights in belonging somewhere. The leader, Woody (Joe Gilgun), takes care of him.

When Woody's friend, Combo (an intense performance by Stephen Graham) is released from gaol, he also takes a shining to Sean. But, Combo and his mates from gaol, are the forerunners of the British National Party and spew out their bigotry, racism and spite in dialogue that is chilling and alarming. This is where audiences can wonder whether now This is England.

Sean gets caught up in all of this, despite Woody's pulling out and not wanting to be brainwashed. Sean attacks the local 'Paki' storekeeper but later has some doubts when Combo, rejected by Woody's girlfriend, savagely bashes Milky, an Asian member of the group,

Then the troops come back from the Falklands and Sean has to face growing up and what this background of the Midlands has meant.

Shane Meadows obviously came through it and has the films, Twentyfour Seven, A Room for Romeo Brass, Once Upon a Time in the Midlands and Dead Man's Shoes to prove it.

UNKNOWN

(US, 2006, d. Simon Brand)

This is an intriguing 85 minute small budget feature starring a number of screen character actors. It is not only the presence of Joe Pantoliano that reminds movie buffs of Memento. This is a film about amnesia and attempts to recover memory.

The film opens in a drab and deserted factory out in the desert. Five men's bodies lie lifeless until one comes to his senses. Gradually the other four also regain consciousness. They have been exposed to some almost lethal gas. But, they have lost their memories. Some flashes begin to remind them of what has happened. Initially hostile and suspicious, they eventually have to band together to defend themselves against the unknown men who are on their way.

The audience does have the advantage of knowing that there has been an abduction of some wealthy businessmen by a gang. But we don't know who is who. In the meantime, the wife of one of them has to deliver the ransom money with the help of the police who have set matters up to apprehend the criminals. Of course, they don't, so there are chases, desperate calls, collecting of information on the criminals.

The five men are played by Jim Caviezel, Greg Kinnear, Barry Pepper, Joe Pantoliano and Jeremy Sisto. They get plenty of chances to be aggressive, despairing, bonding (with a great deal of angry and exasperated swearing) until we find out the real identities. Once again, one needs to wait to the very final shot to appreciate exactly what really happened.

Not a necessary film but it certainly has its moments.

LA VIE EN ROSE

(France, 2007, d. Olivier Dahan)

La Vie en Rose and Je Ne Regrette Rien are two of the 20th centuries most popular songs, made famous by chanteuse, Edith Piaf.

There was a film biography of Piaf, with that title, in the 1970s. Now there is a full scale biopic which opened the 2007 Berlin Film Festival and has broken box-office records in France. Piaf is a French national figure. Her life illustrates very powerfully the rags to riches archetypal story. It also illustrates that fame is not the be all and end all of life.

The film is worth seeing for Marion Cotillard's performance as Piaf. It is far more than an impersonation (though she looks and moves like Piaf). Rather, she has entered into the psyche of Piaf, a strange psyche indeed, and brought her to life again. Marion Cotillard appeared in Big Fish and A Good Year and one would not have anticipated such a tour-de-force from her.

However, while audiences will enjoy the film very much, it has a great drawback in its structure. The idea of running two phases of Piaf's life in parallel is quite a good idea. However, the way it is done here is often confusing (to say the least). We are following, in linear fashion, Piaf's early life and struggles. At the same time, we have moved to her final years, from 1959 to 1963 when she died. The main difficulty is that within this period we move backwards and forwards, which seems unnecessary and is not a particularly illuminating device.

Having noted that, we can sit back and take in and enjoy what's there.

Edith Piaf did not have an easy life when she was young. Her mother wanted to be a singer and took her daughter on to the streets busking. Her father was away at the war. When her mother abandoned her, she found herself in a brothel. The writer-director, Olivier Dahan, creates a sympathetic fictitious character, played well by Emmanuelle Seigner, a prostitute who acts as a mother-figure to the little girl before she is

taken back by her father. As she grows up, Edith sings in the streets, accompanied by her drinking friend that she relies on (Sylvie Testud) – and they both can drink, and more.

Spotted by a cabaret owner (it is the mid-1930s by this) (Gerard Depardieu), she is hired and, despite initial nerves, is a great success and becomes the toast of Paris. However, her past is always there to dog her. The owner is murdered in a gangster feud and her name is tarnished. This only makes her stronger and, with records and performances, and the stern tuition of poet and songwriter, Raymond Asso, she never looks back.

It is surprising to find how, after the war, she spent so much time in the United States, performing, falling in love with a Moroccan boxer, marrying, developing a more autocratic manner, playing the star, roughriding over managers and assistants until a collapse in 1959 which led to her semi-retirement despite an intense desire to perform. It was at this time that *Je Ne Regrette Rien* was written for her. She saw it as a summary of her life.

This is a very classy biopic with some fine performances and a mesmerising turn by Marion Cotillard. At the end, we feel that we have really learned something about Edith Piaf, her personality and her times.

WILD HOGS

(US, 2007, d. Walt Becker)

In the early 1990s, Billy Crystal, Daniel Stern and Bruno Kirby were three middle-aged men who wanted to get away from it all and replenish their better selves. They went west and joined a cattle drive. It did them, City Slickers all, and their wives the world of good.

Not so sure about the Wild Hogs.

John Travolta, Tim Allen, Martin Lawrence and William H. Macy are the 21st century would-be temporary drop outs who want to get on their cycles – and ride. Travolta's wife has left him and he is bankrupt (seems as good a reason to go as any!). Allen is a dentist stuck in a professional and home rut – his son would prefer to throw baskets with his friend's father. Martin Lawrence is finishing a year off from his sanitation work to write a book, but he is henpecked and dominated by his wife – and her mother. William H. Macy is an accident-prone, obsessive computer programmer. He definitely needs to get away from it all. (Although it is his lines, deadpan reactions and accidents that are amusing.)

Off they go into the modern highway blue yonder, friends but bickering, wanting to be free but shackled by their personalities and habits. Then they meet the real bikies, led by Ray Liotta, who accuse them of being posers. Needless to say this has dire repercussions including the bikies' dilapidated bar going up in flames.

Then they come to a nice town where everyone is pleasant (including Marisa Tomei as the owner of a nice diner) and Stephen Tobolowsky (as the meek sheriff). It's New Mexico, so ultimately there is a showdown between bikies and Wild Hogs where the men find they are able to be men as they stand up to the bullies (after being punched and shoved down so many times) and save the town. Then, along comes Peter Fonda who tells the bikies to behave themselves and get back to the spirit of his easy riding days.

With this description, you will know whether you really want to take of with the Wild Hogs or not (but Americans did as the film earned over a hundred million dollars at the box office within a month.)

SIGNIS REVIEWS JUNE 2007

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28 WEEKS LATER

(UK, 2007, d. Juan Carlos Fresnadillo)

It seems to me quite a while since I found myself watching a film in which my hands and arms and my legs kept so tense, conscious that the impact of the film was having such a physical (and visceral) effect on me. 28 Weeks Later is quite an achievement in presenting movie horror and terror.

This is the sequel to the surprisingly successful 28 Weeks of 2002 where a 'rage virus' has been let loose on the population of England and a British 'living dead' are on the rampage with isolated individuals and groups desperate for survival. The British military offers help – but that turns out to be an illusion.

Director Danny Boyle and writer Alex Garland become involved in their very successful Sunshine, so took on a group of Spanish film-makers to come to England to make this sequel. (Boyle did do some Second Unit direction and he and Garland collaborated with the writers.) The sequel is an authentic follow-up in the spirit of the original – which has been highly admired as reinvigorating the vampire genre. This one reinvigorates the living dead genre.

It starts darkly, just over six months since the first film ended. Some refugees (especially husband and wife, Robert Carlyle and Catherine McCormack) are in hiding from the rampaging rage creatures. Tragedy strikes as the refuge is broken into and the husband flees, leaving the wife behind.

In the meantime, American authorities and military have been sent in as an occupying force to pacify the situation and rebuild society (though the screenplay never mentions the name Iraq – it is simply for the audience to think it). London is cleared and a small number of people are allowed back in (via security at airports which will look familiar enough to contemporary travellers). The daughter and son of the husband and wife come back home. Quarantined, they slip out of custody, breaking curfew and boundaries and visit their home – only to find their mother still alive. Her genetic makeup means she is a carrier but is not transformed. This has been passed on to her son. The father, declared well, has become a security guard.

As might be guessed, this precipitates a new crisis with repeats of infection, crowd panic, escapes, pursuits and elimination with extreme prejudice.

The final group consists of the two children, a sympathetic military nurse (Rose Byrne) and an American soldier who cannot kill any longer (Jeremy Renner). His contact is a helicopter pilot who could rescue them (Harold Perrineau). Since they left the Isle of Dogs and Canary Wharf and have to make their way to Regents Park for the rendezvous, the chase takes the group through a deserted central London (as did the opening of the original film). The aerial photography of London makes the city a character, reinforced as the group make their way over the Thames, through Trafalgar Square and Shaftsbury Avenue and, especially, with rifle green night light for sighting to Regents Park. The climax occurs at the new Wembley Stadium.

The pace is constant, editing effectively intense, scare and fright continuous. The special effects are gory at times and the makers seem to be showing off, flaunting (as well they might) their skills. However, unlike so many American films of this kind which exploit the violence and the usual young-adults-whom-you-wouldn't-want-to-know-in-real-life in grizzly peril, this film is intelligent in its approach and, given the apocalyptic scenario, offers credible characters and situations.

Without giving away the ending, can one now expect Vingt-huits mois plus tard?

BLACK GOLD

(UK, 2006, d. Nick Francis, Marc Francis)

A documentary that is not only worth seeing but which touches the day by day life of most of its audience – coffee drinkers. It is only brief but it packs a punch by the end.

The subject is coffee: Black Gold.

In a climate of G8 summits, of discussions about alleviating the debt of African countries, in questions about the effectiveness of aid and its being put to use to better African production, this is a timely reminder that it is ordinary people who can exercise justice in small, even mundane, matters which could benefit the poor.

Black Gold focuses on coffee production in southern Ethiopia. It has a central character, Tadesse Meskela (www.oramiacoffeeunion.org) who has an office in Addis Ababa and goes around the world, especially to conventions and exhibitions, to promote his coffees. His role is General Manager of the Oromia Coffee Farmers' Co-operative Union. He represents 101 unions, 74,000 farmers. His promotions have brought in moneys for building local schools and other amenities.

The film-makers follow Tadesse (filming for over two and a half years) and show him with the farmers, with dealers, full of energy to better the people from whom he emerged after growing up in deprivation.

The film also has a lot of facts and figures, explaining how world coffee markets are controlled by four companies, Kraft, Nestle, Proctor and Gamble and Sara Lee, how the price of coffee is determined by the New York market which has repercussions around the globe, be it in Brazil, Papua New Guinea or Ethiopia.

The points are put forward clearly. The images from Ethiopia are authentic. The issues are important.

If trade, as well as aid, is to benefit Africa, then the industrialised nations and the economic powers have to re-think the monopolies, the price-fixing, the exploitation. Fair Trade is one way for customers in the supermarkets, for drinkers in Starbucks (who apparently agreed to be interviewed but failed to follow up thus losing a PR opportunity), for coffee companies (one in Italy is shown) who can buy and process independently of the big companies, to benefit the Ethiopian farmers more directly.

These days the documentary can be a powerful instrument for social justice.

BLACK SNAKE MOAN

(US, 2006, d. Craig Brewer)

The poster for Black Snake Moan is lurid. It has a scantily clad Christina Ricci on the ground with Samuel L. Jackson standing, dominating, above her. He holds a chain which serves as a leash. One is tempted to interpret the title with some lewd meanings.

Which is a lesson in not judging books by covers or films by posters. Yes, Christina Ricci does look like this. At one stage she is chained. And Samuel L. Jackson dominates her. That still gives a false impression of the film.

Christina Ricci plays Rae, a young poor trash girl in Americas south. Abused by her father and not protected by her mother, she has developed a nymphomaniac psychological and physical condition. Her hope is in her boyfriend, Ronnie (Justin Timberlake) who himself has phobia problems and is going off for national service. In the meantime, Lazarus (Samuel L. Jackson), an old-time musician has given up his playing and is miserable and violent because his wife has been carrying on with his brother and is now walking out on him.

One doesn't get a very hopeful picture of human nature as the film opens – the town also has some drug pushers and young sports players whose vision of life is crass.

When Lazarus finds an unconscious Rae on the road, he takes her in. What happens is rehabilitation, both for Rae and for Lazarus. This, then, is a moral and sometimes moralising film, showing that one should believe in, have hope in, the goodness of human nature and exercise some charity which must lead to positive results.

There are some fine characters as well. Lazarus has a friend, the Reverend R.L. (John Cothron Jr), who is strong in his advice and religious perspective, a man who supports Lazarus and is able to listen to Rae and Ronnie. S. Epartha Merckerson is a storekeeper who brings a sense of decency and kindness to the film.

Black Snake Moan is not the kind of film that many audiences may want to sit through. For those who do, and who can take this sometimes depressing picture of struggling human beings, it leads somewhere hopeful beyond the final credits.

THE CHUMSCRUBBER

(US, 2005, d. Arie Posin)

The Chumscrubber is the name of a character in a computer game. Images of the chumscrubber sometimes appear in the background of this film. What the title seems to suggest is that teenagers today seem to be trapped in the seeming computer games which are their lives.

This is a rather black, though bright colourful, satire on dysfunctional families and suburban American life. During the credits we watch some animation, little box houses which become real, postcard-like, in what is advertised as an ideal neighbourhood for comfort and safety. It is Anywhere USA. Within a few minutes, we discover that a young boy has hanged himself. The film goes on from there.

The central character is Dean. He is played very well and with some inner intensity by Billy Elliot's Jamie Bell. Bell has specialised in this kind of alienated role both in the UK and in the US (Dear Wendy, Undertow, Hallam Foe). His mother is played in a well-wishing but absent-minded way by Allison Janney, his self-absorbed psychologist author husband by William Fichtner. The mother of the hanged boy is played by Glenn Close as if she were one of the Stepford Wives.

This satirical portrait of the adult generation is compounded by the mother of a boy who is kidnapped by the local teenage drug-dealers who want to get their hands on the stash the dead boy had and pressurise Dean who was the dead boy's best friend. They think they have taken Dean's brother but have taken another boy with the same name – who goes along for the ride while his mother (Rita Wilson) is so busy preparing for her second wedding that she does not notice her son is missing. She is divorced from the local police chief (John Heard) and is about to marry the mayor who seems to be in a perpetual daze (Ralph Fiennes). He is in turn admired by the mother of one of the kidnappers (Carrie Anne Moss).

As can be seen, the cast is very strong indeed, with teenagers Camilla Belle, Justin Chatwin, Lou Taylor Pucci and Rory Culkin in there as well.

In trying to indicate the mood of the film, critics have been scrambling for comparisons – which are worth referring to so that audiences have an idea of where they stand and what they are in for. Someone referred to *Donnie Darko* (though it is not quite so bizarre). Someone else said that it is like David Lynch in *Sunshine* (though it is not quite so obscure). I rather liked the publicity material's claim that it is thematically provocative. Part funny, part absurd, part surreal, more than part serious, it is an oddball questioning and critical view of America.

THE CITY OF VIOLENCE

(Korea, 2006, d. Ryoo Seung-hwan)

We would not be surprised at the end of this urban action thriller to see it dedicated to Quentin Tarantino. Not only is it the kind of film he admires, it pays homage to him (or imitates him) especially in the final banquet scene where everybody coming out of the theatre is probably saying, "Kill Bill". The two heroes take on wave after wave of bodyguards and henchmen and, especially, a glamorous henchwoman, and vanquish the lot – though not without a downbeat ending.

The core action could take place anywhere. The special effects and stunts are very Asian. A Seoul detective in an overbusy precinct gets a call to persuade him to come to a childhood friend's funeral. We have seen the killing by thugs in a street in the opening credits. As the friends and associates gather for the wake, people want answers. The detective stays behind in the regional city and discovers quite a tangle of political and financial corruption, kickbacks, frauds and swindles – and some getting rid of opposition and hindrances to casino development plans by murder.

As the plot gathers pace, mysteries are solved but an even greater mystery is opened up as to what makes the villain of the piece tick. This is the most interesting aspect of the drama, especially with the flashbacks to teenage years in the mid-1980s when five young men enjoyed the rough and tumble with local gangs and promised to come together in twenty years when they are successful. That becomes sadly ironic when we realise that friendships can be deeply contaminated and lead to envy and brutality.

There are plenty of fights with the detective played by an action star who does his own stuntwork (Jung Doo-hong) and the director himself getting in on the act for the grand finale.

The Korean film industry has shown itself more than adept with this kind of film, sometimes realistic, sometimes cartoonish as it blends serious issues with hyper-martial arts.

CONVERSATIONS WITH OTHER WOMEN

(US, 2006, d. Hans Canosa)

Apparently, this film was shot in thirteen days, though it looks as if it had a bigger budget and time and room to move. This is especially the case when we see that the whole film (85 minutes) is actually shown with split screen all the way through.

This device is important because the film is basically a two-hander. We are looking at each character on each side of the screen but from different angles from the single close-ups with the editing alternating one face with the other that is the usual staple of cinema conversations. Then characters move from their side of the screen into the frame on the other side. The alternate side of the screen is also used for flashback glimpses as well as imaginary moments where we can watch the image as well as the character remembering or imagining. It also means that supporting characters can also move in and out of frames giving a sense that we are watching the action in more real space and time.

This is the technical side of things.

In terms of theme, this is basically an interaction and conversation between two people, both nearing forty, who meet at a wedding reception. He seems to be pursuing her. She seems to be indifferent. Soon after the conversation begins (with the reception, speeches, dancing, going on around them) and we hear their stories from the past, we realise that they had been married. One side of the screen then begins a series of flashbacks from their past. We get to know them well, likeable qualities as well as characteristics which are alienating. A comic scene with the wedding photographer, 'videographer', where each is supposed to offer a message to bride and groom quickly reveals who they are and much more about them.

As they spend the night together in the hotel before she returns to London where she now lives, we also learn about their present relationships, about his dancer girlfriend and about her doctor husband and the stepchildren.

Of course, the dynamic of the drama is: will they or won't they now come together again.

He is played with a mixture of charm, cynicism and roguery by Aaron Eckhart. She is played with a mixture of honesty, confusion and beauty by Helena Bonham Carter.

The themes are not analysed very deeply, but as they are dramatised, many in the audience may well identify with them.

DANS PARIS

(France, 2006, d. Christophe Honore)

Definitely a film for Francophiles. Others beware.

Christophe Honore's previous film, *Ma Mere*, and the screenplay that he wrote for Gael Morel's *Le Clan*, are full of abstract conversations about inner angst and about failed relationships. They are stimulating if you like this kind of anguished self-analysis and moodiness. Otherwise they seem self-indulgent and are tedious.

Honore has used Louis Garrell (*Dreamers*) in *Ma Mere*. Here, he plays the rather carefree younger brother to Romain Duris' older brother who has broken with his girlfriend, is taking refuge in his father's house (in his brother's room, ousting him to the sofa) and revelling in his depression and sneaking out at night in his brother's clothes and throwing himself into the Seine.

The father (Guy Marchand) is an old grump and is alienated from his ex-wife (Marie France Pisier) who comes to visit but does not bother to see her sons, leaving in a huff because of her husband.

Along with a visit from younger brother's girlfriend (one of many) which does lead to some kind of outgoing action from Duris, this is about all that happens. The talk is what is important – and more important than the random glimpses of Paris (mainly at night), so that having Paris in the title is a bit misleading. One presumes that characters like this talk like this dans France in general.

GOYA'S GHOSTS

(Spain, 2006, d. Milos Forman)

This reviewer, who liked Goya's Ghosts very much indeed, received a shock to find that most other reviewers were very unfavourable in their response. That seems to be a warning in itself.

Everybody did agree that the film looks good. Everybody disagreed about the casting – which is a problem as there is an international cast where Goya is played by a Swedish actor. Most did not like the structure of the film, thinking that it lacked dramatic focus and dramatic momentum.

So, in defence of Goya's Ghosts and in praise of it:

The casting is a little bizarre but Stellan Skarsgaard does make an interesting Goya. Spain is represented by Javier Bardem as Fra Lorenzo, a member of the Spanish Inquisition. America is represented by Natalie Portman who has the difficult task of playing the young Dona Inez in the first part of the film, of playing Dona Inez who is released, not in her right mind, after fifteen years in the Inquisition prison and then playing her vivacious daughter. French Michael Lonsdale is the head of the Inquisition.

It should be said that the director is double Oscar winner (Cuckoo's Nest and Amadeus) Milos Forman. Forman brings the sense of the sumptuous that he showed with Amadeus and Valmont to this re-creation of Spain. Forman also wants us to see Spain through the eyes of the artist Francisco Goya, showing a collage of his sketches and paintings during opening and closing credits, portraying Goya in action with patrons, including the Queen, posing, indicating in some detail how Goya sketched, engraved and printed his drawings. The screenplay was written in collaboration with Jean-Claude Carriere who wrote a number of classic films for Luis Bunuel, like The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie and The Phantom of Liberte.

Which brings us to the structure and drama. Goya is not really the centre of the film. Spain is. When we appreciate this we realise that he is part of the drama but also the observer and we observe events and history with him. Fra Lorenzo is far more the centre of action, first as a zealous but flawed inquisitor and then as Bonapartist official in Napoleonic times. The film is structured accordingly. The first half seems something of a chamber piece, entry into an enclosed world of late 18th century Spanish society, monarchical, conservative, rigid, affluent, superficially religious and at times dominated by a ruthless inquisition which carries out arbitrary arrests, long false imprisonments with torture all in the name of truth and religion.

Then a caption announces that 15 years have passed. This second part of the film is much more open. The early 19th century. Napoleon's troops invade, pillage and rape. The officials of the Inquisition are imprisoned and the alleged spirit of the French Revolution is to prevail. Once again Goya observes this as well as trying to do the best for Inez now released and wandering the streets to search for her child. The revolution is short-lived as Wellington and the British quickly reinstate the monarchy and the status quo. King and inquisition return – this time with executions.

There is a great deal more plot detail. Best to say that for those who enjoy history being re-enacted on screen, offering reflection on government, church and religion and the changing nature of society should find Goya's Ghosts never less than interesting.

THE HITCHER

(US, 2007, d. Dave Meyers)

Once again, the question arises, why a remake, especially of a film that is only twenty years old and still readily available still? The Hitcher was something of a cult movie in the 1980s with a terrifying performance by Rutger Hauer as a murder-minded hitchhiker, C. Thomas Howell as his tormented victim and Jennifer Jason Leigh as someone who tried to help, fatally. If a remake, can it also achieve some classic status?

With this one, not. Not that Sean Bean is not frightening as the malevolent hitchhiker whose life and motives are never explained – except that he enjoys what it feels like to kill. The central couple (Zachary Knighton and Sophia Bush) seem at first just too regular as the students going on a trip for spring break. As they are pursued, fearful, making bad judgments, trying to flee, arrested, framed and, generally desperate, they make something more of their roles and of the terror.

That is what this is, a terror trip with some frights, some ghastly experiences and a gruesome body count. This version reverses the roles of the man and the woman, taking account of the prevalence of the warrior woman in today's films. It is the man who dies and the woman who finally avenges the deaths. When the hitcher asks her how she feels as she shoots him, 'What does it feel like?', he is expecting her to say it is exhilarating. She simply says that she feels nothing. It is the sad combination of satisfaction and emptiness that is achieved by vengeance.

JE SUIS PAS LA POUR ETRE AIME (NOT HERE TO BE LOVED)

(France, 2005, d. Stephan Brize)

This is the kind of character study and romance that the French do so well and without seeming effort. It just flows.

Not that there are not a lot of difficulties for the characters. The main character is the fiftyish, rather silent and morose man, whose bailiff job requires him to demand money from non-payers and to oust non-paying tenants. He has brought his son into the business (but wants no contact with his ex-wife). He goes every Sunday to visit his cantankerous father in a home, to play Monopoly and to put up with his father's complaints and attacks on him. What has life to offer?

There is a tango studio opposite his building. Tempted by the music and watching the learners dancing, he joins the lessons where he meets an attractive middle-aged woman but does not realise she is engaged. The woman has a dominant, interfering mother. They are attracted. The man's perspective on life is changed. He courts the woman only to discover the truth. He erupts at his father, is then informed that his father has died. He never wants to see the woman again. In the meantime, she has to work out what she must do with her life and with the marriage preparations.

There is quite a lot of tango dancing and tango music which gives great atmosphere for the personal dramas.

The stars were both nominated for Cesar awards. They are both impressive, Patrick Chesnais as the man and Anne Consigny as the woman.

The drama has the air of real dilemmas, pain and joy about it.

LIKE MINDS

(Australia/UK, 2006, d. Gregory J. Read)

While the film was written and produced in Australia, with some location work in England, the story it tells is very British. It is a stylish film visually, is well written and performed, with a rather eerie feel about it.

The film opens with some rowdy students misbehaving on a train. Then the transition to the rather upper class school with its prayers, assemblies, uniforms and rituals – and expectations – and some puzzle about who these students are.

When one of them is killed and another taken into custody, the plot becomes intriguing, especially when the student is grilled by the local police and then interviewed by a forensic psychologist. We move from the interviews to flashbacks to developments in the present, so we are asked to keep our wits about us.

One of the interesting features of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* was the theory that neither of the two killers could have carried out the grim murders by himself. Rather, the two formed one personality capable of the violence. This is also a theme of the notorious Leopold-Loeb murders in the 1920s, which the psychologist reads about (dramatised in Hitchcock's *Rope* as well as in *Compulsion* and *Swoon*). This film has a reference to Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* where a mysterious man offers to carry out a murder in exchange for another.

Eddie Redmayne (Matt Damon's son in *The Good Shepherd*) is excellent as the 17 year old accused of murder. He has a harsh back story, especially when it emerges that the Headmaster (Patrick Malahide at his most public school rigid) who has corrected him during assembly is his father. His father imposes a roommate on him (Tom Sturridge), an ethereally sinister lad who is expert at animal taxidermy! The two clash, then bond although it is a bizarre relationship, ending with the death of the roommate.

The plot is even more complex when history, the history of the Church and the Knights Templar is introduced and parallels of the Cathar theology are made with the present – and the Masonic-like association to which wealthy members of the town's society belong to. (The history is about as accurate as that of *The Da Vinci Code* but it is part of the plot rather than being claimed as actual history.)

The two boys act very well and are matched by Toni Collette as the psychologist who is required to be professional, allergic to the detective (Richard Roxburgh) and made to go searching for clues in a darkened cellar with a fierce dog lurking. She acquits herself well in all sequences.

There are plot twists and turns, more unexpected deaths, as well as psychological twists, to make for an interesting and offbeat thriller.

LOVEWRECKED

(US, 2006, d. Randall Kleiser)

For the first five minutes of *Lovewrecked*, our heroine Jenny (Amanda Bynes) screams and screams (she is a mad rock fan of Jason Masters (Chris Carmack)). I was tempted to say that when she stops screaming, we the audience start!

This is a teen movie – well, a teeny teens movie, probably most effectively seen with a group of giggling girls who have identified with Jenny and her romantic fantasies about Jason. She and her best friend, the devoted Ryan (Jonathan Bennett) work at a Caribbean resort for the summer. When Jason overnights there and goes on a cruise, becomes seasick and falls overboard, Jenny dives in to rescue him. They are shipwrecked on a deserted beach and Jenny looks after him, lovelovewrecked. The only trouble is that soon she finds she is on the other side of the island resort, doesn't tell Jason and...

PG style for teens with a cast that are well-known from TV shows (the ability of Amanda Bynes' girlish behaviour as absorbingly attractive for Jason and Ryan eludes me) and, of all things, directed by Randall Kleiser who made *Grease* almost thirty years ago.

MAGICIANS

(UK, 2007, d. Andrew O'Connor)

British audiences might be familiar with comedy duo of David Mitchell and Robert Webb from *The Peep Show*. Others may have seen them in a series of commercials (irritating ones) for Mac computers at the expense of all others. They always have an air of competitiveness about them with Mitchell usually precise and prissy and Webb laid back and nonchalant.

They bring these aspects of their personas to the roles of two magicians, childhood friends, who fall out when one has an affair with the other's wife – and she is accidentally guillotined during an act. Needless to say, they find it difficult to get jobs after this. We see a few mildly amusing attempts to find work.

The screenplay falls back on the convention of the contest for the best magic. Will they combine? If they do, will the past be forgotten? Has the husband overcome his paranoia? Is the friend still too casual? And what of the woman who really wants to be an assistant – and is very keen on the guillotine trick until she hears the truth? And the competitors?

Fans of Mitchell and Webb may well enjoy *Magicians*. Others will find it sometimes amusing, sometimes so-so and filled with far too much schoolboy smutty innuendo which is unnecessary to the plot.

MESSAGES

(UK, 2007, d. David Fairman)

This is the kind of paperback murder mystery that is either an easy night out or an easy night home watching it on TV or DVD. It is something of a routine murder mystery with a serial killer plus some strange messages from the beyond and some ghosts who appear in nightmares and finally appear to wreak vengeance on their killer.

There are not too many candidates for the killer. The screenplay successfully steered me away from identifying the guilty party.

Jeff Fahey has appeared in numerous B-budget thrillers and action shows. A bit older now, he is an American living in England and working in the hospital mortuary as the local pathologist. His wife is killed in a car crash and he goes to pieces. Months later – and he little better – a serial killer is on the loose.

A hot shot author detective is sent to England (Martin Kove) on an exchange in charge of the investigation. He is enough to put anyone off the swaggering cowboy type. The British are represented by the psychologist profiling the killer (Kim Thomson) and the local medical officer (Bruce Payne).

More than a touch melodramatic, this is glossily made standard fare.

MY BEST FRIEND (MON MEILLEUR AMI)

(France, 2006, d. Patrice Leconte)

If you were a fan of French films and you especially appreciated the films of Daniel Auteuil and you went to a preview of *My Best Friend* without knowing anything about it, you may well have thought that you were seeing another Francis Veber comedy about bonding between two highly unlikely types. It may not have the zip of many of Veber's comedies or the farcical situations, but they are certainly there.

However, the point to make is that this is not a film by Francis Veber. Rather, it is a film by that very serious director, Patrice Leconte. His films include *M.Hire*, *The Hairdresser's Husband*, *Ridicule*, *Man on the Train*, definitely not comedies.

The film does have quite a serious undertone. Daniel Auteuil plays a self-preoccupied, self-centred antiques dealer, Francois Coste, who, on a whim, pays an exorbitant amount of money for a Greek vase, a vase whose space was filled with tears for a dead friend – so it is said. The point comes up whether he really has any friends. He takes a bet that within ten days he can produce a friend. He goes the rounds of a list and finds that these associates do not see him as a friend at all. And his daughter finds him difficult to deal with and like.

By chance, he encounters the same cabby, Bruno, several times (Dany Boon with whom Daniel Auteuil appeared in Veber's *Le Doublure*, *The Valet*). Bruno is a very nice man, very sociable, putting people at their ease – except that he is a walking computer for facts for TV quizzes that irritates more than a few and that he goes to pieces with nerves when he goes to auditions for the shows.

As you might guess, Francois grills Bruno about friendship, definitions and techniques and makes a hash of every attempt to be sociable. Bruno, however, warms to him, is helpful about Francois's daughter's asthma, invites Francois to his parents' house for dinner. He is prepared to go to great lengths as a friend only to find that Francois has been using him to win the bet.

That is probably enough plot though there is quite a bit more before Francois learns the meaning of friendship and Bruno can acknowledge it.

It is not every film (or any other film?) that has its great dramatic and emotional climax an episode of Who Wants to be a Millionaire. But My Best Friend does – 'phone a friend' - and anyone who has watched and liked their version of the program should enjoy it. By this stage Leconte has moved from the serious to the comic to the sentimental and a feelgood parable about selfishness and the realities of true friendship.

NIGHT OF THE SUNFLOWERS

(Spain, 2006, d. Jorge Sanchez-Cabezudo)

This is a most carefully plotted thriller, intriguing as it moves from episode to episode and from character to character. After a prologue where the audience sees a middle aged man responsible for the death of a young woman whose body he leaves in a field of sunflowers, the film moves into separate chapters with characters whom we have momentarily glimpsed during the prologue. Though the film is not difficult to follow, it is best to have your wits about you as each chapter has some initial backtracking in its timeline.

In some ways, the initial murder is something of a distraction. The plot goes in other directions. The first chapter shows a man, a travelling salesman, in a motel. We follow him in his work and watch him take a by-road that was suggested for better business. Here he sees a young woman alone in the woods. The next chapter concerns a group of caving experts (unfortunately the copy under review translated the word for caves as 'potholes' for the subtitles!). The young woman is the wife of the leader who has come to the village to explore a newly discovered cave. This becomes important as the cavers see a man on the road and make wrong assumptions about his assaulting the woman and they attack him.

The next chapter concerns 'the proper authorities'. This title has a more than a touch of irony as the local policeman is not at all proper in his life. However, his father-in-law who is the police chief is. In the next chapter, Mad Amos, an old man of the vicinity comes with reports of a murder which confuse the police. Finally, in the last chapter, dedicated to the father-in-law, the pieces all come together in a shrewd investigation of what really happened.

The end is also dramatically satisfying (but still morally ambiguous) as we glimpse each of the main characters and assess how these events have changed them. The man from the motel also arrives home to his family.

Very well acted, expertly plotted with a lot to offer about personal dilemmas, moral choices and the changing society of Spain.

NUOVOMONDO (GOLDEN DOOR)

(Italy, 2006, d. Emanuele Crialese)

One of the good things about serving on a SIGNIS jury is discovering films that are both entertaining and moving and which can be the recipient of awards for promoting human values. Nuovomondo was the final film screened in competition in Venice in 2006. Ninety minutes after seeing it, our jury decided that it was the SIGNIS winner. Our choice was confirmed when the film won other prizes and a Jury prize from the international Jury. Later, Nuovomondo was chosen as Italy's official nominee for the Oscar for Best Foreign Language film.

This background is presented to reinforce the view that Nuovomondo is well worth seeing.

Another reason for seeing the film is its subject. The Nuovo Mondo, the New World – or the Golden Door of the film's title in English – is that of the United States one hundred years ago. Migrants from all over Europe, from Ireland, Italy, Russia and Eastern Europe, many of them refugees, many economic migrants, made their way to the new world in hopes of a better life.

We now take these migrations for granted and see the benefits that the newcomers brought to their adoptive country, especially in terms of the workforce – even if so many of them were exploited. The point to be made now is that different populations from all parts of the contemporary world are on the move. There are even more refugees. There are more displaced people. There are more economic migrants. The pattern of the past remains, where previous migrants are so settled into their new homes that they begrudge favours to newcomers who want only the same as what they wanted when they arrived.

This is why it can be valuable to watch a film like *Nuovomondo* so that these patterns are not necessarily repeated, that welcome is offered to newcomers, that opportunities are made available and that discrimination is not to be taken for granted.

Nuovomondo comprises three chapters.

The initial location is Sicily at the beginning of the 20th century. Life is hard. Peasants are poor. The terrain, though beautiful, is harsh. The film opens with young men racing up a steep mountain with rocks in their mouths as part of the endurance so that they can pray at a shrine for a sign as to what they must do for their future. After much discussion and heart-searching, they apply to sail to America. The film has some marvellous detail of their preparations for the voyage, their buying clothes, the families at the wharves to farewell them.

The second part of the film is the voyage. The re-creation of the boat and life on board, sometimes exciting, at other times harsh with the crowding and the nervousness of people who have no real idea of what lies ahead of them, is so detailed that audiences will feel that they are sharing the voyage. This part introduces Charlotte Gainsbourg as a widow from England trying to find someone who will marry her and enable her to land in America lawfully. She makes friends with the three men from Sicily.

The final section of the film is the arrival in the United States. While they watch the statue of Liberty in New York's harbour, they land at Ellis Island, the point of entry to America for so many of the migrants. They are herded into quarters, interrogated in a language they barely understand, they are prodded and poked for disease or anything that would disqualify them from entry. Since one of the men is mute, we see the lengths the others go to to help him enter.

The film ends as they arrive at the Golden Doors which will open to their new life.

Interesting, moving, thoughtful – and still relevant today.

OCEANS 13

(US, 2007, d. Steven Soderbergh)

Television channels trot out the original *Oceans 11* whenever one of the new *Oceans* films appears. Probably a bad move except for curiosity, as the 1961 film moves so slowly for modern sensibilities and Frank Sinatra does not seem so charismatic and that Peter Lawford seems a stuffed shirt – though the screen does brighten up whenever Dean Martin turns up.

The remake was an extravaganza of a caper, again with a star cast, but with wittier dialogue and lots more technology to play with. *Oceans 12* seemed self-indulgence on the part of the director and cast who hopped off to Europe for a sometimes incomprehensible plot and for mutual amusement which it was often difficult to share.

But, with the return to Las Vegas for Oceans 13, there is a tighter plot (which, however, with the instant arrival of desired equipment, including (twice) a huge tunnel digger that was used for the Channel tunnel – from the French side – with the range of computer technology at work, with instant communications and seemingly unlimited resources of income to pay for anything at a moment's notice, it is a plot very difficult to summarise, let alone comprehend). But, plot isn't everything. By focusing on Las Vegas and a clearly defined caper, this film gains in atmosphere and tension.

The cast is good with no one dominating. George Clooney is still the smooth Danny Ocean and leader but not outshining the rest. Brad Pitt is still the grinning planner and Matt Damon is effectively comic as the uptight Linus who finally gets a chance to cut loose, at least a little and for a moment. Don Cheadle has tones down his absurd Cockney accent. Everybody in the team gets a chance to star and do a set piece. Carl Reiner in his mid 80s enjoys putting on a false British accent to con the casino manager and Elliot Gould has to play victim of heart attack as well as of fraud.

This film also works well for its focused villain – and Andy Garcia's Terry Benedict the 11's first victim is back to land a hand. But Al Pacino is hard to beat as an egotistical, ruthless builder of casinos who defies everyone to bring him down. Ellen Barkin is his strict assistant who suddenly lets go of her primness.

So, it is all glitzy, high-powered, clever, glamorous and good-humoured. The two leads' eyes moisten as they watch Oprah, but Oprah is a good sport and provides a nice 'charity' ending at Terry Benedict's expense.

A word of praise must be given to David Paymer as the put-upon inspector of hotels who proves he is a good sport – and fully deserves his happy ending.

PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: AT WORLD'S END

(US, 2007, d. Gore Verbinski)

Watching this pirate epic in a full theatre on a public holiday is a better indication of how audiences respond rather than watching it in a preview theatre with a group of generally older critics. On the whole, they didn't like it. On the whole, the public did.

It is best advised that it is a long haul. It runs over two and three quarter hours – with a brief epilogue after the long credits which meant that few people actually had remained to see it!

By now, moviegoers young and old know the main characters pretty well and part of the enjoyment is bringing that knowledge to the new adventures. We last saw Captain Jack Sparrow launched into world's end by Davy Jones. How will he return? Will Elizabeth Swann marry William Turner or not? Will Elizabeth's governor father be thwarted by the greedy and arrogant Lord Beckett? How is it that Captain Barbossa who was spectacularly killed off in the first episode and resurrected at the end of the second clash with or work with Jack Sparrow? And what of Davy Jones and his vengeance? Of William Turner rescuing his father from The Dutchman?

As can be seen, having enough plot is not a difficulty.

Early in the piece (which tends to be dark and gloomy), we might be struggling to follow all the ins and outs of the plot, especially as William Turner seems to be against Elizabeth. It becomes even more complicated when our characters find themselves in Singapore of all places and at the mercy of the local pirate chief.

But, when they all find themselves sailing to and falling off the end of the world, the issues become clearer and we know, if not where we are, where we are going. Lots of adventure, lots of talking, lots of special effects.

Johnny Depp has made Jack Sparrow one of the best known of screen characters. Borrowing from *The Matrix*, the filmmakers have provided us with several scenes where there are many Jack Sparrows all at once, visualising the different aspects of his personality. Depp swaggers as usual, makes a lot of funny offhand remarks and subverts the image of the heroic pirate. He is said to have modelled his performance on the antics of Keith Richards but, when Keith Richards actually turns up in a cameo role as a pirate chief, he is very laid back in comparison.

The rest of the cast do what is expected of them. Keira Knightly has a lot more to do when she is elected the head of the pirate league and commands the ship. Geoffrey Rush is back in full blast as Captain Barbossa and Bill Nighy looks and acts as creepily as before as Davy Jones.

Towards the end, we might be wondering how it can all be resolved. No need to worry, there is a huge storm, a huge battle, huge swordfights... Almost absurd at times, but enough swash and buckle to satisfy the patrons (if not the critics!).

SPIDERMAN 3

(US, 2007, d. Sam Raimi)

When *Spiderman* was released in 2002, it created an enormous impact. Not only was it one of the best of the adaptations of a Marvel comic for the screen but it also came to the notice of moral and religious groups who were pleased to write and publicise articles on *Spiderman* as a role model (well, not his acrobatics but his moral decisions and motives). At a crucial moment, Peter Parker had a significant conversation with his wise Aunt May about power meaning responsibility and service. So far, so good.

Two years later, *Spiderman 2* made an even bigger impact. I went back to my review of three years ago and found that I was echoing the kind of comments on the first film:

‘His work in keeping law and order and rescuing those in danger means that Peter has difficulty with his true identity. His inner potential, a more extraverted hero, emerges when he is *Spiderman*. He has a highly developed sense of responsibility and duty which he sees as requiring self-sacrifice in renouncing his love for Mary Jane, especially since *Spiderman*’s enemies would put her life at risk (which they do). Aunt May gives him a strong pep talk about the need for heroes...’.

Three years later, it is now *Spiderman 3* time. There is plenty to satisfy the fans of comic book heroes as well as those still looking for the values. The running time is almost two and a half hours, so it is quite long and younger audiences may fidget at the dramatic interludes – but some action will come along sooner rather than later. In fact, there is probably too much plot for one film, *Spiderman* having to fight three villains, though there is a pleasing twist before the final battle in downtown New York and the ultimate confrontation between good and evil.

Sam Raimi has achieved quite a feat in directing three successful episodes of *Spiderman* (but it makes you wonder if there really is any potential for a fourth). In terms of special effects and stunts, there is more than enough to satisfy.

The cast, mainly from the previous films, are fortunately given plenty to do. This is true of supporting characters like J.J. Simmons who gets some quite hilarious moments as the Bugle editor. Even Willem Dafoe and Cliff Robertson have cameos, their characters contributing to new plot developments. (*Spiderman 3* relates more to the original film than to *Spiderman 2*). Rosemary Harris as Aunt May is still as wise and long-suffering as ever. And, again, she is the character who is able to put the moral sense and perspective into words.

Tobey Maguire has always been convincing as Peter Parker. Last time, he had to face the conflict between heroism and love for Mary Jane. It goes much deeper this time. And we see a lot more of Peter’s complex personality. We see his succumbing to vanity and an inability to empathise with Mary Jane and her acting crisis. But, with an alien substance crashing to earth and insinuating itself into Peter’s body and psyche

with frightening effect, it unleashes some of his shadow side in both arrogance (trying to outdo Travolta's Saturday Night Fever strutting) and in violence, in consuming vengeance for the death of his Uncle Ben. He sees a sinful side of his nature and has to deal with it and make serious decisions.

Kirsten Dunst is back as Mary Jane with her character developing and having to cope with professional disappointment as well as Peter's self-centred behaviour. She also has plenty of opportunity to do some heroine-in-peril screaming at the end. James Franco is also back as Harry. His role is considerably built up this time, giving him big stunts and evil action as well as some sweetness-and-light niceness.

There are two more spectacular villains. Thomas Haden Church gets atomised while on the run from the police and transforms into The Sandman – plenty of eye-popping effects there. Topher Grace is an ambitious young photographer who covets Peter's photography job at The Bugle – and opts for the dark side.

Bryce Dallas Howard offers some (unwilling) rivalry to Mary Jane as Peter's lab partner in studies, daughter of the police chief (James Cromwell) and Topher Grace's girlfriend. Longtime Raimi collaborator, especially in the Evil Dead films, Bruce Campbell, has some funny scene-stealing moments as a restaurant maitre d'.

Quite a cast line-up bringing the wide range of characters alive.

And, of course, the issue of Peter Parker/Spiderman as a role model. At the opening, he is still the same service-oriented, responsible superhero ready to combat evil. But, to our surprise (and our wishing he wasn't), he becomes a rather vain twit. He has feet of clay and is obtuse to Mary Jane, basking in his popularity and crowd adulation and being given the keys to the city. But, it gets worse, when we see his literal dark side. But, this is interesting in terms of exploring the good and the propensity for evil in human nature, even in a superhero. We wait for the resolution of the moral dilemmas and for Peter to come to his senses. Aunt May is key again with her advice.

In fact, there is quite an impressive sequence towards the end when Peter has to face the corrosive nature of revenge and acknowledge the grace of being able to forgive. It is preceded by a sequence with explicit Christian imagery. The dark Spiderman sees a cross on the steeple of a church. He then sits brooding, like a gargoyle, on the high roof. However, he goes into the belfry and makes the choice for light and goodness. Meanwhile the ambitious photographer who has lost his job and reputation kneels in the body of the church below, praying before a large crucifix. But, his prayer is that Peter Parker will be killed. At this moment, the alien ooze which Peter is shedding falls on the photographer and he chooses evil.

Spiderman 3 is pro-good, not only in combating the personifications of evil in the villains but also in the hero.

THE TIGER'S TAIL

(UK/Ireland, 2006, d. John Boorman)

John Boorman has had a checkered career as a director. Some of his films are classics like Point Blank, Deliverance and The General. He has a good reputation with Excalibur, Hope and Glory. However, he has had a number of oddities, Leo the Last, Exorcist 2, Zardoz. He has been directing films for over forty years.

The Tiger's Tail is set in Ireland where he has lived for almost four decades. Clearly he is not impressed by the Irish economic boom since the country's entry into the European Union. He sees it as being detrimental to the soul of the Irish, reducing people to materialism and greed. He also alludes to the corruption of government and the scandals that have undermined the authority and status of the Church.

On paper, the plot of The Tiger's Tail sounds worthwhile. The film is always interesting but not always dramatically convincing.

Boorman himself is the father of twins and says that he has observed their behaviour with great fascination. He takes the familiar story of twins separated at birth and their encounter after separate lives for more than forty years, one prospering, the other not. At first, the prosperous builder (not above bribes and kickbacks for government ministers) thinks he is seeing a double and becomes neurotic. He has more cause for neuroses after the two men physically clash and the 'pauper' takes the place of the 'prince' and the latter is interned in an institution.

The film delves into Ireland's past, the poverty and oppression giving way to affluence, the role of popular priests in fathering children and the plight of the pregnant young teenagers who went to England to escape scandal and let their mothers bring up their children as their own. The film is quite scathing on Ireland's present, with greed dominating, with youth alienated and suicidal, with the poor out on the streets. The film seems to hold little hope for the future with the Celtic tiger growing and then turning to bite.

The theme is clearly 'what doth it profit to gain the whole world and lose one's soul?'. Boorman believes there is a need for repentance and conversion.

Brendan Gleeson, who was Boorman's The General, is a big bluff man who is able to create two clashing characters for the twins. Kim Cattrall is his wife and Sinéad Cusack his mother. There is a positive turn by Ciarán Hinds as a schooldays friend who is a sincerely ministering priest.

More of a fable than a drama - so it makes you think.

TURISTAS (PARADISE LOST)

(US, 2006, d. John Stockwell)

It's an uncharitable distraction during the first part of *Turistas* but, if there were to be victims of predatory Brazilians in the jungle who were to abduct a group of twenty somethings who were preoccupied with having a good time (drink and sex being the main ingredients with some surf added), who were completely culturally insensitive to the people whose country they were visiting, who had the personalities of self-absorbed teenagers, and the Brazilians were to take their organs for profit, then the cast of this film really fits the bill.

So that is who these *turistas* are. For the main part, this is what they do – apart from complaining when things go wrong. And then things really go wrong as they are stranded, robbed, befriended by a guide who is actually leading them to the hideout surgery of a local who resents first world attitudes towards Brazil and where they will be dismembered.

While the subject is gruesome and there are some grizzly scenes, *Turistas* is not particularly gory. Will this tale of a contemporary problem in terms of organ sales put off the tourists (who in this film come from the US, Sweden, the UK – one of these is the most obnoxious – and Australia (and she is the best and most common-sensed of them)? If it does, then the Brazilian tourist bureau will have less to complain about!

WEDDING DAZE

(US, 2007, d. Michael Ian Black)

Wedding Daze is a likeable little comedy about love and marriage. Its heart is in the right place about love and commitment – but the screenplay, written by director Michael Ian Black, is sharper in its humour than expected with a number of funny remarks and wry comments.

Jason Biggs (looking better than he did in his *American Pie* days) is Anderson, so besotted with Vanessa that he dons a Cupid costume to surprise her in a restaurant with his proposal. She is really so surprised that she literally drops dead. Where to go from there, especially as he cannot get her out of his mind?

When his best friend (Michael Weston) urges him to snap out of it, he suddenly proposes to Katie, the waitress at a diner (Isla Fisher) and she accepts. We are then filled in with her background and a proposal she had received the previous evening and refused.

By this time we have a cast of amusing supporting characters: Katie's father who is in prison, her highly strung mother and her stepfather who makes Jewish toys (like a Jupla!), Katie's would-be fiancé who is a wiz at movie charades, two Russians at the diner who want to be in the circus, and Anderson's sex-obsessed parents.

Stir this all together, add some misunderstandings plus Dad's escape from prison as well as the group borrowing a test-drive car and a wedding in Atlantic City that actually has everyone ending up in jail, and you have a better than average trifle in favour of true love.

THE WILD BLUE YONDER

(UK/France, 2005, d. Werner Herzog)

For more than forty years, German director Werner Herzog has been making documentaries and feature films that defy easy categorising. He explored the Conquistador world in *Aguirre*, the *Wrath of God* and filmed the carrying of a boat over the Andes in *Fitzcarraldo*. He created an aboriginal mythology for *Where the Green Ants Dream*. Now he has created a small but idiosyncratic space odyssey.

Brad Dourif comes centrescreen to narrate a voyage of aliens from the far reaches of Andromeda (the real wild blue yonder) when their planet died. Some were lost in space. Others reached Earth. However, their attempts to settle on earth met with failure, the building of a new Washington which was abandoned in the American west. So far, clear enough.

Herzog divides his film into explicit chapters to chart this alien progress.

However, the story takes a different direction when Dourif starts to explain more recent space exploration and ridding the world of dangerous viruses by taking them into space. In his story, the astronauts themselves are affected and begin (somewhat akin to Keir Dullea's journey beyond Jupiter in Kubrick's classic, only here extremely modestly and with small budget) a long journey through space and through time until they return and are decontaminated, centuries hence. In an environmental wishful thinking and wish fulfilment, Herzog has future humans living and working in the galaxies returning only to a now pristine earth to enjoy nature without exploiting it.

In this way, the odyssey becomes a plea for the environment.

Apart from the open space in front of a derelict classic building where Dourif tells his tale, most of the material is archival, shrewdly assembled by Herzog. For the narratives about history, Herzog has used a lot of silent footage. For the present, for space, for the underwater purification sequences, he has been able to incorporate footage of Antarctica and space material.

Herzog calls his film a science-fiction fantasy. It is also a visual poem – evocative and provocative.

CANNES 2007

This file contains reviews of a number of films screened at the Cannes Film Festival, May 2007. They are principally films in the main competition and in the section, *Un Certain Regard*.

4 MONTHS, 3 WEEKS & 2 DAYS

(Competition. Romania. Directed by Cristian Mungiu)

A completely overwhelming film that is gruelling to sit through. It is strikingly made and performed. It won the Palme D'Or.

In 2005, the Romanians gave the world an emotionally draining picture of dying and hospital indifference in *The Death of Mr Lazarescu*. (This film has the same Cinematographer and Editor/Sound Designer). Now we are offered an equally emotionally draining picture of an illegal abortion. The reality and facts are laid before us for our intellectual and emotional response without a didactic moralising. However, audiences are forced to think about their moral stances. Those against abortion will need no persuading. Those who are in favour will be challenged to look at the issues and their consequences. In fact, the title does seem to make a moral statement about life. The setting is 1987.

This is the response of a male viewer. We need to hear the impact on a female audience, especially concerning the abortion scenes and the talk and behaviour of the abortionist, a man.

The structure of the film (which takes place during one winter day) is a series of chapters in the life of two university roommates, Gabita who is pregnant and her friend Otilia. Laura Vasiliu and, especially, Anamaria Marinca as Otilia are totally real.

We seem to spend a lot of initial time watching Gabita pack and Otilia doing the rounds of the dorm. It is fly on a wall observation of people. We are not sure what the issue is at this stage but it is not a difficult guess. Then Otilia books a hotel room. She meets the abortionist and a palpably excruciating discussion ensues with the man pulling no punches in description nor in the price from both women he demands. We look objectively at the procedure.

Surprisingly one of the best dinner sequences in film follows as Otilia goes to her boyfriend's mother's birthday party. One long take with her at the centre, furious and anxious, listening to the older generation describe life under Communist rule (good old days). We are not spared the aftermath of the abortion and a nightmarish episode as Otilia tries to dispose of the foetus.

Totally disturbing and challenging, brilliantly made.

L'AGE DES TENEBRES

(Closing film, Canada, 2007, directed by Denys Arcand)

Best known for *Jesus of Montreal*, Montreal based Denys Arcand has made what is now a trilogy over the last twenty years. This is the final film. In 1987, he made *The Decline of the American Empire*. Keeping that historical perspective from the Roman Empire, he gathered the cast together in 2003 to make a story of what had happened to them in the preceding decade and a half. He called his film, *The Barbarian Invasions*. It won the Oscar for Best Foreign Language film.

After the barbarian invasions came the Dark Ages (which would be a better translation of the French title). This is a story of a very ordinary man, Jean-Marc, 'a man of no interest' (which is the title of a make believe prize winning novel in the film), a middle aged man subject to all the present crises who symbolises the contemporary Dark Ages. He is played quite convincingly in look and manner by comedian Marc Lebreche.

There are two solutions to the Dark Ages. The first is to retreat into a fantasy world. Our hero regularly does this and these sequences have vitality and are also amusing. A glamorous star (Diane Kruger) continually appears to him to fulfil all his desires, including his sexual frustration. He also imagines himself as a celebrity, acclaimed by everyone. But, then it is back to earth, to his real estate agent wife

always on her mobile, to his indifferent teenage daughters, to his humdrum job of mainly telling applicants for aid how their request will be denied, to the constant traffic jams...

To highlight the Dark Ages imagery and symbols, our hero meets a woman at a dating service who takes part in medieval pageants and jousts. The club members dress up, fight the battles and take rather fascist stances on nationalism.

The solution that Arcand espouses is another variation on flight from the world. This is the 'fuga mundi' that the monks of the times of the barbarian invasions and the dark ages advocated: to go to a centre where values, both human and religious, could be fostered and re-establish a values civilisation. (And, during the Dark Ages, it was from these centres that the missionaries went out.)

Arcand is suggesting a rediscovery of roots, of earth, of creation and creativity – it is a bit like the Gospel saying of being in the world but not of the world.

ALEXANDRA

(Competition, Russia, 2007, directed by Alexander Sukurov)

In recent years, Sukurov has dramatised issues of power and politics in Germany and Japan as well as look at father son relationships. This time he explores power and possibilities for peace in Russia and in Chechnya where more than 60,000 locals lost their lives as well as 6000 Russian troops. The plot is basic. An old grandmother goes to visit her officer grandson in a peacekeeping camp. She is a forceful old lady, Alexandra (veteran actress, Galina Vishnevskaya), pushes her way around, sees and says what she wants, especially visiting the local people, the women.

Through Alexandra's strong will and her eyes, we see the young recruits and their inexperience, their poor weaponry, the ugly conditions in a fairly barren countryside. While she tells her Chechnyan guide that war and peace are not simple issues, we know, with her, that there ought to be peace.

AUF DER ANDEREN SEITE (THE EDGE OF HEAVEN)

(Competition, Germany/Turkey, 2007, directed by Fatih Akin)

Winner of the Ecumenical Award at Cannes and award for best screenplay.

Fatih Akin has made a tough film in the past about Turks living and working in Germany and the cultural differences and the demands the Germans make on the newcomers, *Head On*. He has also made a vivid documentary about Turkish popular music, *Crossing the Bridge*. *The Edge of Heaven* is also tough but more audience friendly because it deals with death and grief in a moving way.

Two deaths are noted before sections of the films begin, so we know who will die but not when and how. This makes for stronger tension. The first death is that of Yeter, an older Turkish prostitute living in Bremen who is befriended by the Turkish father of a young professor of German at a Hamburg University. He invites her to be his companion and live in his home. She accepts. In the meantime she is looking for her daughter who is studying in Istanbul, but she has lost touch with her (and has not told her about how she gains the money for her tuition). She asks the professor to help. When she is sadly killed, he goes back to Istanbul to search. He also decides to stay in Turkey and buys a German bookshop in Istanbul.

The second victim is a German girl, Lotte. Parallel to the story of Yeter and the professor, we see what has happened to the daughter. She has joined a militant group and narrowly avoided being arrested. She escapes to Germany and wants to find her mother. Hungry, she asks Lotte at random for money for food. Lotte is generous, invites her to stay at her mother's house and begins a sexual relationship with her. The mother strongly disapproves but helps pay court costs concerning the girl's deportation. Lotte follows her friend to Istanbul, where, in a sadly shocking scene, she is suddenly killed.

This is a film where paths cross without the characters seeing each other or meeting. Some have found this too schematic for a drama (and it is schematic). However, there is something gripping and emotional about the degrees of connection and separation – and the hopes that people will find each other. Here, this is left until after the film is over.

Action moves between Turkey and Germany with lively photography of Bremen, Hamburg, Istanbul and the Turkish countryside and the coast at Trabzon.

It is ultimately a film about reconciliation and forgiveness. The final shot, which is on the film's advertising poster and which continues during the final credits, is of the young professor sitting with his back to the camera on the beach waiting for his father's boat to come in. Not a word, but a glimpse of hope and peace.

APRES LUI

(Director's Fortnight, France, 2007, directed by Gael Morel)

Gael Morel has made a number of interesting films about French young men and their relationships amongst themselves and with their families. A frequent collaborator has been Christophe Honore (Ma Mere, Dans Paris, Chansons d'Amour). Honore's films tend to have a great deal of dialogue with lots of abstract reflections on life and love. When he collaborates with Morel, the characters and plot drive the film rather than the reflections. This makes them more interesting and accessible.

The plot of *Après Lui* is quite straightforward. We are introduced to a young man and his best friend. They go to a party and one is killed in a car accident while the other was driving. The mother of the dead man is distraught at the death of her son but is outwardly controlled while the grief affects her heart and her mind. She becomes more and more obsessed by his death and tries to keep his memory alive by focusing her attention on the driver, keeping alive the memories through him.

This has repercussions on her ex-husband, especially in her inviting the friend to the funeral, on her expectant daughter whom she ignores. The young man's parents also become disturbed.

Catherine Deneuve (in her 99th film) gives a powerful performance as the mother, on screen for most of the film. One can appreciate her grief and how it has taken possession of her but we, like her family and friends, become more and more exasperated with her behaviour. In a sense, the film suddenly stops – but it leaves the audience thinking about what could possibly happen after this.

THE BANISHMENT (IZGNANIE)

(Competition, Russia, 2007, directed by Andrey Zviagintsev)

There is a tradition in Russian literature and cinema that length offers no difficulty, is almost a requirement. A contemporary world finds little time for Tolstoy or for classic films that run for more than two hours. *The Banishment* runs to two and a half hours. It offers time for contemplation and for reflection – which is well worthwhile.

Andrey Zviagintsev made a great impact in 2003 with his Venice winner *The Return* (winner of SIGNIS, Ecumenical and Templeton awards), a beautiful but sad film about a father reuniting with his two sons. This follow-up is a very confident film, beautifully directed and photographed, naturalistically and convincingly acted, a film of great craft in the Russian tradition. There will be no difficulty in critics talking about the Tarkovsky influence, not only in the film's look and landscapes but also the plot and its metaphysical dimensions of reflection.

It is also a film of Russian melancholy, focussing on what seems an idyllic family consisting of father, mother, son and daughter. They move from a dingy industrial city into the old family home in the remote countryside and all seems wonderful until the wife changes everything by speaking about eight, almost

emotionless words: that she is pregnant. Her husband's anger leads to recriminations, to hasty decisions and to issues of abortion which have tragic results.

The director, however, makes one big move towards modernity in storytelling. Just when you think the film is ending with an extraordinary tracking shot of water flowing and nourishing the ground, the film moves to another 30 minutes or so, going back in the narrative to give more detail and explanations of why the tragedies happened. Ultimately, this is more satisfying as it offers psychological and some metaphysical considerations on lack of communication and love.

However, as the history of Russia shows, and the final scene of women singing, raking in the harvest, life must go on.

THE BAND'S VISIT

(Un Certain Regard, Isreal, 2007, directed by Eran Kolirin)

What if an Egyptian police band turned up to the wrong Israeli town to play at the inauguration of the Arab cultural centre?

A pleasing premiss for a light story of friendship and understanding. Director Eran Kolirin remembers his past when there was such a visit, the days when families in Israel used to watch soap operas from Egypt on TV. He also says that the question for this part of the world is not how peace can be achieved but, more deeply, 'why peace?'.

As we see the band leader reminisce with the woman who owns the bar and they exchange stories, as we see the assistant conductor at home with a husband who has had an argument with his wife, as we see the young policeman coaching a gawky local how to charm a young woman at the local skating rink, something of the answer comes across in a light, often charming, way.

BOXES

(Un Certain Regard, France, 2007, directed by Jane Birkin)

Jane Birkin was a fashionable icon of the swinging 60s in Britain (witness Blow Up) and moved to fashionable France in the 1970s (with Serge Gainsbourg). She is a survivor and has now written and directed a film which takes us back to those times and the consequences.

Half in English and half in French and filmed in Brittany, it is like a theatre piece (and heavy on dialogue which can be histrionic and laborious) which may alienate potential audiences. As Anna (Birkin) moves around her house, she relives the meaning of the past, interacting with her parents, her children, her husbands and other characters. Once you get into the swing of it, then she reveals a great deal about human nature (and herself). The performances are striking, like those of Michel Piccoli as her father, and a characteristically fey and earthy performance from Geraldine Chaplin as her mother. The play comes very much alive when John Hurt appears as her first husband.

Sometimes difficult to stay with, but it repays attention.

BREATH (SOOM)

(Competition, Korea, 2007, directed by Kim Ki-Duk)

In recent years Kim Ki-Duk has achieved a world-wide reputation and has been making brief, more focused films (Bunjip, The Bow). It is the same here, a small drama in 84 minutes.

A lonely housewife is fascinated by the TV news of a murderer on death row attempting suicide. She visits him in prison, bringing some colour and joy to his life, and some intimacy. This is a relief for him as he is

in a cell with several others who torment him. Her unfaithful but demanding husband has to deal with this situation.

Breath is life. Breathing corresponds to our moods, our emotions, our crises. The woman gives herself to the prisoner but wants to take his breath before he is executed. Fellow prisoners want to take his breath. A blend of the realistic and the stylised, Kim Ki-Duk offers a challengingly strange short story.

CENTOCHIODI

(Special screening. Italy, 2007, directed by Ermanno Olmi)

Olmi says this will be his last film. An interesting choice of themes, very Italian. A religious professor becomes disillusioned with cerebral knowledge and books and nails a hundred precious manuscripts to the library floor and then opts out to live life with the marginalised on the banks of the Po, becoming their spokesperson and saviour – and they call him, as one would, Jesus Christ.

This symbolic parable criticises the Church as well as God for all suffering and chooses the Gospel message of Jesus: living life and solidarity, being with and helping the poor. ‘Having a cup of coffee with a friend is worth more than all the books’. Idiosyncratically Italian and arresting.

CHACUN SON CINEMA

(Special 60th anniversary screening)

If you didn’t like this three minute segment, then there was another coming up shortly. Forty in fact – a project of Gilles Jacob to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Festival de Cannes. And a fine cinema celebration it is.

Forty directors were asked to contribute a short film on cinema. Those who brought a sense of humour to their project did best (Walter Salles in a mock song about the poor fishing port in the south of France, Roman Polanski’s joke at a screening of Emmanuelle, the Coens’ cowboy deciding between La Regle de Jour or Climates, Ken Loach sending up multiplex programming). The nostalgias were also moving and effective (especially Kitani, the Chinese and Lelouch). Some were pleasantly self-congratulatory (Chahine, Moretti). Amos Gittai was very political about the 2006 war. Only 99 year old Manoel de Oliveira could have a film about John XXIII and Khrushchev. And Lars Von Tier was – well, Lars Von Trier. Too many to mention, but the film provides an intriguing directors’ eye view of the power of cinema.

LES CHANSONS D’AMOUR (LOVE SONGS)

(Competition, France, 2007, directed by Christophe Honore)

Christophe Honore’s films are usually talkative, abstract reflections and interactions about communication and love. This one is less talkative. However, the characters suddenly burst (or, rather, quietly begin) into song, the French plaintive ballad style with lyrics that hover between depth and the trite.

Structure has three parts: Departure, Absence, Return. Of love, that is. This relates to Julie (Ludivine Sagnier) who dies, leaving her boyfriend (Honore regular, Louis Garrel) and family. They all feel (and sing) her absence. But the way they return from grief to ordinary life varies considerably, especially for Ismael, the boyfriend. Honore maintains some geometric patterns within the structure, with the central characters attempting all gender possibilities.

As they say, this is particularly French in content and style, but it does centre on a self-preoccupied, superficial young man whose life’s framework seems indulgently amoral.

DEATH PROOF

(Competition, US, 2007, directed by Quentin Tarantino)

Originally one half of a film combining two genre movies in one (with fake trailers etc): Grindhouse. However, the film did not work at the US box-office. The decision was made to release the two films separately around the world and Quentin Tarantino's half, Death Proof, was in competition in Cannes, with Robert Rodriguez's half, Alien Planet, scheduled for Venice.

Tarantino's intention was to imitate the brief road chase and threat movie, even to the scratched film stock and jump cuts in editing, damage after the film had been shown at drive-ins for some months. This is amusing – but one realises that Tarantino had lots of money to make Death Proof and that it may have made for a better, tighter film to have worked on a smaller Roger Corman type budget. (More than twenty minutes of footage were added to the Grindhouse version for the new release. Death Proof is a very ugly film. The characters are, humanly speaking, ugly as is their behaviour. They talk in an ugly way (which is a pity because Tarantino had a reputation for smart dialogue, interesting chatter on any subject – this time it just inane and crass).

Basically, two groups of women are pursued in their cars by a deranged stuntman (Kurt Russell). He demolishes one lot (admittedly the less interesting and likeable group) and is demolished by the other (which includes Zoe Bell as herself, the New Zealand stuntwoman who was Uma Thurman's stand in for the Kill Bill films doing her rather spectacular thing).

There are much better things that Tarantino could have been doing with his time, energy and money.

THE FLIGHT OF THE RED BALLOON (LE VOYAGE DU BALLON ROUGE)

(Un Certain Regard, Taiwan/France, 2007, directed by Hou Hsiao Hsien)

The final credits suggest that this is a homage to Albert Lamorisse and his beautiful 1956 film, The Red Balloon. While a red balloon does fly over the city of Paris in this contemporary tale – as a guardian, as a friend or, simply, a movie icon – this film has little to do with 1956 in tone or plot. Yes, there is a young boy, but it is the story of him and his mother and the ups and down of living in Paris (or most places) today.

The film requires a strong suspension of disbelief. It also requires a sensibility that delights in staying focussed on small details rather than quickly getting the big picture. There is such attention to detail (sometimes a feature of the director's Taiwanese films) that scenes of minutiae go on and on – and the prolongation is itself prolonged. We are present for a long piano lesson. We watch little Simon play pinball at some length and his new Chinese nanny, Song, filming him. There is some dynamic in the structure of this tale of mother and son and nanny but it is meanderingly episodic. Those who want a quick fix or are happy with intuitions about the big picture will need a lot of patience.

The distinctive performance of a blonde Juliette Binoche must be praised. At times she is all nerves and clatter. She has moments of sheer delight in her son. She is a voice for a marionette play based on Chinese legends which gives rise to quite some vocal versatility. The boy, Simon Iteanu, is a natural and he is centre screen for much of the time.

We have a Taiwanese director who is looking at Paris through magical eyes while bringing his own perceptions about the difficulties of contemporary life everywhere.

GO GO TALES

(Special screening, US, 2007, directed by Abel Ferrara)

Abel Ferrara has had a long career of blunt and direct films, many of them drawing on his life in rougher areas of New York, many of them drawing on the city's Catholic traditions. This one, as the title indicates, is on the rough areas rather than anything religious.

It is a dark story of a strip club in the city, managed by Willem Dafoe though financed by his brother, Matthew Modine. Times are hard, customers are not coming in – and they are relying heavily on Asian businessmen visiting the US. The girls are complaining that they are not being paid. The cantankerous woman who leases the building (a screeching Sylvia Miles) also wants to close down. Meanwhile, Mafia type interests...

That description possibly makes the film sound more interesting than it really is. Despite brief running time, it is heavy going unless the audience is checking out what happens, especially with the girls, in clubs that they would never visit themselves.

IMPORT/EXPORT

(Competition, Austria, directed by Ulrich Seidl)

This is grim film-making which many an audience will find difficult to sit through. Seidl takes on tough, documentary like topics (as in his *Dog Days*). This time he has two stories going, both set in a grim winter, one in Ukraine and the other in Austria, in Vienna.

It needs to be said that he includes two very graphic sequences of sexuality which some may find gross and which many will find are exploitative, especially of the women in the cast. One is at a brothel in Ukraine, detailing the performances of the women for internet customers (filmed at an actual brothel). The second (also in Ukraine) has an Austrian salesman sexually humiliating a prostitute.

Those scenes apart, the film is still grim as it shows Olga, a Ukrainian nurse leaving for Vienna and finding work, first of all in an affluent home but becoming the victim of a pampered child's tantrum, and then finding more rewarding work as a cleaner in a hospital where the nurse in charge forbids her to make any contact with the elderly residents.

The other story is of a macho young man, Paul, who trains as a security guard but who is humiliated on the job. He drifts but then works for his stepfather, delivering goods in Slovakia and in Ukraine.

There are two satiric interludes where the young man attends a course on how to answer job applications and the woman goes to a pep talk on the details of cleaning facilities.

The film does not end. It just stops. With Olga standing in a corridor in Vienna and Paul seeking work in Ukraine. Both are imports/exports.

THE MAN FROM LONDON

(Hungary, 2007, directed by Bela Tarr).

A combination of Bela Tarr and a story by Georges Simenon: Simenon in slow-motion (very slow). (Never has a steadicam been steadier in staying put on a face - or a back of a head).

In admiration: Tarr has made a film which would be at home in a gallery, each frame a stunning black and white photograph. He has captured the style of the silent German expressionist films of the 20s with something of the Warners sets of the noir 40s. The pace is relentlessly slow, giving time for contemplation and reflection on some basic drives of human nature including depression, greed, family dissent, honour.

In exasperation: while the intention is admirable, it is hard going for most, the ultra slow camera movement, the heavily slow movement and delivery of dialogue, the overall phlegmatic performance that gives very few clues as to the inner lives of the characters that Tarr wants us to resonate with (except for the heated family arguments) means that for most, this is rather a cinema of endurance. Tarr, of course, has his admirers but, as an American reviewer noted, this is a film 'for no known audience'.

A MIGHTY HEART

(Special screening, US, 2007, directed by Michael Winterbottom)

One of the highest profile foreign journalists abducted in recent years is Daniel Pearl who worked for the Wall St Journal. This tribute, memoir and picture of the investigation into his disappearance in 2002 is based on his wife's memoir and dedicated to his son, not yet born at the time of his death.

Directed by Michael Winterbottom (his *In this World* and *Road to Guantanamo* have already shown his credentials for work on films from this part of Asia) has directed the film, focusing strongly and at a rapid pace on the details of the search and tracking down of leads. This background to diplomacy as well as counterterrorism holds the interest. An extraordinary amount of effort went into the five weeks of search, utilising the resources of the US Consulate, the local Pakistani authorities and international intelligence offices. Pearl was abducted in Karachi after he and his wife had spent time reporting on Afghanistan, especially the bombing of the Taliban forces after the events of 11th September, 2001.

Dan Futterman (actor in *The Birdcage* and writer of the screenplay for *Capote*) portrays Daniel Pearl. The film has to make him a congenial character for the audience very quickly. He and his Frenchborn wife (who has Cuban background) are preparing to return to the US via Dubai. He takes up one more lead to get to speak with a Sheikh who allegedly can give information about the Afghan situation. He takes a taxi, waits outside the restaurant rendezvous and disappears. To strengthen the impact of his character and that he was a truthseeking journalist (and a mighty heart), there are flashbacks to his courtship and marriage.

There are re-enacted glimpses of the customary videos that kidnapping groups circulate showing their captives and getting them to speak propaganda.

While Daniel Pearl is central to the plot, the focus is on the mystery and the anxiety for his wife, Mariane. She is six months pregnant – and the screenplay inserts a flashback where they discuss the name for their baby, Daniel suggesting Adam, which the boy was eventually called.

Angelina Jolie plays the role of Mariane full throttle, accent and all. While Jolie is always a strong and commanding presence on screen, she is able to blend with the supporting cast and not dominate the film. When Pearl does not return from his meeting, she phones anxiously and soon the house is a nerve centre for the investigation. She appears on television and makes appeals to the abductors. She follows through for the weeks, relying also on some of her newspaper contacts.

When she finally (and suddenly) receives the news of Daniel's execution, she has a scene of grief, tears and cries that is very powerful. She also appears again on television where the interviewer insensitively questions whether she has watched the execution video. The film shows media people as victims of terrorism, but also has victims of the media pack who show little sensitivity as they rush and bully towards getting their story.

When she gathers together those who had worked so hard to find Daniel, she makes a speech at the end which rightly focuses on all the victims of such abductions, Pakistanis as well as foreigners, as this 21st century phenomenon of war continues.

MUNYURANGABO

(Un Certain Regard, Rwanda, 2007, directed by Lee Isaac Chung)

African films in recent Cannes Festivals focused on women and their issues, especially oppressive tribal traditions. This is a film about men's issues, specifically revenge, forgiveness and reconciliation in the aftermath of the 1994 Rwanda genocide. While several powerful films have come from non-African filmmakers, this is from Africa itself.

The origins of the film are particularly interesting. Korean American Lee Isaac Chung and writing partner, Samuel Anderson, conducted a film summer school at a Christian relief base in Rwanda, summer 2006. This film is a project for 15 Rwandan students, a film they can be very proud of.

The plot is straightforward. It is the performance and interpretation that count. The director fostered improvisation so that the characters and their interactions would ring true. Made simply but subtly, in beautiful countryside, the film takes us into Rwanda and the need for peace. This is especially powerful in the long poem about the country, its history and its culture at the end of the film.

MY BLUEBERRY NIGHTS

(Opening night film, Competition. Hong Kong. Directed by Wong Kar Wai)

Loneliness, regrets, time wasted. Listening. Journey, trust, hope.

This is a thematic outline of My Blueberry Nights, famed Hong Kong director Wong Kar Wai's first film made in English and in the US. Sometimes his post-action films make a great impact (In the Mood for Love, The Hand). Sometimes they get critical acclaim but come across as confused, even tedious (2046).

If you let yourself surrender to this one in the early scenes, you will have no difficulty in liking it. It will be rewarding. If you don't, you may become irritated by its slower pace, its talk and its probing the interior lives of its central characters.

Wong Kar Wai is clearly fascinated by the United States and its people. He is also fascinated by the diversity of locations (from New York to Memphis to Nevada casinos and deserts). His film-making style is distinctive and he uses his frequent, very rich colour palette (deep blues and reds and yellows) to paint America more brightly (even at night), than we usually see it. He diversifies camera techniques and speeds to keep jogging us on our perceptions of his characters. And the score is by Ry Cooder.

The plot consists of chapters in the journey of Lizzie who will become Beth and, finally, Elizabeth. She is played engagingly by singer Norah Jones. Distraught at the sudden break-up of a five year relationship in New York, she finds herself talking comfortably with a diner manager (a sympathetic Jude Law, as he was in The Holiday). Most of his deserts are sold out and she accepts a piece of blueberry pie – which no one has ordered. He tells her that blueberry pie is good but people make other choices.

She takes to the road and meets an anguished policeman in the Memphis bar as well as the diner where she waitresses. She listens to him. She also listens to his frustrated wife. David Strathairn and a very different Rachel Weisz are excellent. She also comes across a compulsive gambler, played vivaciously by Natalie Portman, and finds that she has become a good listener and a good friend.

It is time to go back to the beginning of the journey and know the place for the first time.

Clearly, Wong Kar Wai is also a romantic.

NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN

(Competition, US, 2007, directed by Joel Coen)

The Coen Brothers are back to their idiosyncratic world, this time with a story based on a novel by Pulitzer Prize winner Cormac McCarthy. Intolerable Cruelty was a soufflé and the remake of The Ladykillers was misguided.

This time the setting is 1980. The initial voiceover of a weary sheriff tells us that this is a new west. It is more lawless and deadly than the old days of sheriffs and bad guys: Vietnam has scarred American

consciousness and the gangster crime dramas of the past (and of the cities) are now played out in the Texas desert.

With plenty of their dry, wry humour and off-kilter characters, even in the smallest roles of clerks and kids, this is a chase thriller with a high body count as well as a frustrated attempt to administer law and order in a decent way. The Coens and McCarthy are telling us How the West was Lost.

Tommy Lee Jones has become something of a rugged icon of Texas. Here he is the decent one, the old-time sheriff who is a man of common-sense, practical action and useful intuitions.

Javier Bardem (who was raving made in a similar kind of role in *Perdita Durango*) is a memorable killer (if one wants to remember screen killers). Josh Brolin is surprisingly persuasive as the good man who illustrates the biblical maxim that the love of money is the root of all evil.

Philosophical about good and evil, with a number of yarns rolled in, this is the Coens reworking both crime and the west.

PARANOID PARK

(Competition. US, 2007, directed by Gus Van Sant)

Gus Van Sant has been making smaller, more 'cinematic' films in recent years, after his Golden Palm win in Cannes with *Elephant* (Gerry, Last Days). Here he is back in school, this time amongst a group of skateboarders. At a railway yard near a popular park, nicknamed *Paranoid Park* because it had an unsavoury reputation, a security guard has been killed on the adjoining railway tracks. Has one of the skateboarders been responsible? The police come to the school to question and get background for their investigation.

Van Sant focuses on teenager, Alex (Gabe Levins), who we discover is writing a story about the park and skating. It emerges early enough in the film that Alex is responsible. What Van Sant does well is re-create the world of the adolescent, broken family and almost absent parents, friends, sexual experimentation (all with a soundtrack of relevant songs and Nino Rota/Fellini score, and with Christopher Doyle's realistic and stylised camerawork).

What we see is an ordinary young boy who is completely self-absorbed, has no sense of compassion for the victim, never thinking about him and with little conscience. This makes the film arresting to look at and listen to and very disturbing about contemporary moral sense.

SAVAGE GRACE

(Directors' Fortnight, Spain/US, 2007, directed by Tom Kalin)

Years ago, Tom Kalin made *Swoon*, a black and white, low budget take on the Leopold-Loeb murders in 1920s Chicago (the basis for Hitchcock's *Rope*). The film explored the sexual and violent obsessions that united the psyches of the two wealthy young men. Now Kalin is offering another case study of sexuality and violence and an obsessive relationship. This time it is bigger budget, in colour, with a Hollywood star.

Brookes Backeland (Stephen Dillane) is the grandson of Leo Backeland who invented (and grew wealthy from) bakelite. He is married to a working class wife, Barbara (Julianne Moore) who has assumed all the pretensions, and more, of New York society. She also dotes (an understated word) on her baby, Tony. We see them and the brittle marital relationship in 1946 when Tony is born, in 1959 on holiday in Paris and in the late 60s and early 70s in Spain and London.

Barbara Backeland wanted to be an actress and she certainly lives a histrionic life. Betrayed by her husband, she continues to smother-love her son (Eddie Redmayne of *Like Minds* and *The Good Shepherd*)

who is also asserting his homosexuality. Neither consciously recognise their love as destructive and emotionally incestuous. It ultimately destroys them both in madness and violence.

All the cast except for Julianne Moore are either British or Spanish. Redmayne is British as is Stephen Dillane who portrays Brookes and Hugh Dancy who plays Barbara's 'walker', her camp adviser.

Although there is more than a touch of prurience, this is an interesting tale of wilfulness among the rich and pampered.

SECRET SUNSHINE

(Competition, Korea, 2007, directed by Lee Chang-dong)

Director Lee's film Oasis won the SIGNIS award at Venice in 2002. Lee raised difficult questions about society and relationships in that film and does so here but, ultimately less successfully.

Secret sunshine is the translation for the name of the town in southern Korea where a woman travels with her son in order to settle there. She makes friends with a genial and portly garage man – nothing is too much of a trouble for him when it comes to helping her. She is not so kindly in her response, taking his help somewhat for granted. Actress Jeon Do-yeon won the Best Actress award at Cannes.

When her son is abducted, she is distraught. When the boy's kidnapper and murderer is apprehended, she is filled with fury. Then the tone of the film changes. She begins to attend the prayer meetings of a pentecostalist Protestant church and seems to gain some solace from the ceremonies, the hymns and prayers and the friendship of the congregation so much so that she is ready to visit the prison to forgive the killer.

This is where the key question is asked, something that Grahame Greene might have asked. When the killer explains that God has forgiven him, the woman is taken aback. This forgiveness seems an affront by God to her. How can she forgive him, she who was personally so hurt, when God has already forgiven?

This leads to disillusionment, to madness, violence and a final scene which is the camera staring at a drain. What might have been explored is turned into melodrama without insight.

SICKO

(Special screening, US, 2007, directed by Michael Moore)

Michael Moore may not be a White House favourite, but he certainly is at Cannes.

To criticise him as partisan is not really relevant. Being partisan is the point. Moore has the talent to be both serious and funny in his polemic. He offers anecdotal evidence in moving stories, interviews and telling television footage of targeted politicians and business leaders.

He is on surer ground in Sicko. Any visitor to the US knows that they must not get sick there without insurance as ill-health and hospital cost the earth. Moore wants to show that the US health insurance system can be detrimental to sick Americans with its policy of scrutinising contracts to avoid payouts – sometimes with dire results.

Moore visits Canada, the UK and France (very flattering to France!) to examine how the national health schemes work well (despite local complaints). He also takes a group of 'victims' of the US policy to Cuba because of propaganda about the good health conditions of Guantanamo Bay prisoners. They are well received and helped by the friendly Cubans.

He may be annoying or intrusive, but American needs Michael Moore and his films.

LA SOLEDAD

(Un Certain Regard, Spain, 2007, directed by Jaime Rosales)

Jaime Rosales directed a powerfully grim film about a killer, *The Hours of the Day*. This time his subject does include death but, in its almost three hours length, it looks at the intertwined stories of two women.

The film is long. Rosales uses a static camera, making us gaze at length on the characters (and compounded by a great number of the sequences having a split screen technique).

The plot is straightforward but the important factor is the characterisation. One story concerns a young woman who has left her husband, gone to Madrid with her child, moved in with a couple and then suffers a tragedy. The other story concerns the mother of three daughters who tries to cope with their moods and their trying to control her life. (One of the daughters is the owner of the apartment in Madrid.) The daughters squabble amongst themselves with sibling rivalry, one being bossy concerning her mother selling her apartment, another resentful and the third a woman who undergoes surgery for cancer.

The film is not always gripping and requires a willing concentration.

TEHILIM

(Competition, Israel, 2007, directed by Raphael Nadjari)

The content of this film is more interesting than the way it is communicated. We observe rather than becoming engaged with characters and issues.

The film has a religious background, *Tehilim* being the name for the Psalms. We focus on a quite orthodox family (although the mother is from a secular Jewish background). The father and the older son attend classes and study the scriptures. Rituals are kept in the house. (Although the teenage boy who is at the centre of the film goes out at night removing his yamulka when at clubs with his friends.)

After a car accident with his two sons, the father simply disappears. *Tehilim* is about how the rest of the family deal with the disappearance. The mother is thought to be too concerned about the material consequences by the father's brother and father who are devout, not taking her grief into account. This influences the two boys who find a way of giving out books of Psalms to the public so that they will pray for their father. This provokes a crisis with grandfather and uncle.

While the film offers an exploration of a religious family, the kind of religion they practice is very formal: lessons, rituals, prayers, discussion. There is no outflow from their beliefs and practices into the quality of their daily lives, making religion either cerebral or superficial. One would like to be more engaged and to learn more about the religious implications of this orthodox family.

TERROR'S ADVOCATE

(Un Certain Regard, France, 2007, directed by Barbet Schroeder)

For anyone who has the slightest interest in 20th century history, in wars of independence, in contemporary terrorism and the role of politics, law and journalism, this is a must-see film.

The focus is on French lawyer (parents from Vietnam and Reunion) Jacques Verges. Those from the English-language tradition may not know of him but, by the end of the film, we may not yet know him but we know a great deal about him. He himself (at eighty) appears in interviews throughout the film.

His legal life has involved him particularly in Algeria in the 50s and 60s and led to a long life of defence lawyer work. He had contact with Swiss Nazis, with Carlos, with Iranian assassins of the 1980s, with Cambodia, and defence lawyer for Klaus Barbie, 'the Butcher of Lyon'.

An amazing number of interviewees appear, speaking frankly about their lives and their exploits (especially from the war between France and Algeria). Their comments build up an extraordinarily detailed (and yet this is only partial) account of uprisings, networks, terror bombings.

Congratulations to Barbet Schroeder who has made a documentary that is as interesting and challenging as any of his feature films – or more so.

TRIANGLE

(Special screening, Hong Kong, 2007, directed by Tsi Hark, Ringo Lam, Johnnie To)

Six screenwriters and three directors for this Hong Kong crime drama that any of the directors could have made with little effort. But, they seem to have decided to go for broke.

During the first hour one is wondering whether to simply say that characters and treatment are bordering on the absurd. However, the final thirty minutes go over the border and one is left, open-mouthed at what is going on, debating whether ridiculous or ludicrous are words to describe the 'beyond-absurd'.

Even Tarantino who admires their work might pause for assessment – but, then again, he probably wouldn't after the Kill Bill spectacles and Grindhouse.

There is a crime. There are three men in need of money who carry out a crime. There is a policeman who is having an affair with the wife of one of them – and she is beyond crackers! There are triad types. There is a policeman on a pushbike. There is a mentally retarded tyre repairer. And, somehow or other, they finish up all trying to kill each other or to get possession of some antique treasures in a plastic bag, of which there are several mistakenly flying about.

It's time for them all to get back to the normal crime thrillers they do so well.

UNE VIELLE MAITRESSE

(Competition, France, 2007, directed by Catherine Breillat)

Une Vieille Maitresse is a popular French novel of the 19th century by Jules Amadee Barbey d'Aurevilly, the kind of material made popular by Laclos with his Dangerous Liaisons – the film acknowledges this at the opening, saying that the events and characters are from the same period. While this looks very much like Dangerous Liaisons, it is not so hard and calculating as that. However, it is about society, manipulation, rakes and their victims, sexuality, scandal and gossip.

The film is sumptuous to look at and French people say that the language has all the elegance of that literate period.

It opens with gossip, chatter about M de Marigny, a well-known Don Juan, who is about to marry the virginal Hermangarde. The gossips want to put an end to this marriage. However, it seems that M de Marigny, after a ten year relationship with a Spanish courtesan, Venelli, has broken it and is prepared to be faithful.

The bulk of the film is actually flashbacks to Marigny's relationship with Venelli, not quite the excessive passionate affair that we had been led to expect. Marigny is relating his story to his bride's grandmother and so we see Venelli through his eyes. She, however, is an intense schemer and cannot let the marriage go unchallenged. The final part of the film shows her weaving wiles and the effect on Marigny and Hermangarde. This is an era of arranged marriages, mistresses and machinations.

The former mistress is played with her usual alarming flair by Asia Argento. Marigny is newcomer, Hermangarde is played by Roxana who had appeared in A Ma Soeur and Sex Comedy, both directed by

Catherine Breillat who has adapted the novel and directed this film. Catherine Breillat is a director noted for breaking sexual taboos in her films (*Romance* and *The Anatomy of Hell*). Here she is very restrained in comparison with her previous films, relying on the 19th century mood and look to tell her story rather than using shock tactics. Which makes this one of her most accessible films.

WATER LILIES

(*Un Certain Regard*, France, 2007, d. Celine Sciamma)

First time director Celine Sciamma says she is remembering and dealing with questions of ten years earlier in her own life as she charts the story of three fifteen year old girls during a summer holiday. She also says she was intrigued by synchronised swimming and this is how she leads us into the stories.

The film is really a portrait of Marie, introverted, feeling awkward about her less than developed body, pals with the largish Anne (though not above being nasty to her about her size), infatuated with the team captain, Floriane, who is the kind of homecoming queen type. The portrait of Anne is of a childish girl who feels out of place though really wants to be in place, relies on Marie but who is singled out for favour by the local jock, Francois, who is the prom king type with Floriane. Floriane is not all she looks. She is attracted to Marie and not to Francois but enlists Marie's help to stop her seeming to be the local virgin. She is finally seen gyrating alone at a dance, completely self-absorbed.

Complications, emotions, distress, immaturity and infatuation.

WE OWN THE NIGHT

(*Competition*, US, 2007, directed by James Gray)

James Gray has shown particular interest in Russian criminals in New York since his first feature, *Little Odessa*. It is 1988 and large deliveries of cocaine are being made and distributed in clubs. Joaquin Phoenix plays the fast and loose manager of Club Caribe in Brooklyn (owned by the Russians) while Mark Wahlberg and Robert Duvall play his police brother and father.

The opening credits have a collage of stills which reminds us of the police culture of New York and the range of criminals that they have been up against. The plot does not quite work out the way we would have expected although there are the usual investigations, undercover work and stakeouts. Gray seems more interested in the complicated family relationships as they are played out during the drug pursuit.

The clash between the brothers is very strong, a kind of Cain and Abel relationship which moves into something more like the parable of the Prodigal Son. Mark Wahlberg has established himself as a strong screen presence as has Joaquin Phoenix, who with *Gladiator* and *Walk the Line* shows he is capable of more versatility. They both appeared in James Gray's previous crime thriller, *The Yards*.

The cast give solid performances with Eva Mendes as Phoenix's Hispanic girlfriend who was after a good time but finds herself caught up in a witness protection program. There are some very nasty villains, once again the Russians who show how the Russian Mafia could develop in the US. Gray does have some car chases and shootouts but does not overdo them, contributing to a competent and interesting thriller.

ARE WE DONE YET?
CAPTIVITY
DEAD SILENCE
DIE HARD 4.0
FANTASTIC FOUR: RISE OF THE SILVER SURFER
FLYING SCOTSMAN, The
FRANKIE
GROW YOUR OWN
HOME SONG STORIES, The
HOSTEL 2
LUCKY YOU
PTU
SHREK THE THIRD
SKETCHES OF FRANK GEHRY
TELL NO ONE
VACANCY
WAR ON DEMOCRACY, The
WATER

ARE WE DONE YET?

(US, 2007, d. Steve Carr)

This film is something of a relief after the torment of Are We There Yet? That was the film where Ice Cube, a sports store owner, clashed with two of the most obnoxious children ever to invade the screen (especially the girl) and had to drive them to meet their mother, Nia Long, with whom he fell in love, thus acquiring a wife and the two children. This road trip was one of the most excruciating on film as the children tricked, abused, upset Ice Cube.

Very popular in the US for its intended audience, the sequel has not drawn good reviews elsewhere. This film is an adaptation of the 1947 comedy, Mr Blandings Builds his Dream House with Cary Grant and Myna Loy – which was, in turn, adapted in 1986 as The Money Pit with Tom Hanks and Shelley Long.

This time round Ice Cube, with Nia Long pregnant with twins, plus the two horrors (actually this time the boy is not so bad, but she...!!!). They move to the country, are persuaded to buy a good looking house which, of course, has everything wrong with it. Slapstick and pratfalls, anger and humour are the order of the day as the house first falls to pieces and then is put back together again.

Ice Cube is now a long way from the 'hood and his rapper days, settling into comfortable middle class mayhem.

There is one thing, depending on your sense of humour, which helps this film along. It is the performance of John C. McGinley as the real estate agent, all smiles and smarm. Then he turns up, with different hats, as the person responsible for everything else in the town, a different persona for each. He does it all with exuberance and versatility.

But, this is a comedy for its target audience – others probably should beware.

CAPTIVITY

(US/Russia, 2007, d. Roland Joffe)

This is a nasty film experience.

Most audiences will want to leave fairly early in the film. Elissa Cuthbert plays a model who is abducted and subjected to unrelenting torture by a masked figure for half the running time. By the time that some more interesting elements and twists come into the film, it is too late. Most audiences will have given up. Only die-hard horror fans (who proclaim their views on the IMDb blog) have positive things to say about Captivity.

Its career in US release was dogged by controversy when a series of large hoardings in Los Angeles showing the steps in the model's captivity were considered too graphic and were removed.

The main surprise is that the film (a US co-production with Mosfilms, Moscow, and intended as a groundbreaker in collaboration) was directed by Roland Joffe who had begun his career with *The Killing Fields* and *The Mission*. We are a long, long way from those achievements despite the publicity for the film constantly referring to his being a man 'of vision and profound philosophy'. He gives the film a glossy treatment and style but to little avail.

At one stage, the man in captivity with the model calls out (ironically as it turns out) to the tormenter, 'you twisted sicko freak' – and one wonders was he referring to the makers – or even to us in the audience watching.

DEAD SILENCE

(US, 2007, d. James Wan)

There has been a fairly long tradition of 'devil dolls' and murderous ventriloquist's dolls. Here is a 2007 version.

Compared with the number of torture/horror films in recent times, like *Captivity* and *Hostel 2*, this is a very agreeable small scary show. Not too horrific at all (and not a swear word to hear and no confronting sex scenes).

It is the kind of fright film that gives some chills while it is there but not a great film at all. It looks good, some very eerie settings. However, the acting is only moderate, led by Australian actor Ryan Kwantan as the put upon hero and Donnie Wahlberg as a laconic, persistent detective. The dialogue is not too sharp either (and elicited some giggles from the audience). That said, it has an intriguing enough tale to tell (but most will guess something of the solution early enough).

The director, James Wan, and the writer, Leigh Whannell, both from Australia, were responsible for the much more gruesome *Saw*.

DIE HARD 4.0

(US, 2007, d. Len Wiseman)

Even older cinema goers who may not have been out for a while will recognise the title, *Die Hard*. And those who like an action thriller might get more than a little excited. Could a fourth in a series that is almost twenty years old be any good let alone better than its predecessors? The quick answer is a definite 'yes'.

It is extraordinary how Bruce Willis has become one of the major Hollywood screen icons – and he shows no sign of flagging. Between 1985 and 1989, he appeared in 36 television episodes of *Moonlighting*. He also released some albums of songs. He was probably seen as something of a lightweight, especially when he appeared in his first feature film, a comedy, *Blind Date*. In 1988 came *Die Hard* and Willis was off, and in the film, literally running.

His character was called John McLane. And John McLane has become something of a Hollywood icon as well.

On his first McLane appearance, Bruce Willis was 33 years old with terrorists led by Alan Rickman holding a skyscraper. Second time around he was 35 in 1990, saving an airport against Franco Nero. By 1995 for his third outing, he was 41, racing round New York to thwart Jeremy Irons. Which means that the question arises, how can John McLane keep up the momentum at 52 as he faces security expert, Timothy Olyphant?

This is all something of a reminder about the past but also a preamble to saying that an ageing, bald Bruce Willis is fitter than most, performs a lot of action stunts and has to keep going in a plot that takes place over just twenty four hours without a moment of rest, anything to eat or a toilet break. But, while he is on screen, we don't have time to think about this or work out all the logic or logistics.

The important thing for today's audience is that the plot be set in the modern 21st century with all its problems. So, while McLane is not particularly computer literate, he is given a sidekick, an IT geek who has unwittingly been part of a huge terrorist attack on the whole infrastructure of the US and who will have plenty of opportunity to rectify the damage. He is played very well by Justin Long who has appeared in a number of comedies, Dodgeball, Accepted... It's a matter of Willis' brawn combined with Long's brains. The press notes say it's their Yin and Yang. The pairing that does come to mind is something of a Laurel and Hardy odd couple.

But, they do work well together – and they do save the world.

One of the important facets of McLane's heroism is that he is not a comic-strip hero with superhuman powers. McLane is a New York detective who uses ordinary and extraordinary things which are at hand, whether it be a fire extinguisher or a flying crashing car which destroys a helicopter. He tells Long that he was out of bullets!

This means that the older audience will enjoy the use of muscled wit and police experience. Younger audiences will be intrigued by the activity of brilliant hackers, the possibilities of computer links and the 'Fire Sale' which means that the terrorists are targeting everything from power utilities to money reserves.

Obviously, this is a modern 'Boys' Own' action show with its breathless action and heightened violent conflict between good and evil.

THE FANTASTIC FOUR: RISE OF THE SILVER SURFER

(US, 2007, d. Tim Storey)

When the first Fantastic Four film came out in 2005, it was considered a lesser effort and production compared with the 'big' adaptations of comic strip characters like Batman, Superman, Spiderman or the X Men. This was true. However, in its modest way, it was a straightforward entertainment with entertaining characters, stunts and effects, four mutant superheroes along the lines of the X men but less high profile, more down to earth, so to speak. The other factor was that the plots were less complicated, heroes and villains clearly delineated, some comic touches – and a general treatment that made the film acceptable PG action.

And this is true of this sequel. The four are now familiar and can illustrate their abilities without having to explain them. Reed Richards (Ioann Gryfudd) can stretch when need be. Sue (Jessica Alba) can become invisible as she wishes. Johnny (Chris Evans) can fire up instantly and pursue enemies through the air and Ben Grimm (Michael Chiklis) looks even more granite boulder than before. The film has Reed and Sue about to get married, but the ceremony is interrupted so that the world can be saved. The writers also work into the plot some humour where each of the Four is affected by the Silver Surfer and, with a touch, can absorb the powers of the other – some jokes here as Johnny turns into stone etc.

The Silver Surfer rides a cosmic surfboard. Coming from a dying planet, he swoops over the earth with instant ice storms, or solidifying harbours or causing blackouts in LA. He also (conveniently) passes over

the prison where past villain Victor Von Doom (Julian McMahon) has been held since the last film and frees him. Von Doom is smart and teams up with the singleminded military commander (Andre Braugher) to work with the Four to defeat the Silver Surfer. But his plans, of course, are egotistical and power-hungry.

Action sequences are enjoyable. The Silver Surfer (voiced by Laurence Fishburne) turns out to have his own sad story. And the world is saved again, even if this time Reed and Sue have to hurry through their marriage ceremony to get back to more heroics.

THE FLYING SCOTSMAN

(UK, 2007, d. Douglas Mackinnon)

This is a welcome Scots film. They will know the story of Graeme Obree, the 1990s cycling champion and be pleased that it has now been brought to the screen. Members of the other countries of the United Kingdom will welcome him as British. But, it probably helps to know a little of his career and his hard-fought victories and some of his personal struggles.

This is a film that one could recommend for a general audience but, sadly, Graeme Obree has suffered from depression that made him feel suicidal. In fact, the film opens (powerfully but discreetly) with his main depressive episode and returns to it later. However, back we go to his childhood and then his career from 1993-1995.

Graeme was bullied when he was at school which undermined his self-confidence and his self-esteem. However, his policeman father gave him a bike for Christmas and it made all the difference. He could outpace his tormentors by riding fast. But it also gave him a sense of exhilaration and he discovered a talent.

The film moves quickly to 1993 when his heyday of winning was over. He is lovingly married to Anne and has a small child. He works as a bike courier in Glasgow. However, his mind keeps ticking over about how to improve his riding technique with the laws of thermodynamics. His mind also keeps ticking over about how to improve the structure of his bikes by the laws of physics.

He was fortunate to find supportive friends. Those in the film are composites of several real characters in his life. One is his friend and manager, Malkey. Another is a supportive older man, Baxter, who he discovers is a minister of the church of Scotland.

History records that Obree tried to break the hour cycle ride, failed and tried again the next morning and succeeded. His bike was built from scratch – and included many scrap parts, along with the ball bearings from the home washing machine. When his record was soon broken, he tried again and succeeded as well as breaking some shorter race records.

The World Cycling Federation took dim views of his winning and altered rules constantly to try to mean-mindedly exclude him.

One of the strengths of the film is that Graeme and Anne Obree were on the set, Graeme doing some of the riding and the couple coaching the actors who portray them.

Jonny Lee Miller trained powerfully to be able to ride and act the part of Graeme Obree. Often a sullen-seeming and taciturn performer, he fits this role particularly well and communicates the torment of his depression. Laura Fraser is sensible and vigorous as Anne. The role of Malkey is played by an actor who engaged world audiences as a hobbit friend of Frodo, Billy Boyd. Another pleasant surprise is Brian Cox as the sympathetic minister who has experienced sadness in his life but who is able to make an emotional breakthrough that enables Graeme to enter counselling and gain more control of his life.

This is a modest film. Everyone of us has ridden a bike so we can identify with the cycling even if it is in categories way above our competence. But it is a human drama with strong positive values.

FRANKIE

(France, 2005, d. Fabienne Berthaud)

A brief portrait of a young model, her work and the pressures on her for glamour and a career, especially as she grows older. Despite the presence of Diane Kruger as Frankie, the film is not particularly engaging. It is structured in a fragmentary way, moving between different times, especially with many fashion shoot flashbacks, so that it is not always easy to follow. The structure makes us appreciate the fragmentation of Frankie's life and her attempts to come to terms with the end of her modelling by spending time in an institution.

A number of characters move in and out of the plot, models, friends, photographers, directors (all flattery to the faces of the models and critical behind their backs), psychologists.

Filmed with hand held camera and edited to intensify the fragmentary feel, this is a case study in breakdown.

GROW YOUR OWN

(UK, 2007, d. Richard Laxton)

Knowing nothing about Grow Your Own until I went to the press preview, I had not put this modest British film on my list for reviews for The Universe. While I watched, I soon decided that I should review it – and warmly recommend it. And it was filmed not far from The Universe offices, over in Liverpool.

The themes of this entertaining story are often the topics for many of The Universe columnists, especially those who write on justice issues and their importance for the Church. Grow Your Own is about migrants and refugees, trauma and therapy, racial bigotry, friendship, harmony and banding together to help one another.

There is great sensitivity in the writing. The co-authors are Carl Hunter who intended to make a documentary and spent over a year with many of the characters whose stories serve as the basis for the film. His material was shaped into a fiction by Liverpool writer, Frank Cottrell Boyce, who is the author of Hilary and Jackie, many of Michael Winterbottom's films and of that fine story of a little boy who sees the saints, Millions. Boyce is happy to acknowledge his Catholicism in the press releases.

Grow Your Own refers to veggies and fruit. Where they grow is in the public land made available by law in Britain and other European countries. Within this space, for a small rental, people can have 'Allotments', a shed and some ground. In the film's fictional allotment, most of the tenants are older Brits, some of them, as Boyce remarks, cranky old gits! However, some refugee and migrant families (here, from the Middle East and from Zimbabwe) have taken up the offer, giving them a work opportunity and food while their cases are being processed.

The central characters for the film are a Chinese refugee family where the father had been threatened and ousted from his land in China and who hid in a container with his wife and two children to escape to Britain. During the journey his wife died and the family had to stay concealed with the woman's body for days. He is now depressed, scarcely able to speak. The older child, a resourceful little girl, has had to take charge.

The therapist, at her wits end as to what might help, suggests that they try an allotment. On the whole, it is a success – the film is positive in its outlook. Idealistic maybe (but why not?). However, the older locals can be unfriendly and critical. Immigration officials suddenly turn up and roughly remove the middle east family (even though the father is a doctor and the allotment people don't want them to go).

To make matters worse, a mobile phone company is looking for a space to concrete, a base for a signal tower – and the rep is a hard-headed and hard-hearted career woman who assumes that kickbacks are the only way to do business. The ex-policeman elected president of the tenants is only too happy to oblige and, of course, chooses the Chinese allotment for the phone company.

There is a whole lot more going on, often at the rigorously chaired members' meetings, sometimes out in the open air, friendships and some moments of tenderness.

Many critics think that a film is no good unless it has an unhappy ending. This, according to Boyce, is miserabilist. There are some unhappy facets of the film, but it is a story with characters who illustrate in microcosm, modern British society.

THE HOME SONG STORIES

(Australia, 2007, d. Tony Ayres)

If you google Tony Ayres, you will find an article from *The Age* by Anne Crawford (April 4th, 2003), 'Going Beyond the Pale'. She gives an overview of his life: his unstable mother, a Hong Kong singer who married an Australian sailor and came to live in Melbourne, walking out on him and going to Sydney, eventually returning to Melbourne. She was suicidal and ultimately successful. She had her two children, a boy and a girl always in tow. At the end of the article, she mentions that Ayres was starting work on a new film, *Home Song Stories*. Over four years later, the film is being released. And Anne Crawford's biographical summary is almost exactly a brief synopsis of the film.

Ayres had directed *Walking on Water*, a sensitive film about a young man dying of AIDS. *Home Song Stories* is written and directed by him. He invests a great deal of energy into this portrait of his mother and of himself as a little boy.

The fascinating aspect of this memoir is the characterisation of the young boy, Tom (Joel Lok). Much of the action is shown from his point of view. At other times, the camera is focused on his face, often Orientally impassive, but now and again revealing, especially through his eyes, both his gaze and his glances, that he sees clearly what is going on. This is especially true of his appraisal of his mother (Joan Chen), of her relationship with young local waiter, Joe. The audience is invited to share his emotional and mental judgments.

It is dangerous to speculate too deeply on the psychology of a pre-adolescent child. However, the portrait of Tom is so well done that it is difficult to resist the temptation.

In *The Home Song Stories*, Tom is possibly ten. In terms of nurture, he has a terrible life with his crazily emotional mother. He has learned a control which manifests itself in a logical manner with outbursts of chaotic emotion: angry shouting attacks on his mother, weeping in the school toilet (weeping is something he never does) when he overhears his school friend mocking his mother).

However, it is clear from the writing and performance that Tom is an introverted boy, able to be by himself, getting energy more from his inner world than the dysfunctional outer world. Interestingly, Anne Crawford in her *Age* article on Tony Ayres has an insightful description of the man himself which gives a clue to Tom's character: a self-deprecating humour and warmth – and a subversive mind.

Tom's inner world is one of imagination and thought. We are alerted to this early by his surprising fantasy suddenly dramatised on screen: he is a martial arts warrior in conflict with a villain – who turns out to be his adoptive father's mother with whom the family lives and who clearly disapproves of her son's marriage as well as not understanding, or wanting to understand, Chinese manners and traditions. He vanquishes her. He will later have another fantasy with an unseen foe (which is inserted just after some difficulties with his mother's latest boyfriend from the restaurant).

And he reads all the time, Chinese comics but also the Encyclopedia. He wants to read it from beginning to end, so that he will know everything.

The film opens and closes with Tom at his desk writing his memoirs and his often rueful tribute to his mother. This is what he knows and does best. His sister, who managed the disruption and traumas more openly than her brother, is now a psychologist. She reaches out to others in personal interaction. Tom is alive in his inner life and wants to communicate this vitality and insight.

This is a film which should fascinate Australian and Chinese audiences, an opportunity to look at race relations in retrospect as well as dysfunctional relationships.

HOSTEL 2

(US, 2007, d. Eli Roth)

The original film, *Hostel*, received condemnations for its torture sequences but was popular at the box-office. The Slovakian government was not too pleased that such a killing factory should be set in their country. However, here we are again.

The recent increase in what some commentators have termed ‘torture porn’ has brought such films as *Paradise Lost* (*Turistas*) and, the worst, *Captivity*, which had no redeeming features. In fact, compared with *Captivity*, *Hostel 2* does not seem so bad at all. It is the plot of the first film re-run except that this time the victims are women (which somehow makes their humiliation and torture more degrading). Compared with the raunchy men in *Hostel*, these women are very restrained (mainly after some drugs). So, is the first half of the film. It has a gory nightmare and a rather brief glimpse of a ludicrous decapitated body but that is all. The torture is in the second half.

Eli Roth is a good craftsman and he establishes his characters and moods effectively. Since we know what is going to happen, he can spend more time establishing the situations and characters. After the abductions begin and the torture, there are three graphic and ugly scenes, not nearly as much as in the first film. It’s just that they seem so ugly: a literal bloodbath, a chainsaw and a castration. Patrons can choose whether this is what they want to experience – and wish that Eli Roth would turn his talent to more positive themes.

There are some unexpected psychological twists at the end which work – but, then, some would say that the film was already twisted in the first place.

LUCKY YOU

(US, 2007, d. Curtis Hanson)

The first reason for wanting to see *Lucky You* is that it was directed by Curtis Hanson (whose *LA Confidential* is a classic but who also directed *Bad Influence*, *The River Wild*, *8 Mile* and *In Her Shoes*). The next reason is wanting to see the versatile Eric Bana, as well as Drew Barrymore and Robert Duvall, who are always good value.

Now, whether they outweigh the subject of the film – Poker – is another matter. Probably avid poker players will not see *Lucky You* because they will be too busy and obsessively occupied with playing games or on line testing and training themselves. That leaves the rest of us who may or may not know anything about the rules of the game – except for keeping a poker face.

In fairness to the screenplay, there are a number of conversations, especially for the benefit of Drew Barrymore’s singer in Las Vegas, which offer some explanations of how it all works. And, if we are attentive to the many games we are shown, we do learn a few moves and acquire a knowledge of some of the terminology for play.

But, at 124 minutes, this is rather long, even for devotees.

However, the film is generally watchable. Eric Bana combines some niceness and a relentless, self-absorbed study of body language in opponents but has the opportunity to become a bit more human in his encounter with the sweet and somewhat naïve would-be singer from Bakersfield. Robert Duvall is Bana's father and there is quite some tension between them.

We also see a lot of Las Vegas.

The screenplay speaks of skills and luck as well as mad bets, obsession and addiction. One of the main factors about this kind of gambling is the obscene amounts of money that so easily change hands, and frequently, which could do so much more good than support the extravagant life style of casino operators and the gamblers who are able to hold on to their money.

PTU

(Hong Kong, 2003, d. Johnnie To)

Hong Kong has produced more than its fair share of police action thrillers. And director Johnnie To has made many of them. This one is considered a more personal project as his own company made it. All things considered, it is an interesting and entertaining thriller, taking place over one night, with complicated strands about the city's gangs and gangsters as well as giving a complex picture of the police who are not above rough hand (and rough foot) tactics for getting information.

PTU is the Police Tactical Unit. We see them in action, although the more authoritative and controlled CID join in the investigation of the murder of the son of one of Hong Kong's principal gangsters.

After PTU, Johnnie To became a director whose films were sought for festivals, especially Cannes and Venice, with such high flying entries as *Breaking News*, *The Election series*, *Exiled* and his collaboration with Tsui Hark and Ringo Lam, *Triangle* (and over the top – and beyond – version of a video game). However, PTU shows the essential Johnnie To.

SHREK THE THIRD

(US, 2007, d. Chris Miller)

Shrek has become one of the best known names in cartoon and animation history. Shrek the First was such a success world wide, only to be outdone by the box-office popularity of Shrek the Second. (Both of them even being screened at the Cannes Film Festival.) While the initial surprise and magic can't be recaptured, this is an entertaining enough sequel.

Shrek, Fiona, Donkey and that recent new comrade, Puss in Boots, are back along with a host of other fairy tale characters. And it is the demure heroines like Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella who come into their feminist own by the end of the film.

Shrek is ruling the kingdom of Far Far Away until the Frog King gets better. He doesn't (which gives John Cleese a chance to do three quick death scenes). But Shrek wants to go home to the swamp and live happily and grubbily ever after with Fiona, the way ogres should. He finds a way out when a distant relative could be the next king, Arthur. Off the expedition goes to find him and bring him back (just after Fiona tells Shrek she is pregnant which gives him some frightening nightmares of broods of little ogres during the voyage).

Arthur is not Round Table calibre – call me 'Artie'! But off they go for home, aided by a spell from a befuddled Merlin which switches Donkey's and Puss's personalities - so some comedy routines of mixed identity.

This is complicated by the sinister planning of the thwarted Prince Charming, now a has-been actor for down-and-out villains (Captain Hook, the Evil Queen from Snow White...) who spend their time at a bar at the Unhappy Hour.

There is never a doubt that there will be a happy ever after for everyone except Prince Charming (even Captain Hook will give up his hook and go and grow daffodils) when the reborn Arthur gives a stirring speech about the only obstacle to being who you want to be is yourself! It is the adventure and comedy along the way that is the important thing. For the youngies there is a lot of slapstick and schtick from Eddie Murphy's Donkey and Antonia Banderas' Puss as well as all the mishaps for Charming (Rupert Everett obviously relishing his villain status).

Shrek is, of course, his old self, becoming more benign as the series goes on. Fiona has long given up her beautiful appearance and is also her ogre self. Julie Andrews is the Queen who is not keen on being called an old lady and who can thump through walls with the best of them. The mock scene of Snow White's sweet song with all the animals joining her suddenly turning into a mini Valkyries' attack is enjoyable. Eric Idle is Merlin and Ian McShane is Captain Hook. A good surprise is that Artie is voiced very well by Justin Timberlake.

Plenty of sight gags, with Far Far Away looking a lot like Hollywood with such shops as Versarchery. Quite a number of musical gags (like the theme from Live and Let Die for the funeral of the King or the bewitched trees rehearsal, tapping to music from A Chorus Line). Plenty of plot – perhaps laughs for the kids and smiles for the parents.

SKETCHES OF FRANK GEHRY

(US, 2006, d. Sidney Pollack)

Watching a documentary is a different experience from watching a fiction film. Narrative is not necessarily important. It's generally the themes and the issues, especially if the screenplay relies strongly on facts and 'truth'. If the subject is real, is being interviewed, their movements being photographed and edited, watching them is something like being a listener in to a therapy session, attentive to what the subject presents of him or herself.

Within a few minutes of the documentary, Sketches of Frank Gehry, I realised that this is what I had started doing. Frank Gehry (born Goldberg in Toronto in 1929, but changed because of the persistence of his wife and his interpretation of some treatments as anti-Semitic when his family moved to Los Angeles in 1947) is an architect. Within a further few minutes, I realised that Gehry was not coming across according to the stereotype of an architect. Perhaps this was the perspective of the director who has shaped this film, conducted the interviews, shot much of the interview footage. He is Sidney Pollack, Oscar-winner for Out of Africa and responsible for a lot of my favourites: They Shoot Horses Don't They, Three Days of the Condor, Tootsie (especially!), The Firm. Sidney is a friend of Gehry and the interviews were conducted over a period of five years, amiable conversations, bringing out the genial in Gehry.

Gehry has a great reputation for his designs. He begins with intuitive sketches, lines and squiggles which, despite appearances, do look like his final buildings despite tinkering and questioning, further tinkering, changes, odd challenges, response to possible ugliness and difficulties by trying to incorporate them – and working with longtime design partners and a large team of associates, relying ultimately on the talents of structural engineers.

This is a man of infinite possibilities. He loves colour, texture, shapes, design. He talks about painting and the delight of colour and canvas – and then reveals he has never painted. His own sketches are impressionistic. His greatest delight seems to be interacting with his designs, a creative blend of outer intuition, stimulated by 'what might be' in the unusual designs and structures that he continually invents, with his inner intuitive hunches.

As a self-composed man, he often sounds an objective and logical architect. But when Gehry is speaking very personally to Pollack, the language become more and more subjective. His basic criteria depend on what he 'likes'. He then begins to use the word 'love' in this regard. Commentators note that the most important factor in his designs are his clients, how they tick and the consequences for what he offers them. The musical director at the Walt Disney Centre in Los Angeles remarks that he found it refreshing that Gehry was more interested in what the building was for and how it would function than in the art of the building itself. Pollack shows us a number of clients who interacted with him, for their homes which he designed, for a centre in Scotland for cancer patients, designed pro bono for a friend as a tribute to his dead wife...

If this were therapy, the film is only a first session, so to speak, lasting only 83 minutes. So there is a lot more to respond to: Gehry as a personality, the range of his buildings, the testimony of friends and colleagues.

One other feature that took my attention.

Pollack's film acknowledged that many people find Gehry's buildings difficult, some of them ugly. He offers a collage of newspaper criticisms which include words like, 'perverse', 'monstrosities'. Fair enough. However, an architecture critic was given a 30 second byte which raised my hackles and my sympathy for Gehry. This man said without blinking or smile that, as a critic, his mandate was to draw the line and prevent people being caught up in something he severely disapproved of: a 'culture of warmth', 'a culture of sympathy' that welcomed Gehry's work. Juxtaposed with this is a comment from a relaxed friend lazing by a pool. He thought that this kind of comment was like 'flies on the neck of a lion'! [Makes one consider one's position as an armchair commentator on work that artists like Gehry and Pollack achieve – especially when they themselves express doubts about the quality of some of their work and can put themselves down without any assistance from the caustic and sardonic critics.]

Most audiences will be glad that they have seen Sketches of Frank Gehry. They will be both delighted and informed.

TELL NO ONE (NE LE DIS A PERSONNE)

(France, 2006, d. Guillaume Caunet)

Tell No One is based on a best-seller by Harlan Coben. This reviewer confesses that Coben is one of his favourite authors. Not only does he construct intricate plots for his thrillers, he also writes tantalisingly enjoyable prose with a gift of the entertainingly incongruous metaphors, often from modern pop culture.

So, what is a writer whose stories generally take place in New Jersey doing with a French film. Guillaume Caunet is a popular young French and international actor (The Beach) who was fascinated with the novel and decided to adapt it with his writing partner, , and set it in France. The adaptation works very well.

The film has received critical acclaim and has won four French Cesars (including best actor and direction) and has also proven popular.

When the wife of a doctor is murdered, the doctor is initially thought to be the killer. But he himself was attacked and has little memory of what happened. Eight years later, some bodies are discovered in the area and he comes under suspicion again. He then receives an email message and some streaming video which suggests that his wife is still alive.

The writers keep Coben's characters – quite a large cast – and the steps of his plot as more and more complexities are revealed. In fact, the cast is most impressive. Francois Cluzet is excellent as the harassed doctor, with Marie-Jose Croze as his wife. Character actors include veterans Nathalie Baye as a lawyer, Jean Rochefort as a business tycoon, Kristin Scott Thomas as a friend. Caunet has cast himself as a very nasty type who is killed.

Just as American adaptations of French films (and there are many) Americanise them (and are harshly criticised for this), so the French have Frenchified (or Gallicised) the American story – and are being highly praised for it!

Interesting, entertaining and substantial.

VACANCY

(US, 2007, d. Nimrod Antal)

A high fright factor.

Usually, films about people stranded on American back roads in the dark focus on rather unsympathetic 20 somethings who encounter variations on the living dead and spend most of the film being chased and tortured. Vacancy is more than a bit different.

This time the central characters are a married couple (Luke Wilson and Kate Beckinsale) who are estranged because of the accidental death of their young son. Tension between them is strong. When the husband takes a side road because of a freeway pile-up and then swerves to avoid a racoon, things go to the worse and worse. They are lost. A man in a garage seems friendly but sabotages their car. They walk back to the isolated motel and are persuaded to stay the night in the best room – with special features.

The rest of this brief film has them terrorised by the mild-mannered, bespectacled manager (Frank Whaley) and his brutal friends who have a small local mini-industry of filming live-action terror.

Director Nimrod Antal (who made the Hungarian film, Control, in the Budapest rail subway) keeps the pace going and immerses the audience in the couple's fear and their being trapped, sometimes in claustrophobic tunnels under the motel.

Antal sets out to make a scary movie for adults – and succeeds.

THE WAR ON DEMOCRACY

(UK, 2006, d. Christopher Martin and John Pilger)

John Pilger has been a provocative and insightful journalist for many decades. Practically all his audiovisual work has been for television. Now he has made a film for cinema.

The focus of attention is Latin America. Pilger travels around several countries: Venezuela, Chile, Bolivia with reference to Central American countries like Nicaragua and Guatemala. The aim is to explore the nature of the United States' foreign policy and covert and overt action in the continent. Pilger has the ability to frighten – especially with interviews from former politicians, former CIA operatives and chiefs, staff from the School of Americas where so many of the military dictatorships officers were trained, some of whom operate on a policy of America knows best and will act on that principle and, says one bluff interviewee, anyone who disagrees can like it or lump it.

Back Pilger goes into the history of the Allende era, the Pinochet era with its devastating effect on ordinary people who went missing. He reminds us of the destruction and oppression in the civil wars in Central America. He looks at the new president of Bolivia and his attempts to change society for the better and for more equality and independence.

But, the star of the film is someone Pilger admires very much, president of Venezuela, Hugo Chavez, the present bane of the American administration. He interviews a jovial Chavez with enthusiasm and more than a touch of partisanship. He takes us back through the orchestrated attempts to overthrow Chavez and hound him out of government. The many hostile television networks in Venezuela offer a different partisan approach. People power brought Chavez back and he is still there.

Pilger's frequently polemic attitude alienates unsympathetic viewers. However, like him or not, his opinions need to be paid attention to, especially with the wide range of interviewees from all walks of life. It seems that Latin America is flexing its muscles and moving towards greater autonomy as well as independence.

WATER

(Canada, 2005, d. Deepa Mehta)

There was a great deal of controversy in India about the making of *Water*. Authorities and popular movements condemned the director for her alleged attack on customs, especially concerning widows. The result was that this Indian story was actually filmed in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan locations, especially the river, are beautifully photographed. And there is an impressive finale scene at a railway station during a brief stopover and prayer by Mahatma Gandhi.

Water certainly does attack what seem to be inhuman customs concerning the lives of widows and their status and rights in India. Statistics are offered at the end of the film which suggest that in many areas, abuses are still rife. However, the setting of this story is 1938, the years before the end of British rule and of partition (which was so vividly filmed in Deepa Mehta's fine film, *Earth*).

The initial focus is on a little girl, Chuiya (Sarala, eight at the time of filming) who is asked whether she remembers her marriage. She doesn't - and her family then inform her that she is a widow and that the scriptures of Manu require widows to have their heads shaved, wear white and live in seclusion in a compound together where they have to eke out a living or beg. Seeing this through the frightened and sad child's eyes makes the widows' plight seem even more dreadful. We then see the various women, many of whom have spent decades secluded and frustrated, especially the big and imperious woman in charge.

There are two other women at the centre of the film. One is a devout woman, Gyanvati (Seema Biswas), who accepts her lot with faith, believing that there must be some meaning in her life. She is kind, generous and is the saviour for Chuyia, an admirable woman. The other is a young and beautiful woman, Kalyani (Lisa Ray), bewildered by her fate. By chance, a young man (John Abrahams) encounters her and Chuyia and he falls in love with her. Family, friends and, especially his father, who has his own secrets, advise him against marriage. The head of the widows' community who actually lends out women for procurers is also against the marriage.

The playing out of this romance as well as the fate of the little girl makes for very moving and upsetting drama.

Comments in the background throughout the film remind us of the political situation and the role of Gandhi who is released from prison by the British.

Toronto-based Deepa Mehta also tackled difficult female and feminist issues in her previous film, *Fire*. Here she makes an effective and moving plea for oppressed women in society.

SIGNIS FILM REVIEWS AUGUST 2007

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DARATT

(Chad, 2006, d. Mahamat-Saleh Haroun)

Films from Chad are very rare. Director Mahamat-Saleh Haroun was born there in 1960. He studied at film school in Paris and journalism in Bordeaux. His first film, *Bye Bye Africa* was made in 1999 and won the Best First Film prize at Venice that year. His second film, *Abuna*, is a very moving film about children, family relationships and absent fathers. It screened in the Directors' Fortnight at Cannes in 2002. *Darat* is his third film. It won the Jury Prize in Venice in 2006 as well as many other side bar prizes for social justice. It received a commendation from the Signis jury.

The setting is Chad at the end of a forty-years period of civil war. An amnesty is declared. A young man is urged by his grandfather to go to the city to avenge the death of his father, killed during the civil war. When he meets the man responsible for his father's death, he hesitates, sees him distribute bread to poor children.

The young man stays, works as a baker for the killer, sees him treat his wife badly, yet seems to be a good man in terms of Muslim expectations. Ultimately, he takes the man back to his grandfather (who is blind) and pretends that he has shot him.

The film uses local locations quite strikingly. The audience feels that it has been in Chad. The performers are very good, again making audiences believe in the motivations, the ambiguities of their lives. The theme of justice, retribution and forgiveness and reconciliation come across very powerfully.

DISTURBIA

(US, 2007, d. D.J.Caruso)

American producers are always looking for movies to remake – and, most times, audiences complain that they are not as good as the originals, so why bother?

Somebody must have asked the question, 'what would it be like to take the basic plot of Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) and update it to the new surveillance technology?' (after all James Stewart in those days was confined in his wheelchair and to a camera and its flash). And what about putting it in a youth setting for the multiplex moviegoers? The answer would be *Disturbia*. And they haven't done a bad job at all!

Disturbia is, of course, disturbing suburbia, that view of American streets with their neat houses and lawns, where all is surface respectable, but behind the windows, behind so many of them, as in *Rear Window* with the apartment blocks, curtains are open inviting some neighbourly voyeurism, there lurks violence and mayhem. *Disturbia* offers a different variation on the phrase 'Neighbourhood Watch'.

The film opens in tranquillity, father and teenage son bonding in mountain fishing. *Disturbia*? And then comes a graphic car crash and the film takes a different tone. The question arises, how can you confine the teenage hero to his home so that he will watch the neighbours? Answer: have him disgruntled, punch his teacher and have the judge limit him to his home with an ankle bracelet alarm to warn police when he goes out of bounds. That works well – especially when he is bored and starts looking and speculating. Can a Grace Kelly character be worked in? A cool blonde teenager moves in next door, so no problems there. And Thelma Ritter as the nurse? What about a kooky Korean American classmate who likes practical jokes and has photo equipment.

When a lone neighbour who mows his lawns incessantly (and reminds cinema buffs of Raymond Burr) carries out plastic bags of rubbish dripping with blood, then it is suspicion and snoop.

Actually, for those not in the Hitchcock know, there is enough plot, some scares and suspense to make this a better than average teen movie. For those in the know, it is entertaining but it is also enjoyable to see the reworking of the original.

Shia LaBeouf (*Holes*, *A Guide to Recognising Your Saints*, *Transformers*) is an agreeable lead even when he is being disagreeable. Carrie-Ann Moss is his worried mother. And David Morse is the quietly violent killer.

EVAN ALMIGHTY

(US, 2007, d. Tom Shadyac)

What if a modern-day Noah had to build an ark? Here is one answer.

I wish I could have like Evan Almighty more than I did. Not that many audiences will not enjoy it and its positive – even religious – message and comic tone. But, compared with *Bruce Almighty*, it is far less complex, far less witty, far less funny. Maybe God, as well as writer Steve Oederkerk and director Tom Shadyac has a lot to do with it.

God? Well, at least God as portrayed by Morgan Freeman. He is back again after letting Bruce take over for him while he went on vacation so that Bruce (and the audience) could learn some of the pressures that God is under as well as wondering how we would handle the world were we to find ourselves given the divine task.

Perhaps the thing is that, this time, Evan does not get the chance to play God at all. There is a much more different dynamic operating here, one that those familiar with the stand-out figures of the Old Testament would appreciate. God calls special people for a particular and challenging mission. He doesn't necessarily reach out to help them all that much. The learning is in completing the mission and the effort that it takes.

Last time we saw Steve Carrel's Evan as a vain (and tongue-tangled) television personality. Now he has been elected to the US Congress and has moved with wife and three sons to Virginia. As with all those American movies which challenge oppressive legislation in the Capitol, especially against the environment (from *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* to Goldie Hawn in *Protocol* and *Legally Blonde 2*), the hero has to stand up to a dominating villain. This time it is a literal heavy in the form of John Goodman.

But, God has other ideas for Evan and delivers tools, then wood, to his front door with the request that he build an ark – and even supplies *Building an Ark for Dummies*. Evan becomes an initially reluctant Noah

(with his wife, Joan – of the ark!), bearded, long-haired, with a Hebrew robe. The family are upset but opt to work with Evan (thus reinforcing the message about the family that builds arks together stays together). Media, politicians and public come to mock.

But, birds have come flocking (in twos), then the animals arrive, bigger and bigger (and who also help in the building). When the flood comes, it is a particular flood with an ecological and anti-business exploitation message; and the special effects are quite spectacular.

So, the dynamic is that of the biblical call and mission, with the kindly Morgan Freeman (doubling as a diner busboy Al Mighty) doing a touch of divine bullying. And God does not appear as frequently as we would like.

The screenplay is very American in its style, straightforward, broadly comical rather than hilarious, wearing its religious heart on its sleeve rather than rib-tickling or acting on the funny bone. Other cultures, more reticent in expression, might find it a bit too obvious, a bit too pious and a bit too preachy. It does not mean that one sensibility is better or worse than another – it's just that sensibilities are different in their responses.

GANDHI MY FATHER

(India, 2007, d. Feroz Abbas Khan)

This is a surprisingly interesting film, very interesting in fact.

Our cinema knowledge of Gandhi comes from Richard Attenborough's Oscar winning epic of 1982. The film filled in some of the background of his life but also put him on a pedestal as one of the great figures of the 20th century. We would have to check whether much screenplay attention was given to Gandhi's wife or to his eldest son, Harilal.

It seems time for some revisionist looks at Gandhi himself while acknowledging the extraordinary influence he had in his time and still has. Director Khan has directed *Mahatma v. Gandhi* in the theatre and actor Darshan Jariwala has played Gandhi on stage. They have strong credentials for making a film about him. It is all the more interesting that the director is a Muslim, though he has contributed for several decades to the development of Hindi theatre.

So, who was Harilal Gandhi? The film opens in an emergency ward in Bombay, June 1948. A wild-looking alcoholic has been brought in and the authorities are trying to discover his name and any family. He claims to be the son of Gandhi.

In a series of flashbacks from the hospital, the film traces the story of Harilal and his relationship with his father. The film also includes key scenes in the career and the campaigns of Gandhi himself so that we are getting two solid narratives in one while the story of the son intersects with that of the father – and contrasts with his father.

It is a commonplace experience that crusaders are powerful in their impact on their followers while frequently overlooking their own family. The flashbacks open in 1906 when Gandhi was confronting the racist, anti-coloured regulations in South Africa. Harilal has gone to India to study and, against his father's wishes, has married. But Harilal wanted to study in England and become a barrister like his father. Gandhi was against this, wanting his son with him as a pioneer of passive resistance and learning from life and prison. Over the years, he overlooked his son when opportunities for study arose, counselled his wife to go back to India, underestimated Harilal's hopes.

Perhaps Gandhi was not entirely wrong because Harilal was failure-prone – in decisions, in business and fraud and becoming an alcoholic. Or should Gandhi be blamed for this even though Harilal had to take responsibility? The question recurs as Harilal avoids his father, then comes to his ashram as a follower, then is seduced by persuasive businessmen who want to exploit the Gandhi name to raise funds. There is a

scene in 1934 when he comes to the station to meet his father's train to give an orange to his mother. He ignores his father. He had great love for his mother who is presented as a strong and devoted figure but she was caught in the patriarchal stances and the rather puritanical approach of Gandhi to enjoyment and pleasure, let alone alcohol.

The film does show Gandhi often trying to come to grips with his relationship with his son, sometimes rationalising, sometimes very emotional.

Harilal's life was a sad one, a wasted one. The film shows the power of Gandhi's movement, utilising newsreel footage of the time. It also shows the horror of the massacres that broke out in 1947 and the harsh realities of partition.

The film is Indian and moves at an Indian pace which western audiences may find slow and repetitious – but it is very accessible to a wide audience and repays viewing.

GRAFFITI

(Russia, 2006, d. Igor Apasyan)

This film starts in a tour-de-force swirl of camerawork and editing. A young art student has put up his signature graffiti all over Moscow and is challenged by a gang. He defies them and races off, setting up an exciting chase (which defies realism as he continually outruns bikes) – but is finally caught and bashed. We know nothing about him – and learn nothing of his background except that he is surly young man with chips on his shoulder.

To get a pass grade, he travels to a decaying small town – which, as in all films where the city slicker meets the country citizens (no matter how hayseed or hillbilly they might be) leads to his change of character. He is commissioned to paint a mural in the renovated club, featuring the leading citizens. However, more and more people turn up with photos of those killed in war, especially in Chechnya, and he has to readjust – and start again. It is as if he is the same kind of blank wall and the citizens imprint themselves on him and bring him to life.

There are the usual types: the alcoholic rogue who becomes a sage father figure, the simple young soldier who has been wounded and disfigured in the war and who is the sewage disposal man, the larger than life prostitute (rather Fellini-like) with whom he is infatuated, the local authorities (some overweight and over-important) who have employed a geologist to find oil to revive the economy, plus some villains, especially a farmer who breeds ostriches.

This is a cross-section of Russian characters presented in a raucous, not too subtle way, who portray human nature, human foibles and some moments of tragedy. And the young man, despite himself, is transformed.

HAIRSPRAY

(US, 2007, d. Adam Shankman)

In 1988, John Waters' Hairspray was an exuberant comedy that tickled the funnybone of most audiences, delved into the gauche days of the early 60s and live television programs as well as raising some serious social issues. Waters used his home town of Baltimore as the setting for the average American city.

Then came a musical version with music by Marc Shaiman and it proved to be a great success on Broadway and has begun to travel.

In the meantime, here is a happy film version of the musical. Exuberant would be something of an understatement.

We are back in Baltimore 1962 (with a lively song about the city to open the show) and being introduced to Nikki Blonsky as high school student, Tracy Turnblad, like the little teapot, short and stout, but not really minding it a bit. She loves life. And her dream is to dance on the local Corny Collins Show, twisting, bumping and grinding in a pre-Grease kind of way. School is spent getting into trouble from cantankerous teachers and being sent to detention where she meets the black students, all dancing, and welcoming her to their moves. And then it is home with her best friend, Penny Pingleton (Amanda Bynes) to watch, cheer and dance in front of the TV. Except that Penny's puritanical mother (Allison Janney) definitely does not approve.

Tracy is lucky to have a nice and rather large mother who does local laundry and ironing and has not been out of the house, due to embarrassment at her size and her love of eating, for more than ten years. She is an encouragement to her daughter. Her nice and quiet father runs a novelty shop downstairs. Much has been made of the fact that John Travolta plays Edna Turnblad in a fat suit – and he does it particularly well, relying on his own voice, but bringing a modest niceness to his performance and getting the chance to dance again, especially with that best of actor-dancers, Christopher Walken as Wilbur Turnblad. (Even more dancing with them would have been welcome).

Meanwhile at the TV station, steely blonde manager Velma Von Tussle (Michelle Pfeiffer) is pushing her daughter Amber (Brittany Snow) to be the Dancing Queen, pressurising the all-smiling, all-singing and dancing Corny Collins (James Marsden doing a surprisingly agreeable turn). Zac Efron is Link, the star dancer on the show, who falls for Tracy.

There are some nice cameos from John Waters as a flasher, Jerry Stiller, the original Wilbur, as a shop manager and Rikky Lake (the original Tracy – who then went on to host her talk show) as an agent, along with Adam Shankman, the choreographer who directed the film.

We know where the plot is going. It's the enjoyment of seeing how it gets there, especially as Tracy teams up with the blacks who are allowed to have a day a month on the show as Negro Day, under the compering of Motormouth Maybelle (Queen Latifah). Some funny situations and protest marches remind us that these were serious days for civil rights and race relationships.

Plenty of songs, plenty of lively twisting dancing, genial characters and snarly villains. Indeed a happy show.

HARRY POTTER AND THE ORDER OF THE PHOENIX

(UK, 2007, d. David Yates)

This is Harry Potter time. With the release of the last book in the series (and sales of millions) and the fifth film in the series, Harry Potter is a worldwide phenomenon.

Six years ago, when the first film came out, there was a great deal of heated discussion. Children and adults who were content to move into a fantasy world that looked at times a little like ours but was vastly different enjoyed the opportunity to make believe. What if...? On the other hand, a number of fervently religious people were alarmed at the words 'magic' and 'spells' and 'wizard' and interpreted the story as being against some of the literal injunctions of the Old Testament.

We hope that this discussion has been resolved, realising that J.K.Rowling was just inventing a world that was another fairy tale place with some adolescent epic touches. This is not a world to be taken literally. It is more like the imaginative world that J.R.R. Tolkien invented for the Lord of the Rings or that George Lucas invented for the Star Wars series. In fact, it is a useful comparison to make between Harry Potter and Frodo as well as with Luke Skywalker. They are young heroes who bear some of the burdens of evil in the world and receive a mission to combat evil.

This mission is becoming clearer as the books and the films continue. Harry started as a young boy. We have seen how he has changed as he moved through the early years of adolescence. Last time, Harry came

face to face with the personification of evil, someone who had chosen to 'go over to the dark side', Voldemort. This film is literally darker as Voldemort now moves in on Harry to create an evil world. Harry has to draw on inner resources to be able to live up to his mission.

This time he has the support of his parents' friends, the Order of the Phoenix (with its name of hope for rising again) and of his godfather, Sirius Black. He also has to learn that he is not alone and rely on the support of Ron and Hermione (even if it means listening to lectures from Hermione).

This is a film for adolescent audiences. The classification is 12A or its equivalent which means that parents have to decide whether they want their younger children to see the film. If young children have started with the other books and films then they will know what to expect. Otherwise it could be puzzling and frightening.

Most of the familiar cast have returned, even if some of them have only a few moments. Adults will regret that there is not more of Emma Thompson, Maggie Smith and Robbie Coltrane. However, there is a new character who leaps off the screen at us as she tries to control Hogwarts and impose her kind of order. This is Dolores Umbridge, sent by the ministry to correct what are considered Dumbledore's mistakes. She flounces around in pinks and mauves completely self-satisfied. Imelda Staunton gives a wonderful performance.

There are plenty of special effects that are amazing to watch, a delight that technology can create so much magic.

This is a review of the film, not the book – readers always find that the filmmakers have left out characters and incidents that they really wanted to see. But, as a Harry Potter film, the Order of the Phoenix should satisfy.

THE HOAX

(US, 2007, d. Lasse Halstrom)

Some older readers might remember the heady days of 1971-2 when Howard Hughes was one of the world's richest men, wielding power, even though he had become an eccentric, dust-phobic recluse.

Novelist and art historian, especially with a book about an artist called *The Fake*, Clifford Irving, was not having the success he hoped for with the publication of a novel by McGraw Hill. Determined to find a topic that would sell, he lighted on the idea of an autobiography of Hughes. Since he was a recluse, could anyone really prove whether he had interviewed him or not! Sounded plausible and more than a touch daring, just the thing for an ambitious and risk-taking writer.

That is the gist of *The Hoax*, based on Irving's story of the pitch, the writing and the denunciation of his gigantic literary confidence trick.

This version (with some inventions by writer William Wheeler who, with Swedish director Lasse Halstrom (*My Life as a Dog*, *Gilbert Grape*, *Chocolat*, *Shipping News*) thought that the story allowed him more than some poetic license) includes some dreams and imaginative interludes.

Richard Gere (a bit too old, unfortunately) plays Irving with an exuberance that carries the audience along. Particularly good is Alfred Molina as his friend Richard Susskind, nervous one minute and blurting out the truth the next. Marcia Gay Harden is Irving's wife, Edith, who did the depositing of the publishing advances in a Swiss bank. The three of them ended up serving time in prison.

There are a lot of lines which remind us that people are more gullible than we often think (though handwriting experts and others confirmed the authenticity of the Hughes' correspondence which Irving forged). The publishers eventually fall for the hoax in a big way. There are also some Nixon, Watergate, Hughes connections.

Actually, the film does reveal just how much pressure hoaxers must be under if they are to continue lying, having to improvise with their stories, remain consistent and cover their bases.

The Hoax is both interesting and entertaining.

INCENSE

(Armenia, 2006, d G. Harutyunyan)

The incense of the title is what a newly released prisoner in Armenia, 1953, the year of Stalin's death, searches for to pay honour to his dead mother. Incense is forbidden by law.

While the Armenian people are trying to raise consciousness of the 1915 genocide, there is also the story of the country during more than four decades of Soviet domination. Armenia can boast that it was the first nation to accept Christianity (in 301 AD). Commentators say that it was the church which kept hopes alive during the Soviet era. However, this picture of life in a country village, where simple people are made to live in fear and religion is a crime against the state (and where the people have to gather as the local church is to be blown up and listen to jingoistic, idealist socialist rants) reminds its audience that this was a period of repression of freedoms.

Director Mikayel Dovlatyan, a tall, almost gaunt and commanding figure plays Poghos, a local worker who has spent time in gaol as a young man because of a friend's betrayal and who returns in the late 1940s, the era of the church explosion – which he stops by cutting the burning fuse. He also secretly buries the school teacher who is hanged because of his opposition to the destruction. However, a spy reports him and his school companion is now the local police officer who basks in puffed-up position and power. He arrests Poghos and he is sent into exile. He comes back in 1953 only to find himself again in conflict with the policeman and the powers that be.

The ending is not what we might expect. More hope than we anticipated.

The film is straightforward though it moves back and forth between the two returns of Poghos. The style is also straightforward, how the film might have been made in the era in which it is set. But, it is an opportunity to go back and experience what the Soviet era was like in the Armenian countryside.

I HAVE NEVER FORGOTTEN YOU: THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF SIMON WIESENTHAL

(US, d. Richard Trank)

Simon Wiesenthal is, to say the least, an extraordinary figure of the 20th century. This film is a fine tribute to him, recounting his life as well as spelling out, in word and image, his legacy.

Wiesenthal, who was based in Vienna, was given the title of The Nazi Hunter. This is what he did, grateful that he had survived Mauthausen, the camp from which he was freed in late 1944, feeling indebted to his many relatives and to the millions of Jews who were killed by the Nazis. He persevered for decades, incurring enmity, experiencing calumny, but staying with what he saw as his life's mission. His wife found it difficult and experienced breakdown but stayed at his side, married 67 years. His daughter contributes to the commentary in this film.

The documentary is exemplary in its giving information about Wiesenthal, the architect who remembered names and incidents from his internment and was amazed, at the liberation, to see the Americans interrogating former captors. He was able to provide information to the allies, thus beginning his life's work.

The film offers insight into his character, with him speaking in German and frequently in English. We also follow some of the cases, especially Adolf Eichmann, and the way that international governments,

including Brazil and Pinochet's Chile, both of whom were havens for Nazis, handed over war criminals. He and his associates lobbied the German government to drop the statutes of limitation for these criminals. There is an interesting episode with Frederick Forsyth writing *The Odessa File* and asking Wiesenthal's advice – and then the screening of the film in Chile leading to the capture of the SS officer portrayed.

There were controversies in Wiesenthal's career: his naming of an Austrian politician as having been involved in a massacre in Ukraine, the uncertainties about the hunting of Josef Mengele, his statement that accused President of Austria, Kurt Waldheim, was not a criminal. However, Weisenhal had many supporters who organised his work and created centres.

He died over sixty years after his liberation from the camp, dying in 2005 after receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom from Bill Clinton. However, the memory to take away from the film, unobtrusively narrated by Nicole Kidman, is Weisenhal's 90th birthday celebration in the Imperial Hotel in Vienna, the hotel where Hitler and Himmler had permanent suites and from whose balcony Hitler addressed the crowds. He was pleased that history would record this event, the kosher dinner and the Yiddish music played there.

IN THE LAND OF WOMEN

(US, 2007, d. Jon Kasdan)

The title sounds far too solemn and serious for the actual film. It is about the land of women, both geographical in a small suburban setting as well as psychological in families and neighbours.

Adam Brody portrays a young screenwriter (who writes softcore pornography as well as children's stories) who is dismayed when he is dumped by his film star girlfriend. He takes refuge at his grandmother's house – as played (as usual) by Olympia Dukakis, she is a comic blend of death wish, offhand humour and worldly wisdom. However, it is the women in the neighbouring house who have an effect on him.

He first comes across the teenage daughter of the house (Kristen Stewart) and her precocious younger sister. He serves as something of a sounding board for them while being caught up in their home and school problems. Then he meets their mother, Meg Ryan, who is upset by her husband's infidelity, her inability to communicate with her daughter, her regrets concerning the life she might have led in New York. This is complicated by a diagnosis of breast cancer and her chemotherapy and hospitalisation.

There is nothing particularly new here. What holds the interest is the dialogue and the working out of the tensions among the characters. The film is a first for writer director, Jon Kasdan (son of director Lawrence Kasdan and brother of Jake Kasdan).

THE LARK FARM

(Italy, 2007, Paolo and Vittorio Taviani)

For decades the Taviani brothers have made films of the land, the Italian land, its history, its revolutions (Allonsanfan), World War II (The Night of San Lorenzo), the people who have made Italy, even its migrants who went to the US and worked on Griffith's *Intolerance* sets (Good Morning, Babylon). Their cinema style has been colourful, bold, often larger than life – at times, operatic in an emotional Italian way.

They bring this style now, especially its operatic emotions, to an entirely different world from Italy: Armenia. This is a disturbing film about the 1915 Armenian genocide, the massacre of over a million and a half Armenians by the Turks, a national trauma that has not been healed and which is officially denied by the Turkish government (and passed over by others).

A prologue with a dying grandfather creates an idyllic family which is suddenly shattered by a nightmare of death and a glimpse of a wall spattered with blood.

The Tavianis create life in a town where the officials are from the almost defunct Ottoman Empire, yet the two peoples, Turks and Armenians, live side by side. This is the period of World War I and the Turkish alliance with Germany. We are then introduced to the family with a great attention to domestic detail. They are well-to-do, live a genteel way of life, and get on well with the local commandant. Into this context, the plans for the extermination of the Armenians are explained by ruthless visitors from the Turkish government and, as in other massacres, the reasoning that 'orders are orders' takes over.

Warned about the impending attack, the family and people from the town take refuge in the country at The Lark Farm. Suddenly, and without warning to the audience as well as to the characters, the killing is upon us. The Tavianis do not spare the audience. The action is appalling but the Tavianis have the skills to blend some extraordinary graphic moments with suggestion, mood and implications.

With the male population dead, the troops march the women and children out into the desert where they are to be exterminated. The screenplay brings some tension into this merciless trek by having a Greek servant combine with a local beggar who repents the role he had in betraying the family, raising money and finding the means for the survivors to escape by night. It almost works but graphic tragedy occurs again.

The aftermath offers some court sequences of what were momentary show trials (and which were peremptorily terminated) and tribunals of justice have not taken up the wrongs of what occurred almost a hundred years ago.

Based on a novel by Italian Armenian, the film has an international cast of well-known actors: from France, Tcheky Karyo as the father and Andre Dussollier as the commandant; from Spain, Paz Vega as the central sister and Angela Molina as the servant; from Canada, Arsinee K, as the mother; from Germany Moritz Bleibtreu as a sympathetic soldier, plus a number of Armenian performers acting out the destruction of their ancestors.

MACBETH

(Australia, 2006, d. Geoffrey Wright)

In the early 1990s, Geoffrey Wright made a name for himself for that very energetic portrait of racism and neo-nazism in Melbourne, *Romper Stomper*. He followed it up with another energetic film about cars, youth and the western suburbs of Melbourne, *Metal Skin*. And then he went to Hollywood where he did not have great success, directing the youth slasher thriller, *Cherry Falls*, in the late 1990s.

Now he is back on familiar ground and has decided to follow the Baz Luhrman lead of bringing Shakespeare to the wide audience by re-locating it in the present. He has opted for *Macbeth*.

The text is there, although pruned and some of the soliloquies are done as voiceovers, especially moving 'Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow...' to the end of the play while omitting 'full of sound and fury signifying nothing'. Perhaps Wright and his co-adaptor, Victoria Hill, wanted it to signify something and not nothing.

So, the action is set amongst the drug-dealing gangs of inner city Melbourne. The text still uses the language of kings and thanes, but the film has guns and knives in the Luhrman vein. While the world of gangsters seems a suitable one for this kind of violent drama, it does not provide us with a tragic hero as Shakespeare does. This *Macbeth* is an adventurer, a thug, a criminal who does not have a tragic flaw. Rather, he is corrupt and corruptible, ambitious, greedy and power-hungry, even if he wavers at times and is less single-minded than his wife. Sam Worthington's performance might be considered rather slight in many ways but he probably is embodying the director's vision of this weak, coerced and, ultimately, frantic gangster. By contrast, Victoria Hill (the co-writer) is initially icy and focused, using *Macbeth* and ready to step in smear Duncan's guards with blood when *Macbeth* loses his nerve after his repeated slashing of Duncan. But, with *Macbeth* having fits as he sees Banquo's ghost at the banquet, she starts to crack, washes the damned spot and eventually kills herself in a bloodstained bath.

Gary Sweet and Lachy Hulme are Duncan and Macduff, mob leaders who give a cynical tone to Shakespeare's picture of the realm of Scotland. The three witches are dressed as mischievous schoolgirls and graffiti writers at the opening but later use the tradition that the witches were not old hags but young and naked women (which makes Lady Macbeth with her topless washing and wringing of her hands also a witch).

Modern equivalents are intriguing for those who wonder how the bard can be updated: tv monitors, mobile phones, motor bikes, cocaine, and a logging company called Birnam bringing its lorry load of logs, wood, to Macbeth's mansion, Dunsinane.

A British reviewer commented on the strange accents – but, if you are going to do an Australian contemporary adaptation, this is how Macbeth and his crowd would sound.

An interesting experiment that should please experimenters but not die hard devotees.

THE PRIESTESS

(Armenia, 2007, d. Vigen Chalandrian)

This historical epic, combined with contemporary psychology, is well worth a look.

While it starts in Yerevan in the present when a young woman is knocked down in a car accident and undergoes therapy, it also goes back into 3rd century Armenian history. The woman comes to consciousness and tells her story – that she is a priestess of Mithra, carefully chosen and groomed, with seer-like powers.

The 3rd century story is intriguing with attention to detail about the installation of the priestess, the Mithraic rituals, her prophecies. However, she is also the daughter of a farmer and lives out of the city in the countryside. This story is told in flashbacks as the screenplay returns to the present and the introduction of a scholar who knows the historical background and leads her through the events. The main threat to her health and exploring this story is that her doctor and medical staff want to resort to shock therapy to bring her to her real self.

The doctor (played by the director who also produced and did production and costume design) is a quiet, bookish man. The director also plays a dashing tutor of the royal family who encounters the priestess without knowing who she is and has an affair with her. She becomes pregnant. However, he is killed, unable to read out the royal proclamation of persecution and death for Christians.

Armenia was the first nation to officially accept Christianity (301 AD). The film is a speculation about that conversion. The priestess foresees the conversion (with a short sequence showing Jesus carrying his cross – and played by the director as well). She goes into exile and encounters the imprisoned St Gregory the Illuminator, helps him survive and, with her son, is instrumental in the conversion of the people.

This is no Da Vinci Code material. The device of having a contemporary woman imagine she is a reincarnation of a 'historical' person was used in Michael Anderson's 1972 film Pope Joan, with Liv Ullmann. While the priestess story is the invention of the writer and director, the Temple at Garni where she was installed is still there as are the caves at Khor Virap where Gregory was imprisoned. So, for Armenians it is a kind of movie historical novel. And, for non Armenians, an easy way into appreciating this period of transition from pagan practice to Christianity.

SCREAMERS

(UK, 2006, d. Carla Garapadian)

An interesting and very well made documentary with a message that is powerful and challenging.

Screamers are rock concert fans and this film follows a European tour of the rock band, 'System of a Down'. For those who enjoy rock concerts, no problem. For those who don't (and find the lyrics hard to decipher) a little patience during the performances because there is a great deal of thoughtful material as well.

System of a Down consists of Armenian American musicians who are descended from survivors of the 1915 Armenian genocide at the hands of the Turks in the declining years of the Ottoman Empire, when Turkey was allied with Germany. A racial hatred came to a head and over a million Armenians were massacred. This is vividly portrayed in the Taviani brothers' film *The Lark Farm* and is seen in Atom Egoyan's *Ararat*.

The musicians are articulate in their message lyrics (when you can understand them) but are also articulate in the presentation of their views, personal, political and historical. Some of their very elderly relations who escaped to America are interviewed, very movingly.

There are quite a number of interviews. Susannah, author of a book on genocides, recurs throughout the film with observations on the 20th century killings. There are excerpts from the American presidents from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush – with the comment made that when the president acknowledges that the 1915 killings were genocide, this honest acknowledgement is taken for a touch of heroic honesty which means there is nothing else to do.

While the focus is Armenia, the other genocides are brought into focus, especially the more recent killings in Rwanda and Darfur.

There is an interesting section on the man who introduced the word genocide into world usage.

Carla Garapedian herself is a descendant of survivors. She has been a BBC reporter (and this film was commissioned by the BBC) and she shows her skills in reportage and she does not intrude at all in a film which is not only well worth seeing but is a stimulus to action. (An Ecumenical commendation at the Yerevan Film Festival.)

THE SIMPSONS MOVIE

(US, 2007, d. David Silverman)

The Simpsons Movie is very funny.

For twenty years, the Simpsons have entertained television audiences with their madcap lives but, even more tellingly, with their spoof comments on human nature, social issues and political stances. In fact, The Simpsons has created an industry but also a niche in intelligent discussion of the media. Some contestants on *Mastermind* take The Simpsons as their topic and can identify incidents from episode to episode. Many Christians have written articles and books on how effective The Simpsons has been in offering a contemporary way of dealing with important values.

Not that Homer and his family are exemplars of righteous living. Often, Homer is far from this. But, the series has been written as an appeal to basic values that audiences believe in which becomes a means for our responding to the family's behaviour.

Homer himself is usually the cause of the problems with his obtuse selfishness, his immediate gratification and his inability to think things through let alone foresee consequences. Yet, sometimes, but especially here in the movie, he is the one who has to come to his senses and rectify the situation and save his family and the people of Springfield. He is both an irritating slob and a lovable human being who shows more than his fair share of human foibles.

Marge, on the other hand, with her high-rise blue hair, is normally the sensible one. Bart is mischievous but is always looking for some fatherly interest and care. Lisa is serious and the baby is a bit of a chameleon, gooey eyes one minute and mini-martial arts the next.

After twenty years, the producers have responded to popular demand for a feature film – and fans will not be disappointed.

The series has always delighted in witty screenplays and this one is full of clever lines. Even baby Maggie's first word at the end of the film is – 'sequel'!

Actual characters have always been a target for some send-ups and here we have glimpses of Hilary Clinton, Arnold Schwarzenegger as president ('elected to lead, not read') and Tom Hanks wandering about, serious-minded.

Sight gags abound. The Simpsons Movie is strong on visual wit.

Then there are the messages. Basically, the plot is a recognition that global warming is a human responsibility. Homer is selfish and careless in disposing of waste and causes Springfield to be quarantined by a huge and impenetrable dome. He escapes but his conscience gets the better of him and he returns to try to make things right again.

There is also the theme of parenting and families. Homer is no example to Bart who finds his neighbour Flanders a better father to him – but he has to learn (as does Homer) what family bonds can be.

In many ways these messages are mini-sermons (though Homer is not very good when he attends Church and misses out on messages there). But, they are packaged in humour and irony, with many references to contemporary politicians and discussions, which means that we are laughing at the bad behaviour while we know what good behaviour ought to be. We 'get' the message.

At the session I attended, young children were laughing out loud at the characters and situations. Adults were laughing at the spoofs and satire. The Simpsons can communicate with everyone.

A STORY OF PEOPLE IN WAR AND PEACE

(Armenia, 2007, d. Vardan Hovhannisyan)

1994. Three years after the proclamation of the new Armenian republic (after 45 years of Soviet domination), film-journalist, Vardan Hovhannisyan, spent five days filming a group of resistance (not army) fighters against the Azeri on the border of Azerbaijan. In the woods, he shares the harsh conditions, gunfire from the unseen enemy, haphazard skirmishes and continual danger. It is vivid war material.

2005. Vardan is commissioned to try to find any of the survivors from the group and hear what has happened to them. He tracks down four – and who explain that others were killed in action. The three men and one woman have been deeply affected by this experience of fighting. A former teacher, who looks tough in the war sequences, is now sadly divorced, is seen fishing and saying he was not a brave man, was not in any way a fighter, but lives with the memories of war. The young man of 1994 is now in prison for cannabis use and reflects on how he has changed in the ten years, from age 19 to 29. We later see him free and trying to resume his life. Another man is in a state mental institution, whispering that he is not mad. The woman of the group, a nurse in those days, has in fact now become a member of the army.

What makes the film and the interviews more powerful is that the director has intercut these interviews with the war footage that he showed at the beginning of the film. We look at the survivors then and now, the experience of war and the trauma of the aftermath. This is a picture of and a comment on all wars. (Ecumenical prize at the Yerevan Film Festival.)

TALES FROM EARTHSEA

(Japan, 2007, d. Goro Miyazaki)

Some recent Japanese animation films have been based on British stories, *The Moving Castle of Howl and Steamboy*. This time, the source is the *Earthsea* series of fantasies by Ursula L Guin. It pays to know something of the characters and their histories, otherwise you have to pay careful attention to understand the background of the *Earthsea* mythology and recognise the characters and what they stand for.

This is very familiar animation, not too many tricks or fancy styles. The characters are quite traditionally drawn. However, there are plenty of effects such as flying dragons, storms at sea and magic spells in the final confrontation between good and evil. This makes for straightforward images and storytelling.

There is an early shock as the young prince Arren kills his noble father and flees the castle. Confronted by snarling wolves, he is rescued by the wise man from the court, Sparrowhawk, the principal magician who is in search of the reason for the loss of balance in the kingdom. They are given refuge by Tenar and a young girl who lives with her, Therru. They work the farm but the time comes for them to confront the powerful but renegade magician, Cob, who wants power and to live forever.

In the background are themes of self, the hidden self and the true self and of how shadow evil can take possession of a person. The harmony of the world depends on a balance which evil desires and spells can disrupt. As expected, there are themes of heroism with Arren as the ambiguous young man who has absorbed shadow evil and must fight against it and with Therru as a mighty heroine.

The English language version has the benefit of the strong tones of Timothy Dalton for Sparrowhawk and a sinister Willem Dafoe for Cob.

TIME OUT

(Russia, 2005, d. Karen Oganessian)

There is a basic interesting idea here – intimations of the afterlife. However, it is presented in a very broad style, touches of unsubtle farce that limits its appeal to those who enjoy rather broad comedy. And, the resolution of the idea is not totally satisfying.

A very cantankerous middle-aged doctor has nightmares about death. He is annoying at home, interferes with his adult daughter's relationships, even tormenting her employer with whom she is infatuated. Then he is accidentally hit on the head and finds himself in an eerie, desert-like place with several other people who are also in coma. Is this a kind of pre-purgatory? More or less.

He meets the boss who has had a car accident, some dreamily romantically inclined women and two men. Then he is woken and gets the opportunity to put things right for people – more or less, sometimes less. While he becomes a little more realistic, he allows some of his fellow-comatose to remain locked in their fantasies.

A mixed entertainment.

TRANSFORMERS

(US, 2007, d. Michael Bay)

Michael Bay usually directs big and loud popular movies. *Transformers* is, if not his biggest, then his loudest.

There is a market out there for *Transformers*, those who have played with the toys over the last twenty years, who know the names and characteristics of all the transforming machines (and the press book has details and photos of more than we would ever need to know – the reviewers that is, not the kids who enjoy

them). The brief Japanese animated film of the early 1980s has also been re-released for Transformer fever.

Out in space, there has been conflict between the good and evil transforming machines – and now they have discovered Earth. As with many alien stories, the battle between good and evil has been located on earth, America to be specific (which is where most alien movie encounters take place and where apocalypse and armageddon are rife, making one ask what it is about US susceptibilities for unidentified, as well as identified, flying objects).

Actually, we discover that contact was made in the 1890s, the key to confrontation being transfixed on a pair of spectacles of the lead explorer in the Arctic. The spectacles are now on E-bay where his descendant (Shia LaBeouf) hopes to make some money. Instead, this is where the Decepticons make for, to retrieve the information that will give them supremacy. These are a big, monstrous and loud lot and can transform into huge machine terrors. On the other hand, we discover that the Autobots are the goodies and obviously more kindly disposed and turn into nice or humorous machines or sleek cars.

The government has a secret agency for all this kind of thing, unwisely under the direction of John Turturro who does an exaggerated turn as a wild bureaucrat. The more sober aspects of government are represented by an anguished Jon Voight. Meanwhile a wild hacker, Anthony Anderson, is commandeered by an IT expert, Rachel Taylor, and Shia's girlfriend, Megan Fox gets in on the act, all witnesses to the final machine versus machine battle – which, of course, can only be won with the lone human hero's help.

For those who love machines and mechanics, doom and boom, this is it. Otherwise, it is hard to tell a goody machine from a baddy machine and it all goes grindingly on – and on.

TRESETE

(Croatia, 2006, d. Pavo Marinkovic)

Tresete is sub-titled, The Story of an Island. The island is off the Croatian coast and is in steady decline after the war experiences of the 1990s.

However, there is a group of four older men who love playing cards every night. The card game, Tresete, becomes the focal point of the film but also a symbol of the joy, the risks, the obsessions of island life. The film's chapters are named after the card suits.

This is a brief film, comic in its presentation of its characters, but with a serious undertone, even melancholy for a lot of the running time.

One of the card players suddenly dies and the remaining three go to great lengths to persuade others to become the fourth. There is the priest who is violently seasick when he comes, who feels he is in a literal backwater – and is preoccupied with donations and money collections. There is the local law enforcement officer who is rigid in interpretation (and rigid in collecting his winnings). There is the simpleton goatherd who plays erratically. Finally, there is an estate agent who is stranded on the island (and who also wins!).

In the meantime, the group consists of the former teacher whose school is closed down and who loves photography (and reconstructing photos introducing long dead ancestors into photos of contemporary funerals); the miserly former sailor who is hard on the simpleton, regrets his lost love and makes some startling discoveries; the man who went to war and disputes his inheritance with his war-injured brother who is the postman and who is trying to sell the family house (while his brother is stealing the furniture and appliances to give them to the daughter of the dead man who is reconstructing her house). And so on... until there is a tournament of tresete after twenty years and everyone is, for the moment, happy. (Ecumenical prize-winner, Mannheim, 2006.)

THE WALKER

(US, 2007, d. Paul Schrader)

An immediate reason for seeing this film is that it is written and directed by Paul Schrader. Schrader, with his strict Calvinist upbringing, has spent decades observing US society and its moral and amoral stances. He is well-known as the writer of many of Martin Scorsese's films (Mean Streets, Taxi Driver, Last Temptation, Bringing out the Dead). His own films have been varied: Blue Collar, Hardcore, Mishima. Schrader links the central character of The Walker to the disgruntled Taxi Driver and the amoral American Gigolo. What would this kind of character be like in his fifties and at the beginning of the 21st century?

Schrader's answer is to create the walker, the homosexual man accepted in high society as a pleasant and unthreatening character who escorts wealthy wives to social functions.

Woody Harrelson plays Car, an estate agent with means, who lives in the shadow of his dead politician father, who is gay and a walker. We find him playing cards with a group of women, Lauren Bacall, Lilly Tomlin, Mary Beth Hurt (Schrader's wife in fact) and Kristin Scott Thomas. They gossip, they plan dinners, they support their ambitious husbands. However, one of them has been having an affair with a financial adviser who is murdered.

The action of the film shows Car and his attempts to both investigate as well as protect the wife, finding himself caught, ridiculed and betrayed, finally coming up against the police and Washington money and power.

The film works well on the level of its portrait of society, the glamour, the glitter and the gossip. It is somewhat convoluted in its presentation of the crime and the detective work. It also complicates matters with glimpses of Car's private life and his relationship with a photographer (Moritz Bleibtreu). However, the film does not quite communicate the oomph that plot and cast lead us to hope for.

The performances, especially of the women, are interesting and Woody Harrelson in quite a different role reminds us of how talented an actor he is.

SIGNIS FILM REVIEWS SEPTEMBER 2007

2 DAYS IN PARIS

3:10 TO YUMA

1408

12:08 EAST OF BUCHAREST

BOURNE ULTIMATUM, The

BRATZ: THE MOVIE

BUY IT NOW

COPYING BEETHOVEN

DEATH SENTENCE

DECEMBER BOYS

EAGLE VS SHARK

ECOUTE LE TEMPS

EVENING

HALLAM FOE

HAPPILY N'EVER AFTER

KNOCKED UP

LADY CHATTERLEY

LICENCE TO WED

MARIGOLD

MEE SHEE: THE WATER GIANT
NO RESERVATIONS
QUELQUES JOURS EN SEPTEMBRE
RUSH HOUR 3
SERAPHIM FALLS
SUGARHOUSE
SPARKLE
SURF'S UP
WAITRESS
WE ARE ALL CHRISTS
WIND CHILL
YEAR OF THE DOG

1408

(US, 2007, d. Mikael Hafstrom)

Stephen King seems to have a thing about hotels, the sinister potential of hotels. This was true of *The Shining*. It is very much true of *1408*. Based on one of his short stories, this is quite eerie and frequently frightening stuff.

John Cusack is a writer, sceptical, very sceptical, who writes books about haunted locations, especially hotels which make claims for ghosts (and tourists). His signature comment to fans is, 'Stay scared'. That is the last thing he is expecting for himself. But, of course, we know that this is what is going to happen.

He responds to a challenge to stay in the haunted room, 1408, (56 deaths have taken place in it), at the Dolphin Hotel in New York. The Manager, Samuel L. Jackson, does his best to persuade him against it.

The film builds up the tension gradually so that we experience menace, anticipation and, then, the real thing with terrifyingly effective special effects. There is a moment when we reach a climax which momentarily seems like an anticlimax and we think, 'is that all there is...?'. And, the answer is 'definitely not'. Back to room 1408.

John Cusack is centre screen all the time, often by himself for a long time in room 1408. He is very persuasive. This film returns us to the heyday of Stephen King films of the 1980s like *Christine*, *Dead Zone*, *Firestarter*.

2 DAYS IN PARIS

(France, 2006, d. Julie Delpy)

This is a surprisingly entertaining film despite the fact that the two central characters can be extremely irritating, prone to selfish and stupid behaviour.

In 1995, Julie Delpy starred with Ethan Hawke in what many thought of as a talkfest film, some finding it arresting and insightful, others finding it tedious. It was Richard Linklater's *Before Sunrise*. Nine years later, the three teamed up again for the opportunity to explore what had happened to the couple in the meantime, *Before Sunset*.

In recent interviews, Julie Delpy has spoken of how she and Ethan Hawke contributed to much of the dialogue. If one was a little sceptical about this claim, *2 Days in Paris* proves how right – and how skilful – she was and is. Now she has written a similar kind of film, directed it, edited it, composed the music and some songs which she also sings. It is quite true when the credit comes up, a Julie Delpy Film.

This time the man is the bearded, prone to slob-look Jack, Adam Goldberg. Julie Delpy is his partner, Marion. And her actual parents play her mother and father in the film, ageing former hippies and artists.

The couple, who have lived together in New York for two years, arrive in Paris for a two day stopover to meet Marion's family. They talk and talk – in ways very reminiscent of the 'Before...' films. But, instead of being confined, they move around Paris, meet cab-drivers (who seem to be particularly targeted by Delpy as crass and bigoted), arty friends, past loves. They both create emotional scenes, some of which grate but, all in all, the talk is often very funny, quite insightful into the uncertainties of contemporary young adults (and their hypochondria).

Julie Delpy proves herself to be quite a talent.

3:10 TO YUMA

(US, 2007, d. James Mangold)

This is a very fine western, especially at a time when the studios do not make many westerns at all.

Many will have seen the original film, made fifty years earlier, with Glenn Ford and Van Heflin. It was based on a short story by crime writer, Elmore Leonard, and has elements of the crime thriller as well as the western. This version has amplified aspects of the plot and some of the characters.

The two stars, Christian Bale and Russell Crowe, are excellent. Russell Crowe, as the ruthless gunfighter, seems natural in his role. But Christian Bale, who has shown such versatility in recent films like *Batman Begins* and *Harsh Times*, stands out as the rancher who is coming to the end of his tether.

The crime background of the film is fairly straightforward. Ben Wade (Crowe) and his gang have robbed stagecoaches 21 times. Despite a Pinkerton agent and a gatling gun, Wade ambushes a 22nd. Dan Evans (Bale) and his two sons come upon the robbery and their horses are taken for an escape. Later, Evans is instrumental in the arrest of Wade. The challenge is to evade his gang and a rescue as they travel to the rail head through the desert and mountains so that Wade can be put on the 3:10 to Yuma train for prison.

Dan Evans is an upright man, a Massachusetts guard who lost his leg during the Civil War and the defence of Washington. He owes money and a greedy creditor who sees the coming railroad making land more valuable wants to get rid of Evans and his family. The film opens with the burning of their barn.

One of the amplifications from the original which makes this film very interesting is the character of the older son, William, a fourteen year old boy who despises his father as weak and submissive and who is attracted by the often suave manner of Ben Wade. The boy is instrumental in the journey to the rail head and has to re-evaluate his father.

Evans is a man of principle. Van Heflin stood out fifty years ago as the embodiment of a good man, a decent man. In fact, the word decent is often used in this version as well as conscience. Christian Bale brings a seriousness and commitment to this man of decency.

This means that the film, which does have action, quite violent, especially the desperate climactic shootout as Evans tries to get Wade from the hotel to the station, under fire from the gang and the townspeople, is more of a psychological western, a battle of conscience and wits between the two men. And the film does not opt for easy answers, leaving the audience pondering the moral dilemmas they have seen and their consequences.

The Arizona scenery is impressively photographed, especially during the trek. The fine supporting cast includes Peter Fonda as the Pinkerton agent and Ben Foster, really sinister, even creepy, as Wade's second in command.

3:10 to Yuma is a cinema parable about conscience and moral choices.

12.08, EAST OF BUCHAREST

(Romania, 2006, d. Corneliu Porumboiu)

An interesting film for those who want to know more about the downfall of Communism, especially in Romania. Its focus is quite local but, along with so many contemporary Romanian films, it is sombre, direct, although there is a satirical and critical undertone which may appeal beyond the local.

We are introduced to three different characters as they wake up one morning. One is an alcoholic teacher who has to get ready for school. Another is an industrialist who now owns a television channel and is preparing for his afternoon program. The third is an old man who used to be the Santa Claus in the town. They are all going to appear on a discussion and phone-in program asking the question whether there was a revolution in 1989, the day that Ceausescu fled Bucharest by helicopter at 12.08, with the population watching the events on television.

While the film is at pains to give detail of each of these characters, the main part of the film is the television program. Much of this is medium shots of the participants but the cameraman, despite criticism of the anchor, tries to do some shots to make it more stylish (but it doesn't).

Since the anchor owns the station, he can say what he likes. The alcoholic teacher is there because he says that he and his friends came out into the local square before 12.08 and, therefore, there was revolution in the town. The old man, who fiddles noisily during the interview, puts in his memories. Difficulties come when the phone calls start. Since there had been criticism of the Securitate personnel at the central offices, one rings up and denies the claims of the teachers. However, he had gone shopping at this time on that day. Other people ring in with their memories – which tend to militate against the teacher. The anchor tries to keep control but is not too good at it.

Which means that we are getting different memories and points of view, each remembering their own view of things and not remembering that this was limited. The audience is left with questions rather than answers. Romanians will try to remember what the Ceausescu period of dictatorship was like, what they were like and what prospects for prosperity were and assess what has happened since 1989, whether Romania is better off, a better society, or not.

THE BOURNE ULTIMATUM

(US, 2007, d. Paul Greengrass)

Whew! (or any other exclamation to sum up the feelings of exhilaration and exhaustion at the end of this film).

This is a holiday film for the adult audience who may want something more engrossing or demanding than the popular shows. It is the third in the Jason Bourne trilogy based on novels by Robert Ludlum. They are the best film versions of his novels so far.

Ludlum (who died in 2001 but whose stories are still being published under his name with co-writers) was a master of the espionage novel. They were large books but real page-turners. And for their plots: they seemed to be far-fetched with extraordinary global conspiracies. At least that is how it seemed in the 1970s and 1980s. Now, with the experience of terrorism worldwide, with the exposure of cold war espionage names and details, we might well wonder. Ludlum's novels drew on the technological weapons developed to that time (while the James Bond movies imagined weapons, some of which we might now take for

granted). The novels were intense. They were character studies, especially of their central heroes who were trained in the ways of expert spying.

This film is certainly a visual experience of the novels. In two hours we are rushed through the plot (presupposing the first two films in the series, *The Bourne Identity* (2002) and *The Bourne Supremacy* (2004)). Director Paul Greengrass and his editor, Christopher Rouse, have found the visual equivalent of page-turning. It is some of the quickest-paced editing you are likely to experience. The audience is almost breathless in the first five minutes. Shots are short. Camera work is handheld and immediate. We are edited into the action ourselves and, while there are some quiet moments, some pauses for thought, the hectic pace continues, especially with a number of very fast chases and crashes.

We still ask, as does the hero, who is Jason Bourne? We are aware from the first film that Bourne has been created as a killer by a department deep within the CIA. We know that he has lost his memory and is trying to recover it, sometimes shocked at what he discovers about himself. The second film showed Bourne getting closer to the CIA controllers, motivated by revenge. This time all questions are answered and, at the end, his memory recovered.

Actually, this time there is not a great deal of plot. It is simply Bourne tracking down contacts which lead him to the CIA training centre in New York. Bourne finds an article about him in the *UK Guardian* and contacts the journalist. This leads to a strongly suspenseful chase around Waterloo station. After London comes Madrid, then Tangier and, finally, New York.

Paul Greengrass (*Bloody Sunday*, *United 93*) was a reporter and documentary maker. His portraits of the cities and their detail will impress and please those who know the cities. Aerial shots giving the sweep of the cities, then realistic locations settings that make what is quite an incredible story credible enough.

Matt Damon is implacable as the put-upon Bourne. David Strathairn is excellent and icy and callous as the deputy head of the CIA. The surveillance equipment and access to cameras, phones and technology – even at Waterloo station – are beyond Orwellian chilling. Strong support comes from Joan Allen and Julia Styles who were in the other films and Paddy Considine as the journalist.

Jason Bourne is a hero, trained in survival techniques, who uses his wits rather than weapons. He is a representative of good, but a good that comes from evil and needs redemption.

BRATZ: THE MOVIE

(US, 2007, d. Sean McNamara)

Totally!

Or awesome, as these girls say – but really only awesome for the easily and quickly awed.

This is not a film for anyone over 15 to review, especially reviewers who have been reviewing for a long time, those in the old fogey category. In asking the opinion of some of these reviewers for whom they thought the film was made, they thought it was for 12 year old girls and under (though 12s might be becoming too demanding) – as it offered some role models and images of what they might be aspiring to in a cash and credit card handy consumer society.

More effective was Googling the Wikipedia entry on Bratz. The Bratz website was out of my reach since my Adobe Flash Player was out of date. If you go to Wikipedia, because you are not familiar with Bratz, you will find that the Bratz dolls were launched in 2001 with four characters who are at the centre of the film. Apparently, there have been lots of others but Yasmin, Jade, Cloe and Sasha are the original four. I didn't find Meredith who is the arch villain, a completely self-centred 16 year old who sees herself as the most glamorous teenager on earth and makes life hell for the others.

The Bratz are the most popular dolls in the UK, for instance.

The film, by way of comment rather than review, looks as if it has taken over a lot of the plot of Mean Girls: the cliques at school, the boys, the meanest of the girls, the put-on-a-show, the comeuppance... The star was Lindsay Lohan. But, with her misadventures, who wants to grow up to be Lindsay Lohan? Or Brittany Spears? It also looks as if it belongs to the same school of film-making as the Hilary Duff film about being rich, then pretending to be poor and becoming even richer, Material Girls. Perhaps that's Paris Hilton role modelling, but now she has been in prison.

Anyway, these films take us to the allegedly ordinary American High School which sometimes have classes but always have sports, shows, after-school parties and a, to say the least, flirtatious mind set. Money is for most no object. And as for wardrobes... Here the Bratz have walk in closets and a repertoire of clothing that could stock a boutique.

There is plenty of meanness. There is plenty of girliness (like listening in to a group of giggling teenagers gossiping in public transport or on their mobile phones). There is plenty of sentiment and some final moralising on friendship and doing the right thing.

For the reviewer one of the most shocking aspects is seeing Jon Voigt hamming it up as the school principal and Meredith's father.

These comments are only by way of comment. For a review, probably best to check with the intended audience. Whatever!

BUY IT NOW

(US, 2005, d. Antonio Campos)

Running for only just over an hour, this is a bizarre film or, rather, an intriguing film about a bizarre topic.

It consists of two parts. In the first part, filmed as a documentary, we see a 16 year old (Chelsea Logan) deciding with a girlfriend that she will put her virginity on Ebay and auction it. This is precisely what she does, interviews potential buyers and makes her choice and follows through. Her motivations are completely amoral, no understanding of deeper meanings of sexuality and wanting the money with her consumerist philosophy.

Here is another alert to the perverse ways the internet can be used.

However, the second half is a drama, the same story told, but told as story. This time there is more complexity to the young girl, especially in her relationship to her mother, a good but unaware woman. This time the client is presented as a lustful predator and the girl is left more in puzzle about what she has done and what it means.

It would be interesting to hear a discussion amongst sixteen year olds about the internet, this kind of use of it and the moral issues. Campos took up some of these themes in his first full-length feature, Afterschool.

COPYING BEETHOVEN

(US, 2006, D. Agnieszka Holland)

Copying Beethoven has not received good reviews and has found limited release. It probably works better for an undemanding audience rather than discriminating music aficionados. (A previous Beethoven film with Gary Oldman in the title role and focussing on his younger years was called Immortal Beloved.)

A word of praise should be given to the production, set and costume design. We are immersed in the early 19th century. Hungarian locations and theatres stand in for Vienna.

A word of praise also for the use of Beethoven's music, some of it in the background but attention given to the 9th Symphony with a quite long section of the film devoted to a recital. His Grosse Fugue is also featured – the composition that drove out the audience which had cheered the 9th.

Part of the difficulty is the screenplay which mixes an old style of language with more contemporary phrases. The inconsistency does not work well. Perhaps it tries to make Beethoven a contemporary type, but... On the other hand, there are a number of speeches put into Beethoven's mouth about his understanding and criticism of God but also about his sense of vocation, hearing the voice of God and his music being the expression of God.

Ed Harris, Beethoven wig and all, suffers also from the contemporary/historical inconsistency. At this stage of his life, in his 50s and three years before his death, he is an arrogantly irascible genius. He has come to terms with his deafness, can read lips and sense vibrations. But, in his head (and, as he insists, in his gut), there is a vitality of sound, of melody, rhythms and extraordinary orchestrations.

Diane Kruger is charmingly strong as Anna Holtz, a fictitious character based on actual people, who is his young copyist who breaks through some of Beethoven's chauvinist presuppositions. She copies, even corrects his manuscripts and, although he initially mocked her composition, she works on her own music with him. Her life is complicated by her love for a young engineer (Matthew Goode) whose model bridge Beethoven publicly smashes because it lacks imagination and inspiration.

The film gives the audience images of the period and of Beethoven's life – and also the context for his music and creativity.

DEATH SENTENCE

(US, 2007, James Wan)

In the 1970s Brian Garfield wrote the confronting novel, *Death Wish*. It was filmed in 1974 with Charles Bronson and raised controversies about vigilanteism, taking the law into one's own hands when justice seems to be inadequate or ineffectual. It raised questions about the effect of this kind of brutality by ordinary citizens on themselves and their families. There were three sequels.

Based on Garfield novels, *Death Sentence* is this theme revisited for the 21st century. Not that it has not been filmed often enough already. This time is made by James Wan from Australia who directed the box-office success, *Saw*. He also directed *Dead Silence*. He directs this film with flash and flair, especially raising tension and providing a breathless chase. He is served well by having Kevin Bacon as the central character whose life is changed by a ruthless and cold-blooded murder and decides to take action himself. He does not consider the repercussions as he initiates a gang war between some thugs and himself which has devastating results for himself and his family.

For about three quarters of the film, one can appreciate the emotional and conscience dilemmas for a businessman who is told that his son's murderer will get a deal which will have him back on the streets quite quickly. The aggressive emotion is well staged. The horror of his revenge sinks home. Then the violence consequences make the audience realise that it is not simply a matter of justice equations to make up for injustice. So far, so good but controversial and challenging.

And, then, of course, *Death Sentence* goes for vigilante broke and the makers go for exploitation treatment rather than the more serious approach they had begun with. Which means that we leave the cinema focussed on the final bloodbath rather than the issues initially raised.

DECEMBER BOYS

(Australia/UK, 2007, d. Rod Hardy)

This is a good, modest film. It has particular interest for Catholic audiences with its theme of orphans in an institution during the 1960s. However, it is positive in its outlook and in its presentation of nuns and clergy.

It is an Australian film, based on a novel by Michael Noonan, a memoir of growing up in a remote orphanage in the desert and a wonderful holiday at the sea for four of the boys. They are the December Boys, because they are the orphans who have a December birthday. And they are the lucky ones who benefit from a gift of a couple for some of the boys to go to their place for the summer holidays and celebrate Christmas.

The story is told in voiceover by the now old Misty, the central boy, who is about ten at the time of the holiday. The boy is played by Lee Cormie, completely convincing. Two of the other boys are eleven or twelve (nicknames Spit and Spark) and there is an older boy, about sixteen, Maps. Curious audiences may want to see the film because Maps is played by Daniel Radcliffe during the break between Harry Potter four and five. He acquits himself well, Australian accent and all. While there are, of course, some Harry Potter reminders, he makes this role his own.

Basically, the film is about friendship, about boys who play together, are mischievous together, but who long to be adopted and experience parental and family love. The opportunity rises during the holiday and the three youngest try their best to be good in order to be chosen. Maps does not want to be adopted. A young couple who worked in a carnival cannot have children and the boys bond with them.

Maps encounters a young girl who is visiting and has a secret hideaway cave in a cliff. So, this is also a rites of passage story for Maps and his discovery of sexuality and relationships. The meeting has a profound effect on him, bewildering him, especially as he realises the transient nature of so many relationships. However, he is still leader for the boys and has to risk his life in the water when Misty gets into difficulties.

This is even more interesting in view of the information given by the old friends meeting again at the cove decades later about what Maps did with his life.

The old couple (Jack Thompson and Kris McQuade) have a naval background and like things ship-shape. They are also devout. They offer a great Christmas surprise: Father will turn up for confessions! And there is a funny scene where Misty goes to Confession in a gradually hotter and hotter car. Father is a friendly and decent figure. The glimpses of the nuns indicate strictness but not harshness.

The other glimpse is of the Blessed Virgin. There are images of her and she appears in Misty's imagination. He is a pious boy. However, there is also an apparition, brief and understated, when the two boys are in difficulties in the sea.

This is a well-written script that most audiences would enjoy, a visit to the past which had its difficulties but was not traumatic. Rather, the holiday had a wonderful effect on the boys and bonded them even more closely.

ECOUTE LE TEMPS

(France, 2005, d. Alante Kavaite)

Before seeing this French drama, I thought the title meant being alert to the times. However, the title is dramatised literally. The central character actually listens in to particular times in the past.

Charlotte (Emilie Dequenne) has left home, clashing with her mother who has a psychic gift. She can see the future. On Charlotte's return, they almost crash the car when her mother hits an animal on the road, panics and flees. There is a reason for this which we gradually discover.

Charlotte goes back to her work which is recording exotic sounds in strange and distant locations. She is told that her mother has been murdered, so she returns home, is dissatisfied with the police investigation and tries to solve the mystery herself. She does – because she also has a psychic gift. With her equipment she can, in different parts of a room, hear the conversations from the past. She criss-crosses the room with strings and labels identifying particular days and times and so listens in, learns who the suspects could be, hears her mother's conversations with them and eventually identifies the killer who has been responsible for the hit-run killing of a child – which was the cause of the upset to the mother when she struck the animal on the road.

So, this is a drama of the paranormal, played quite realistically, a drama of relationships and of Charlotte coming to understand her mother and to understand herself. Lowkey but effective.

EAGLE VS SHARK

(New Zealand, 2006, d. Taika Waititi)

This is a deadpan comedy, a story of an awkward young woman who serves at a fast-food outlet, lives with her brother and has longing eyes on an awkward young man who works at an electronic games outlet in the mall. Not the most enticing couple to spend time with.

The trouble is that the writer-director has to make the two interesting. With their laconic, direct statements and answers to questions, with their ingenuous and literal attitude towards life, there is the danger that the audience will be almost forced to be patronising towards them and their often foolish behaviour.

As the film goes on and we get to know – and get used to – the two and their sometimes even dimmer relatives and friends, we can't help but warm to them, especially Lily (Loren Horsley who co-wrote the screenplay with director Taika Waititi) from whose point of view we see (and abstain from judging) everyone. Jarrod (Jemaine Clement), her idol, is eccentrically self-centred and dim-witted, despite his abilities. Lily almost defeats him (she lets him win) at a computer game competition at his Come-as-your-favourite-animal party which she was not invited to but gets her friend's invitation. She comes as a Shark. He is an Eagle. He warms to her (insofar as he can be warm), begins a relationship and persuades her brother to drive him to his home town where he wants to have it out with someone who bullied him at school. There is also tension at home because of the suicide of his sports talented older brother.

Lily and Jarrod are a couple whose yes is yes and no is no. They speak (laconically, even monosyllabically) but are always truthful and direct. Given the way most people hedge their remarks and try to save themselves by ambiguity, this is often quite startling as well as amusing.

Set on the east coast of the north island of New Zealand, this is a very local production (accents and all) that is anchored in ordinary life. There is an intriguing charm about it all.

EVENING

(US, 2007, d. Lajos Koltai)

We are familiar with the film which opens on a deathbed followed by a long flashback. While flashbacks occur in Evening, the film is really two stories in one: a story, in the present, of a death and the people who come to the dying woman's bedside and the story of the woman in the past, in the 1950s.

Evening belongs to a genre of popular film-making that might look something like elegant soap-opera at first, but one which avoids most of the melodrama and heightened emotional interactions that is characteristic of the soaps. Films like *The Notebook* or even *The Hours* move backwards and forwards in time but emphasise the humanity of the characters more than the soaps do.

The Notebook and *The Hours* also remind us of how a large cast of top actors can enhance what might seem an ordinary or familiar story.

Evening has been adapted for the screen by its author Susan Minton with the collaboration of Michael Cunningham (who wrote *The Hours*). It has been directed by Hungarian cinematographer, Lajos Koltai, who directed a powerful film about the Holocaust in 2005, his first directorial effort, *Fateless*. Koltai has a keen eye for visually impressive filming as well as an ability to communicate feelings.

Vanessa Redgrave is Ann Grant, who is bedridden and dying. Her two daughters, played by Toni Collette and Natasha Richardson (Vanessa Redgrave's own daughter) have come to be with her. One is a happy family woman, the other (Colette) is low on self-esteem, prickly, and uncertain about the direction of her life. Eileen Atkins plays the sympathetic night nurse. Vanessa Redgrave is confined to her room and, in fact, her bed except for one sequence but she is convincing as a dying woman.

Clare Danes portrays Ann Grant in the 1950s, an effective portrait of the younger woman, made all the more interesting as the film moves between the two actresses and we try to connect them and the development of Ann Grant's personality and character. The setting of the 1950s story is the wedding of her best friend from college, Lila, who belongs to a wealthy family whose mother (Glenn Close) has some pretensions to local grandeur. She has an alcoholic younger brother, Buddy (Hugh Dancy), and a childhood sweetheart Harris, (Patrick Wilson). Attention is given to the wedding preparations, to Buddy's infatuation with and dependence on Ann as well as to the charming Harris and the effect he has on his friends and on Ann. At the end of the day, there is some melodrama which affects Ann's life.

There is a moving scene at the end of the film when the older Lila comes to visit the dying Ann. Lila has been played by Mamie Gummer and the older Lila is played by her real mother, Meryl Streep. Mamie Gummer looks like her mother and exhibits some of her mother's expressions. This is one of the arresting 'extras' with *Evening*, to see Vanessa Redgrave and Meryl Streep and their daughters.

The film is pleasingly modulated in its pace, maybe too measured for some tastes, which means that it does not have the dynamic urgency of high drama. But, it gives an opportunity for audiences to appreciate a whole life, how a person changes, makes mistakes, has regrets, has great joys and comes to face death.

HALLAM FOE

(UK, 2007, d. David Mackenzie)

Perhaps there are people with names like Hallam Foe. However, it is one of those eerie names, especially the Foe, which characterises the non-hero of this Scottish drama.

Hallam Foe is 17 turning 18, a morose young man who likes to pry and spy on people. His mother has died and his father has remarried, with Hallam indulging in some paranoia, suspecting his stepmother. Hallam leaves home for Edinburgh, getting a job in a hotel where he is attracted to a young woman who resembles his mother. He also pries on her and the married boss who is having an affair with her. She then takes up with him. Where is Hallam Foe going with his life?

This film is something of a psychodrama, exploring the strangely aberrant mentality that compels him to intrusive, malicious and even violent behaviour.

Jamie Bell has come quite a way since *Billy Elliot*, but he brings something of that disturbed intensity to Hallam. Sophia Myles is the complicated girlfriend with Ciaran Hinds as his father and Clare Forlani as the sometimes sweet, sometimes sinister stepmother.

Directed by David Mackenzie (*Young Adam*, *Asylum*).

HAPPILY N'EVER AFTER

(Germany/US, 2007, d. Paul Bolger, Yvette Kaplan)

A good idea, an inventive idea – but the execution!

The straightforward animation makes for clear communication but the dialogue and the voices are truly offputting. The screenplay is of the slang American kind (the ‘you gotta act smart this time’, ‘I wanna do somethin’ variety – or lack thereof). Much of it would not get a pass in an English language course. It is a too contemporary, lazy screenplay. And the delivery matches it. While Andy Dick and Wallace Shawn voicing two assistants to the Wizard get the humour and delivery right, as does George Carlin as the Wizard and Patrick Warburton as the vainly preening Prince Charming, the others do not. Sarah Michelle Gellar and Freddie Prinz sound as if they have just come from their latest Scooby Doo film, conventional American goodies. The worst offender is Sigourney Weaver as the evil stepmother whose voice is strident and her delivery and maniacal laughter madly over-the-top screeching.

As was noted, the idea is not bad. What if the familiar stories had an unhappy ending? The evil stepmother does her best to achieve this, especially with the Cinderella story. But, she didn’t count on an extra character who is not in the books, the servant and laundry man, Rick, who works for the Prince but is in love with Ella and saves her as she is pursued by wolves, monsters, trolls and Sigourney Weaver.

The 2006 Hoodwink’d, an amusing variation on the Red Riding Hood tale, showed what can really be done if you are going to spoof happy endings.

KNOCKED UP

(US, 2007. d. Judd Apatow)

Writer-director, Judd Apatow, has the knack of offering provocative titles for his comedies – at least for those who are alert to sex comedies, either for or against. He also has the skills in creating some crass jokes and allowing his cast to improvise. But he also has the know-how to make his sex comedies moral fables for today’s generation which is less puritanical and/or inhibited than some past generations. The 40 Year Old Virgin was about love and respect as well as sex. Knocked Up’s paean to pregnancy, motherhood, fatherhood and responsibility and family love outweighs the casual sex angle which the title and the opening of the film highlight. Even the final credits show the cast and crew’s baby photo album.

So, casual sex and the consequences, decisions for life and the repercussions. This is really a very strong pro-life comedy.

However, the characters!

Seth Rogan is Ben, one of a group of slackers who like min-Jackass kinds of pranks and are preparing a website to offer information about nude scenes by famous stars and when they occur in the movie. We are introduced to a bunch of little boys in adult guise who experience no urgency in life at all. By chance Ben meets Alison who is celebrating her promotion to on camera interviewer on Channel E. They drink, they dance, they go home together and...

One of the interesting things about our response to the characters is how the progress of the film alters our perceptions of them and our attitudes towards them. There is practically nothing about Ben that commends him. His tasteless verbal gaffes, his getting high, his idiotic behaviour offer very little hope. And, yet, he does it. He changes gradually. He begins to grow up. And everyone hopes that he will be a great father.

Katherine Keigl is Alison who is shocked at the pregnancy, makes a decision, against her mother’s advice, to keep the baby. We share the pregnancy with her – and her mood swings.

Her controlling older sister (played incisively by the director’s wife, Leslie Mann – with their actual daughters as the children here) alienates her loving husband (Paul Rudd) and Alison feels they are terrible role models. Of course, Debbie needs a good talking to, at least, and does get some – so there is hope in that household as well.

Knocked Up is not quite so overtly funny as was The 40 Year Old Virgin. It is more of a smile comedy, but nonetheless is always amusing. The crass slackers and their interests are neatly and mockingly set up for parody.

The film has been a box-office bonanza in the US and with its touches of the raunchy (not too much given some of the youth oriented films these days) and with its obvious love for family and babies, it will appeal to a lot of audiences.

LADY CHATTERLEY

(France, 2006, d. Pascale Ferran)

There have been some expressions of surprise that a French company should film D.H. Lawrence's Lady Chatterley's Lover – but few English speakers have any qualms when Americans or the British film Madame Bovary, let alone Les Misérables. This French version is very well made, an intelligent interpretation of Lawrence and his world and world-view.

One of the difficulties is that naming the novel or even Lawrence brings up the obscenity trial in the 1960s – which in view of what has happened in terms of availability of novels and magazines let alone films and television, seems a bit quaint.

In fact, Lawrence wrote three complete versions of his story. The third was the centre of the trial. This film is based on the second version, a more straightforward telling of the story, called John Thomas and Lady Jane.

It is to the credit of the writer-director Pascale Ferran that she avoids any sensationalist or squalid presentation of the novel. It is frank and visually explicit (though not verbally) but appropriate to the context of the plot and characters.

This is the story of Constance Chatterley, married to Sir Clifford who has been injured in World War I – the film opens with a dinner party where the guests discuss the injuries and deaths in the war. Connie lives in the Chatterley mansion away from the town, isolated and lonely in the countryside. The film takes some time in helping the audience understand Connie, quiet episodes of her domestic life, moments by herself, quietly tense moments with Clifford.

It is then that she takes a message to Parkin the groundkeeper. He is a taciturn loner. However, as Connie continues to encounter him, she is sensually attracted to him and he responds to her. There are several scenes of sexual encounters where the emphasis is on the total response of each, not simple groping lust. The early encounters focus principally on Connie's face to appreciate what is happening to her. As the liaison continues, each of them becomes more loving, more committed and freer in the expression, less inhibited. Lawrence's moral framework is one of 'freedom' but he firmly believed in a total experience of sexuality: bodily, sensually, emotionally, even spiritually.

Marina Hinds, beautiful but not glamorous, is completely credible as the lonely woman whose marriage has eluded her and whose world is opened by the relationship with Parkin. Jean-Louis Couluc'h is a perfectly ordinary looking Parkin. Hippolyte Girardot effectively creates tension as Sir Clifford.

The film is beautiful to look at with a lot of Merchant Ivory detail in production design and décor. The subject is one that not everyone is comfortable with, but this is an illuminating treatment of Lawrence and his novel.

LICENSE TO WED

(US, 2007, d. Ken Kwapis)

The film-makers and the publicists have been at pains to explain how important marriage preparation is these days, that too many couples rush into marriage without knowing each other very well and with the presumption that divorce is an easy way out or even inevitable. One can't really disagree with that.

Which means that the premise of License to Wed is very important.

But...!

How they have treated it is often quite off-putting.. They have created the character, the Reverend Frank, who is the last word (or the last gasp) on marriage counselling. He has his own program that the couple has to pass. His method is part showbiz, part con tricks and part prurient curiosity – along with a smart mouth for sexual innuendo that shows a worldly wisdom but also a leering sense of humour. So far, so bad.

Reverend Frank is played by Robin Williams, not quite in his frequent manic style, but manic nonetheless. Most churches will be eager to check what denomination he belongs to. He has married, so despite his collar, he is not a Catholic. His church has a Pentecostal choir and a more Protestant looking altar – though he is vested. Episcopalian? One presumes that most Episcopalians would hope not, especially because of his sidekick, a largish boy, always there, who is in training for 'the priest of tomorrow' and seems to presume that the main quality of priesthood is fascist demanding of obedience. He is quite creepy.

Reverend Frank uses role-playing, gestalt therapy exercises which are played for disbelieving laughs rather than realism. Where most would be aghast (even though it is also meant to be funny) is the Reverend's bugging the couple's room in case they had premarital sex – enabling him to knock on the door as preventative tactics.

The rather controlling bride-to-be (toothy and smiling Mandy Moore for whom any word of Rev. Frank is taken as infallible) is all for the course, especially the writing of the vows. The husband to be (John Krasinski) finds it all exasperating and can't write vows – and we tend to be on his side. When he punches Frank out, one is tempted to cheer. But, of course, it all ends well because (happily) they do get to know each other, (unhappily) because Frank will be part of their lives from now on. Unless he is in gaol for stalking or some such crime.

MARIGOLD

(US/India, 2007, d. Willard Carroll)

While the British have embraced Bollywood and vice versa in recent years, the Americans have not been so responsive. Marigold is an attempt to introduce the US audience to the styles of popular Indian film-making. It has been written and directed by Willard Carroll (Playing by Heart) after a visit to India and his being fascinated by the country.

What if a Hollywood actress (whose CV consists mainly of films with numbers in them, like Basic Instinct 3) were to go to India to make a movie, get fired when the company collapses, and be stranded in Goa? Actually, she (Ali Larter) has been so obnoxious in getting on the plane, on the plane and on her mobile to agent and boyfriend, that we could not care less whether she ever made a film again. Probably better that she didn't.

However, a pleasant young woman takes pity on her and takes her to a film set. The director gets a brainwave for a plot development with an American girl. She can't dance or sing – which is quite a drawback in Bollywood! However, a young choreographer who has been disowned by his prince father because of his career choice, is attracted, teaches her, falls in love with her – and she is transformed.

Add in a vain star, a jealous co-star, a mysterious bodyguard and a wealthy family and you have Marigold.

There is a lot (lots!) of colour, clothes, make-up and adornments. There are plenty of songs and dances – paralleling the plot. There are melodramatic moments, tears and laughter, plenty of contrivance, the breaking of traditions and a happy ending all round. What else!

MEE-SHEE: THE WATER GIANT

(UK, 2005, d. John Henderson)

When you hear that there is a mysterious creature in a Canadian lake, you can't help thinking of the Loch Ness Monster. (And then we discover that director, John Henderson, directed Loch Ness.) Almost immediately, we learn that this creature, Mee-Shee is benevolent and saves a helicopter pilot and passenger from drowning.

When you discover that a young boy is disappointed that his father is breaking a promise to go with him on holiday because he has to go to the lake to recover an expensive oil drill, you can't help thinking that the boy is going to find Mee-Shee and they are going to become friends.

Of course, they do.

But, this is a genial story of a father (Bruce Greenwood) bonding with his son (Daniel Megdar) and the son bonding, with the help of a young Indian girl, with the creature. There are some genial folks at the lake: the local Indian, Custer, with a sardonic sense of humour, the owner of a dredge on the lake, an attractive female environmental inspector, and the largish, jovial assistant to the father. There is also Mrs Coogan (Phyllida Law) as the strict but genial housekeeper.

And there are two nasty villains who are after the drill.

Unfortunately, for the dramatic impact, Mee Shee and family look like animatronic sea creatures and rubbery rather than real – a bit like giant ETs.

However, leaving that aside if one can, the New Zealand scenery standing in for Canada is stark and attractive and the story very 'family-oriented'.

NO RESERVATIONS

(US, 2007, d. Scott Hicks)

If you would like a pleasing night out at the cinema, No Reservations would fit the bill for an undemanding romantic comedy with an attractive cast.

Catherine Zeta Jones has been a headliner for many years both for her marriage to Michael Douglas and for her performances in her Oscar-winning performance in Chicago. Her role in No Reservations should gain her some more fans. It is a much more ordinary role, less flashy than usual and she acquits herself very well.

Some may have seen the German film, Mostly Martha, about five years ago. It was a story of a highly qualified, perfectionist chef at a fashionable restaurant. When her sister is killed in a car accident, as nearest of kin, she is asked to take custody of her young niece. Meanwhile, back at the restaurant, the manager takes on an assistant chef whose kitchen style is exactly her opposite, cheerful, singing, laughing and irking his boss.

No Reservations is Mostly Martha transferred to lower Manhattan, keeping the central characters and the crises as well as the romance.

Not being a connoisseur of kitchens, food preparation and cooking, I forgot to say that for most audiences, one of the main attractions will be the food – and more food (often in close-up). The film opens with a voiceover recipe for quail and truffles.

The chef this time is called Kate. Kate rules the kitchen and its large staff with absolute precision. She commands loyalty but she allows no leeway for sentiment – nor for complaining customers who are on the receiving end of cool tantrums. It should be mentioned that her boss, alert to her obsessiveness, has asked Kate to go to therapy. She even brings food for the therapist to eat during the sessions.

Catherine Zeta Jones is able to portray convincingly the unbending regime in the kitchen, at the market and in her own life. This has not prepared her at all for looking after a nine year old little girl. Zoe, the bereaved niece, is played by Abigail Breslin who received an Oscar nomination for Little Miss Sunshine. She is a strong child actress and is also believable, relying on acting skills rather than simply being cute.

Aaron Eckhart portrays Nick, the alternative style chef. He sings opera, makes jokes and his good nature is infectious – except for Kate who is appalled at his behaviour. But, it is he who is able to make a breakthrough with Zoe – and, eventually, with Kate. And, a lot of this has to do with even more food and cooking.

The writers and director are obviously on the side of the humane, relaxed and happy way of life rather than the obsessive workaholic and uptight approach. Nick does not really have to change – except to be prepared to take on more responsibilities. It is Kate who has to mellow and realise that there is more to life than control and work achievement. And this, in a busy, busy world, is not a bad lesson, all served up, garnished with comedy and romance.

QUELQUES JOURS EN SEPTEMBRE

(France, 2006, d. Santiago Amigorena)

This is a film set in the days immediately before the events of September 11, 2001. The film has an atmosphere of espionage as well as conspiracy theories – and an interesting perspective on French espionage as well as American espionage, links to the Middle East, Arabic-speaking countries and the terrorist attacks of the time.

The film structure is taking six days day-by-day. The initial setting is Paris where a French spy contacts the daughter of a former colleague who had worked with her in Iraq before the first Gulf war. Complications arise when the stepson of the American spy also arrives – tailed by a mercenary killer. The film then shows the cat-and-mouse tactics of the spy as she evades her pursuer, all the time protecting the squabbling young people. The scene shifts to Venice where there is a beautiful location for a melodramatic confrontation.

The film is particularly interesting because of its casting. Juliet Binoche is not the first actress one would think of to portray a tough secret agent. She does well in the role. John Turturro is manic as the pursuing killer, quoting literature, confident in himself – but relentlessly cruel. Sarah Forestier is persuasive as the temperamental daughter and Tom Riley is the stepson. At the end, there is a guest appearance by Nick Nolte as the American spy.

The film was written and directed by Santiago Amigorena, Argentinian-born but who worked in France as a screenwriter, over thirty films for such prominent directors as Cedric Klabisch, Marion Vernoux and Stephane Clavier. This is his first film as writer-director.

The film is interesting as offering a different perspective on events in the Middle East, in Iraq, the Gulf war, espionage and motivations – and possible double-dealings by American spies, trying to make money out of the impending September 11 disaster.

RUSH HOUR 3

(US, 2007, d. Brett Ratner)

No surprises for fans of the previous Rush Hour films, only satisfaction.

It doesn't really matter that Jackie Chan is 53 and not quite as agile as before – not that you would immediately notice since he has plenty of stunts. And he has a sympathetic screen personality. If only one could only say that about his partner, Chris Tucker. Tucker's screen presence and sense of humour is an acquired taste – which the present reviewer has not been able to acquire since he found Tucker so abominably off-putting in *The Fifth Element* in 1997. The only thing here is to put up with it and hope for the best.

The previous Rush Hour films were set in Hong Kong and in the US. This time, the action goes to France with some fine photography of the city, some very funny satiric lines about Franco-American relationships and a spectacular and lengthy climax on the Eiffel Tower which is well worth seeing. Yvan Attal is very good as the sullen Paris cab driver who is not racially prejudiced but is just anti-American. When he warms to the partners, his wife won't let him go and help them out. He regrets, quite ruefully, 'Now I will never know what it is like to be an American: to kill for no reason'.

Max Von Sydow is, as so often, benign and sinister. And, uncredited, Roman Polanski turns up as the head of the French police.

It's all formula, but that is what makes it an entertaining action thriller with laughs (except for those of Chris Tucker!).

SERAPHIM FALLS

(US, 2006, d. David Van Ancken)

Seraphim Falls is a visually beautiful but thematically grim western. Its plot is very similar to the classic Clint Eastwood film of 1976, *The Outlaw Josey Wales*. While that film began with the post Civil War raiders burning the farmer's home and killing his wife and child and Josey Wales then going on a revenge pursuit, *Seraphim Falls* opens in mid-pursuit, the farmer chasing the Union commander who ordered the burning of his property which led to the deaths.

Pierce Brosnan is Gideon, the Union officer. Liam Neeson is the former Confederate officer who is bent on revenge.

The pursuit takes them through the snow and ice of the mountain forests of Nevada (with New Mexico standing in for these locations, the waterfall actually in Oregon), down river and the waterfall, to the isolated lowlands to a town, to the site of work on railroad tracks, past a group of religious settlers and into the desert for the showdown. One saying goes, 'Revenge is sweet'. That is definitely not the message of this film.

Apart from the two men, there is a posse, frightened children in a cabin, the railroad builders, a lying reverend, a mysterious Indian in a top hat whose name is Charon and a well-dressed travelling saleswoman, played by Anjelica Huston. By the time we meet Charon, we are wondering if the two men are, perhaps, already dead, playing out the final stages in a purgatorial confrontation. Certainly, Madame Louise appears in dry desert and seems to disappear, as do the images of the two men at the end.

The director has spoken of mythic westerns and that is the thought that occurs a number of times while watching the film. So, how much is real and how much is surreal and symbolic? During the final confrontation there is a vivid flashback to show the horror of what happened at the fateful burning of the house.

The physical endurance of Gideon, especially in the frozen mountains as well as his skills in survival make this a very tough film. The long pursuit, the deaths and the revenge motivation mean that it is also harsh and relentless.

SPARKLE

(UK, 2007, d. Neil Hunter and Thomas Hunsinger)

For the first half of Sparkle, it is a very slow burn. The characters are not particularly engaging and the situations familiar making one wonder whether the film is just a light slice of life or whether something more substantial was intended.

Two thirds of the way through, a new piece of information slips in which makes a difference to the plot and raises some curiosity as to how it will all be played out. The answer is what you might expect, but there are some moments of insight and resolution along the way.

The writer-directors made The Lawless Heart in 2001, which was quite a moving drama centred on a funeral and the rediscovery of relationships. Sparkle is also about relationships with some artificial coincidences in plot that are a bit far-fetched but get the emotions going.

The strength of this London-set film is in the performances. In support is Bob Hoskins quite impressive and credible as a very shy ageing man. Lesley Manville dominates her scenes as the hero's doting mother, a would-be singer. Shaun Evans plays a self-centred young man who, through ambition and callowness in relationships, gets into quite a messy situation. Stockard Channing is the boss of a PR firm who takes on the young man. Amanda Ryan improves on acquaintance as the girl he falls in love with.

The young man and his mother's name is Sparks. The night at a restaurant where she will sing is called Sparkle. Her night, in fact, does not sparkle, which makes the title a risky one and the film might have been better served by a lower key name.

SUGARHOUSE

(UK, 2007, d. Gary Love)

In the last ten years there has been an abundance (over-abundance?) of British gangster film. It's a fairly limited scope compared with the US gangster world. Here is another.

The action takes place over a few hours one afternoon in East London. Wealthy businessman, Tom (Steven Mackintosh) links up with a black addict, D (Ashley Walters), to buy a gun. He doesn't know that D has stolen the gun from the local kingpin, Hoodwink (Andy Serkis). Hoodwink wants his gun back as it is a weapon in a murder crime. He confronts D and Tom and then the tables are turned. The other characters are Hoodwink's pregnant wife who calls him Michael and has a technique for him to calm his habitual rage. There are also three young thugs from the area who also experience Hoodwink's anger.

There are lots of conversations, a certain rhetoric in the screenplay with D speaking in a more literate way than we might expect. It sounds as if it were adapted from a play – and we discover it is. It is based on a 2001 play by Dominic Leyton who has adapted it for the screen but, while opening out different locations has kept too many speeches. And the performances seem like overacting with Serkis showing hyperkinetic energy. The settings are striking but the film is rather alienating.

SURF'S UP

(US, 2007, d. Ash Brannon, Chris Buck)

What an enjoyable film. One can't guarantee what age group of children will enjoy it best, but it has a great appeal for adults – and not just the surfing community, though they will find it a treat.

Two years ago, the penguins marched. Last year they danced with happy feet. This year they are surfing. Is this the era of the penguins? Despite coming in third, *Surf's Up* is a most welcome addition to the study of the Antarctic and what penguins do when we are not looking!

The very smart thing about *Surf's Up* is presenting it like a documentary (and at times a 'mockumentary'). There are interviews, talking heads (with the voices of some actual surf champions doing the commentary voiceover), station logos, microphones getting into the frame. There are also plenty of penguins wanting to be on TV – and a few other fauna as well.

The animation is clear and bright, especially the icescapes of Antarctica and the huge waves building up and breaking.

The focus of the documentary is Cody Maverick, a young penguin, considered a bit of a loser who has lost his father but had an epiphany when former surf champion Big Z gave him a medal personally when Z visited Antarctica. Cody's vocation was settled – except that he has to work in the fish sorting pile, has a large unsympathetic brother who puts him down during interviews and a very busy mother, chopping fish.

When he gets the opportunity to go to a tropical island for the championships (by chasing a bird scout who travels by whale and being pulled aboard by Chicken Joe, a surfer from the American Midwest), it is the dream of a lifetime. But, he also gets the opportunity to meet a lifeguard penguin, Lani, and fall in love with her, to meet Big Z again as well as his rival, Tank. And the biggest con-animal agent you could find, Reggie Belafonte.

So, plenty of action in the waves, some soul-searching and the moral that winning isn't everything.

The voices are a delight. Shia La Beouf is just right as Cody. Jeff Bridges reminds us of the Dude in *The Big Lebowski* as Big Z. The unmistakeable voice of James Woods brings Reggie Belafonte to perky life. Zooey Deschanel is Lani and Jon Heder is the scatty Chicken Joe.

For what it set out to do and for entertainment, just right.

WAITRESS

(US, 2007, d. Adrienne Shelley)

This is a pleasant surprise. Yes, it is about a young woman who works at a diner and, yes, there are a lot of familiar characters and situations. However, there is a warm-heartedness, even a sweet-naturedness about it that appeals – even though it does not shirk some of the harsher aspects of life. And this is in no small measure to the winning performance of Keri Russell as the young waitress, Jenna.

Waitress was written and directed by actress Adrienne Shelley while she was pregnant. It explores the wonder of pregnancy, but with some edge. The waitress doesn't really want to be pregnant. She is married to a husband who hasn't grown up, who is completely self-centred, demanding and dominating. Jeremy Sisto portrays him as fascinatingly malevolent. Her gift in life is to create and bake pies – and to give them names which correspond to the situation for which she makes them.

For those who enjoy food films, there are many sequences of pie-making as well as visual displays of colourful and tempting pies.

Much of the action takes place in the diner where the waitress works – and a lot of humour in the characters of her two waitress friends, one of whom, Dawn (Adrienne Shelley herself), lacks self-confidence, relies on help from her friends to make her look attractive, and then falls in love with the eccentric man she met on a 'Personals' date. The other, Becky, is played for good laughs by Cheryl Hines, wisecracking with a heart of gold.

An added bonus is Andy Griffiths as Old Joe, the curmudgeonly owner of the diner, demanding with the waitresses and their work but who befriends the put-upon Jenna and serves as both friend and conscience.

This is needed as Jenna falls in love with her married obstetrician and has to face reality about her baby and about her husband. As with so many Hollywood films recently (Evening, Knocked Up), there is a delight in motherhood and babies.

The sad note about the film is that Adrienne Shelley was needlessly murdered by a worker in her house. Her own little daughter appears in the emotional final scene of Waitress.

WE ARE ALL CHRISTS (WSZYSCY JESTESMY CHRYSTUSAMI)

(Poland, 2006, d. Marek Kotorski)

Polish sensibility has deep Catholic roots. This is evident in a grim and graphic film about alcoholism, We are All Christs (2006) directed by Marek Kotorski. The central character is a professor of art who takes students on guided tours of churches. We see him standing against the station of the cross where Jesus falls the first time. He explains the sufferings of Jesus with some forcefulness. Interspersed amongst the scenes of family conflict because of alcohol, are brief sequences of Jesus carrying his cross, but against the background of a modern high-rise apartment building.

Not only that, various characters are depicted as being on the cross and their sides pierced, like that of Jesus, by a spear wielded by another member of the family who is being cruel. So, we are all Christs. Towards the end, when father and son attempt reconciliation, we see the two of them, dressed in white robes, carrying a heavy cross like that of Jesus, each helping to bear the other's burdens. The Jesus-figure and the Christ-figures bring Jesus into the harsh contemporary world of addictions where people suffer like Jesus. They fall. But Jesus has been there before them.

This is quite a harrowing film. At times the desperate behaviour seems too much, but it is clearly the self-destructive behaviour of longtime addicts – and the destructive effects on succeeding generations.

WIND CHILL

(US, 2007, d. Gregory Jacobs)

What looks like yet another conventional horror movie, with young people out on the highways and lost in remote places, set upon by savage attackers, is definitely not just another horror movie. This is an intelligent variation on a theme with strong characters and performances, reticence in visuals and language and a thriller in which suspense and atmosphere are more important than shocks.

The first part of the film sets up the characters and situations and may irritate audiences too anxious to see what happens. However, this is a strength of the film, enabling Emily Blunt (My Summer of Happiness, Irresistible, Devil Wears Prada) and Ashton Holmes (History of Violence) to establish their characters. They are never named. The girl is finishing a pre-Christmas exam and gets a lift from an unknown student. He, in fact, has been attracted to her and virtually stalking her and has set up the situation. Their journey takes them through the Pennsylvania mountains (with the Rockies standing in and photographed often quite breathtakingly, even at night when most of the action occurs).

Taking a short cut (what else!), they collide with a mysterious car and are stranded all night. They have to deal with each other and suspicions, with the cold and having nothing to eat. Soon there are mysterious presences on the road, people who don't stop to help. Whether in reality or in dreams, a violent policeman keeps appearing making them even more terrified. The ordeal has dire effects on each, the girl finally admitting how difficult she is and trying to mellow in her concern for the injured young man.

There are some flashbacks, some explanations of what had happened on this road in the 1950s, some mysterious retired priests of the time – and the evil policeman. Early in the film, there had been some philosophical discussion about reincarnation and cyclic recurrence of events. Is that what this is? The film presents the story, the characters, the eeriness and leaves the conclusions to us.

YEAR OF THE DOG

(US, 2007, d. Mike White)

Here is a quite unpredictable film which certainly merits the description, 'quirky'.

And it really is about dogs. The focus is on the 40ish unmarried, rather awkward and reserved, Peggy. She is devoted to her work and her boss, from the vantage point (and restricted area) of her cubicle workplace. At home, she communes with her pet dog, Pencil. She is a loving aunty, especially for her niece Lissie, a kind of agony aunt for Layla at the office and provides donuts for her fellow-workers' morning tea.

Pencil dies.

It is almost the end of the world for Peggy but she meets Newt from the vets who persuades her to adopt another dog. She also takes a fancy to Newt but to no avail. She is so persuaded, however, by his vegan beliefs that she gets caught up with all kinds of protecting animals associations. This is disastrous to her life, to her relationships with her family – and to her dogs.

Where on earth can the plot go? To find out, you will need to see this sometimes puzzling light comedy. Molly Shannon is on screen all the time and makes Peggy a really distinctive character. The supporting cast includes Peter Saarsgaard as Newt, Laura Dern as Peggy's sister-in-law, John C. Reilly as her neighbour and Regina King as Layla.

It is written by Mike White who is definitely quirky with his Chuck and Buck and The Good Girl and his writing of and performing in School of Rock.

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ACROSS THE UNIVERSE
AND WHEN DID YOU LAST SEE YOUR FATHER
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CONTROL
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FEAST OF LOVE
GEORGIA RULE
HALLOWEEN
HOT ROD
IN MEMORIA DI ME
IRINA PALM
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LUST, CAUTION
MICHAEL CLAYTON

MR WOODCOCK
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ROCKET SCIENCE
SERPENT, The
SHOOT 'EM UP
SLEUTH
SUPERBAD
SYNDROMES AND A CENTURY
TAKVA
WAR

ACROSS THE UNIVERSE

(US, 2007, d. Julie Taymor)

An intriguing question is to ask who is the target audience for this film. The poster is rather psychedelic, taking us back forty years. But, who under 30 to 40 is automatically going to want to go back to those times of forty years ago? Clearly, those who have a hankering after the 1960s will be keen to see the film – and perhaps those for whom the 60s were a mystery or a time of change, war and protest that has had a traumatic effect.

Whatever the case, this is all highlighted and underlined in *Across the Universe*. The title is from a Beatles' song which features towards the end but, surrounding it, are more than 30 other Beatles songs, some very well known, others much less well known, but all picked to offer lyrics which explain the characters and the plot.

The screenplay was written by the long-standing British team of Dick Clement and Ian Le Frenais who were writing for film and television in those times. Their angle is quite nostalgic. The director is the American, Julie Taymor, who made *Titus* and *Frida* and is famous for directing the stage version of *The Lion King*. She has a musical and lavish theatrical background which is strongly to the fore here. One can easily imagine a stage version of *Across the Universe*. The costume design is already done (a creative use of masks and other devices used on stage in *The Lion King*). Some very stylised sets and action pieces are ready and are inserted here into the realism of the rather straightforward plot: Liverpool lad (whose name is, hey, Jude) goes to America meets a young girl, Lucy (and, yes, it sung during the cosmic final credits) with a brother, Max, who is drafted (in what looks like a good parody of *Hair*) and serves in Vietnam. They all live in New York with a singer and her guitar-playing boyfriend. Lucy gets involved with the peace movement. Jude is deported, but... 'All you need is love'.

Beatles' fans may relish the opportunity to find the characters frequently bursting into song – though the principals sing well, there are some interpretations which may raise eyebrows from Joe Cocker and Bono (especially eccentric and aping the Beatles Magical Mystery Tour, Transcendental Meditation phase).

But, what the film does do is take us back to an overview of the 1960s in the US, Vietnam, protest, drugs, the hippy experience, the beginnings of New Age, perhaps a more vigorously radical period than our own (though the references to Iraq are unavoidable).

AND WHEN DID YOU LAST SEE YOUR FATHER

(UK, 2007, d. Anand Tucker)

Book-loving readers of *The Universe* may remember this memoir of poet, novelist, literary editor, Blake Morrison when it was first published in 1993. It has taken a long time to reach the screen, not an easy task to adapt a family memoir, but it has been worth the wait.

If audience experience is anything like this reviewer's, then they will be identifying with characters very strongly, identifying with the situations and making comparisons if they have been through similar experiences, especially of terminal illness and death.

The quotation of the title comes late in the film. It is a reference to Blake Morrison's grandfather who was asked at the time of his father's death, 'And when did you last see your father?'. The question has many meanings, not just seeing one's father at the time of death or in final illness. Rather, it asks the question, when did you last see your father as he really was, fully alive as himself.

Morrison asks the question because he had many difficulties with his father. Arthur Morrison was an extroverted, jocular, even rambunctious man, a doctor, married to a doctor, who hoped that his son would follow in his footsteps. In many ways, his son was a disappointment, a quiet and introverted boy who grew up to be a writer, even a prizewinning writer who was never praised verbally by his father.

Not that Arthur Morrison was not proud of his son and loved him. He didn't say it and Blake needed the words. As he recollects his father in this memoir, he begins to realise all that his father did for him and to let go of the anger, even fury, that he felt for his father.

The film is a memoir composed of jigsaw pieces of life. As they intersect on screen, we see the little boy realising his father's infidelity. We see the quiet teenager who becomes the butt of his father's stories and jokes. We see the adult Blake who has come to be with his father and mother in his father's final illness, hoping for some talk, some reconciliation, a man who needs to put the pieces together and appreciate his father, faults and failings as well as generosity and love.

The film is beautifully presented, home and travels in traditional English countryside and a musical score that starts light but becomes more sombre as the narrative progresses. Many audiences will feel at home in the film.

But, it is the acting which is the film's great achievement in communicating the characters, the story, the crises and the emotion.

Jim Broadbent is one of Britain's great character actors. He won an Oscar for caring for his wife in *Iris*. Here, he is the dying father – most convincing and moving in this part of the film. But, in the flashbacks, he comes fully alive and creates a vivid Arthur Morrison.

Colin Firth can often be silent and withdrawn in his films. This suits perfectly as the adult Blake, remembering, tending his father, supporting his mother and trying to deal with his emotional needs and his relationship with his father. Matthew Beard is also strong as the adolescent Blake. Juliet Stevenson is unobtrusively moving as the long suffering but devoted wife and mother.

This is life, acknowledging the hurts and the sins, but seeing the hope in a redemptive love.

ATONEMENT

(UK, 2007, d. Joe Wright)

Atonement is a particularly religious term. While it is not referred to as explicitly religious in this film, this is its implicit meaning. In fact, the screenplay also uses the term, penance.

Atonement is based on the novel by Booker Prize winner, Ian McEwan. The screenplay has been written by playwright, Christopher Hampton, and retains the literary quality of the novel. It is worth seeing.

The film has three parts and builds up very well to a surprising ending. The first part is set in the English countryside in 1935. Echoes of the Merchant Ivory period films. Atonement also gives great attention to detail. We are in a narrow world of wealth on a country estate. But the focus is on 13 year old Briony who is seen finishing a play. She is a young girl of imagination, romantic imagination, excellently played by

Saoirse Ronan. She watches her older sister Cecilia (Keira Knightly) and her interactions with the son of the housekeeper, Robbie (James McEvoy). The audience watches the same scene from Cecilia's and Robbie's point of view and soon finds that Briony has misinterpreted what has happened. She does the same the same evening with disastrous consequences for Robbie and for Cecilia. It is her sin which needs confession and atonement.

The second part of the film is World War II action in 1940. This section is broad in scope, taking audiences well beyond the country estate. Robbie is a soldier lost in Northern France. Cecilia is a nurse. So also is Briony. The war setting gives occasion for a quite lavish and extraordinary recreation of the stranding of the soldiers at Dunkirk. It is a far more realistic picture than we have previously seen in war films. The scenes in London at the hospitals are also vividly portrayed.

Briony has the opportunity to acknowledge the hurt that she has done and takes the chance of visiting Cecilia and confessing. This is a powerful sequence as she accepts the responsibility while knowing that she might never be forgiven.

The final section is brief. Briony is being interviewed in the present on the publication of her novel, *Atonement*, which she says is an honest telling of what happened in her childhood and in her attempts to make atonement. She is played movingly by Vanessa Redgrave whose performance is principally in direct to screen close up.

This is a satisfying drama, especially for those who appreciate literary translations to screen. And it has some depth to the characters, the terrible realities of 'sin' and its consequences as well as the hopes for redemption.

THE BRAVE ONE

(US, 2007, d. Neil Jordan)

With autumn political conferences, issues of crime, gun possession, the carrying of knives, stop and search, gang murders receive a great deal of headline attention as well as comment. Promises about policing are made. Fear amongst the public makes for alarming reading. Crowded goals and judges' decisions become problems.

This is the material of comment columns in a Catholic paper like *The Universe*. However, sometimes a film comes along that raises the issues in a story form, dramatically, that heightens our emotional response to crime and the inadequacies of the law and makes us think. The social comment becomes part of the film review.

There have always been films about angry vigilante activity, about people taking the law into their own hands, films like *Death Wish*. They make emotional sense for bereaved and angry victims and their families, but what is the morality of such vigilante action?

Now comes a film about crime, brutality, the law and vigilante action. But, it is a film which acknowledges such action without condoning it, which acknowledges the anger that eats at victims. But, it is also a film which goes inside the mind and heart of a victim whose partner is viciously killed while she is bashed. Does she really survive? Is she the same person? How can a person who calmly observed society before now become a different person, a stranger to herself, consumed by anger and acting in vengeance?

These are some of the questions raised in Neil Jordan's excellent film, *The Brave One*.

Dublin-born director and novelist, Neil Jordan, has been making films for a quarter of a century, making a variety of impressive but very different films. Amongst his films *The Company of Wolves*, *Mona Lisa*, *The Crying Game*, *Interview with a Vampire* and *Michael Collins* stand out. He brings these skills to *The Brave One*, making one wonder what such a serious-minded director is doing with a vigilante theme.

The answer is that he wants to raise the issues through a dramatic story. He wants to present the various sides to vigilante arguments but, more than any other such film, he wants to go into the mind of the vigilante to see what the violence is doing to the psyche, the conscience and the soul. No matter how seemingly just the cause, taking the law into one's own hands to become judge, jury and executioner takes its moral toll.

This is a Jodie Foster film. She is also a very serious actress who won Oscars for portraying a rape victim in *The Accused* and Clarice Starling who confronts Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs*. Here she plays a radio personality who tapes the sounds of New York City as background to her broadcast musings on life in the city. By using her voiceover commentary, we hear what the experience of the bashing and death mean to her and how they change her.

The New York detective, played by Terrence Howard, who is committed to the law and his own personal integrity meets and is interviewed by the radio personality without knowing who she is let alone what she is doing in vengeance. He too is frustrated in criminals escaping justice and is close to moving to his own independent action from a different perspective.

Strong production values, New York city itself as a vivid character, fine acting and a thoughtful script means that this is a parable about vengeance, not solving the issues neatly and clearly, but providing a range of questions. It is a question parable.

It is a very relevant and demanding parable for today.

CONTROL

(UK, 2007, d. Anton Corbijn)

A portrait of the lead singer of the group Joy Division, Ian Curtis.

Much of the interest in this film will be determined whether one has heard of the 1970s UK band Joy Division or knows their records. If the answer is yes, then it fills in the background as well as focussing on Ian Curtis (rather than his music, which is featured but not put at the centre of the film). If the answer is no, then it depends on how interesting the characters are found to be.

The director is celebrity photographer Anton Corbijn who says that one of the reasons for his coming to live in England from his native Holland in 1979 was Curtis and Joy Division. He also photographed the group not long before Curtis' untimely death in May 1980 at the age of 23.

The biographies of rock stars are usually full of colour, glamour, loud music and those traditional accompaniments of rock'n roll, sex and drugs. Compared with these, *Control* is definitely austere.

Corbijn has opted for black and white photography. This is an aesthetic choice which drains the story of any glamour whatsoever and immerses it in a real, sometimes gritty world. Curtis came from Macclesfield, near Manchester, and lived there until he died. This is a very, very ordinary world of Lancashire streets, local shops, small clubs in Manchester and Liverpool. This was the life Curtis was used to – he died before the planned trip to the US.

Curtis comes across as something of a daydreamer with a love for poetry and music – and some questions about existence (with which the film opens). We see him at school, at home with his parents, taking out Deborah whom he married at age nineteen, at the birth of his child, singing with the group, dealing with entrepreneur Tony Wilson (the subject of Michael Winterbottom's *24 Hour Party People* which used the exact opposite aesthetic of this film). But, Curtis is quite morose, becomes absorbed in his singing (and the awkward characteristic arm gestures of marching when he sang), is afraid of his child, distant from his wife – and then falling in love with a Belgian magazine writer, Annik.

His principles of fidelity torment him. He has epileptic seizures and moves step by step to ultimate depression and suicide.

The film is well-made and well acted, especially by Sam Riley as Curtis. There is also a characteristically strong performance from Samantha Morton as Deborah. The film is based on her biography of her husband with her consent and that of her daughter and Annik has allowed her real name to be used in telling this part of the story.

Control is very local in setting, particularly lower middle class British in its characters, and effective in its rather sad portrait.

DIE FALSCHER (THE COUNTERFEITER)

(Austria, 2007, d. Stefan Ruzowitzky)

World War II films offer an opportunity to examine the conscience of the past as well as offering lessons for younger generations, especially as it is over 60 years since the end of the war. The Austrian film, *The Counterfeiter*, is a well-told story of a Jewish conman and forger who was arrested before the outbreak of war by the Berlin chief of the forgery squad. It is based rather closely on a true story. The forger is a survivor, first of all pandering to the guards and officials by flattering them with sketches and then called up, along with other printing experts, to work on a project to produce sterling and then American dollars to flood the markets and, later, to buy munitions.

The film boasts a strong performance by television actor, Karl Markowics, and highlights the major themes with which we are familiar, the suffering and humiliation (and the horror by the time of the liberation of the camps), but shows this group getting special treatment and incentives to keep them on target with the counterfeit notes. August Diehl plays the unscrupulous controller of the plan. The film moves quite briskly and keeps the interest.

DEATH AT A FUNERAL

(UK, 2007, d. Frank Oz)

A tongue-in-cheek title which sounds something like an Agatha Christie title. And, it all takes place in a village which, in its more sedate past, might have been a setting for Miss Marple to do her investigations.

This comedy and farce is much less sedate – and is directed by Frank Oz who knows how to be irreverent since he began voicing Miss Piggy and other Muppet characters more than thirty years ago. He has also directed some funny comedies including *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* and *In and Out*. This comic flair serves him well here as his flamboyance is tempered by a very British setting with some stiff upper lips having to become quite, quite loose.

The amusing credit sequence traces a hearse travelling along the country roads on a map – and getting lost. An obvious joke follows but it is handled with aplomb and gets the audience laughing. The atmosphere gradually builds up as we are introduced to all those going to the funeral. Some of the stories are serious, others farcical. And, gradually, things get right out of hand what with some hallucinogenic tablets mistaken for vallium (which propels the plot right until the end), a mysterious dwarf with some incriminating photos, an extra death which one knows will lead to the corpse being hidden in the coffin, and hilariously being discovered... and more.

It goes for only 90 minutes but, apart from the swearing and some innuendo, most audiences will have smiles or get some good (and some surprise) laughs.

Matthew McFadyen has to hold the film together in the serious role as the son of the deceased and he achieves this very well. Rupert Graves is his self-centred novelist brother. Jane Asher is their proper mother. Keeley Hawes as McFadyen's wife provides the pleasantly normal anchor to the proceedings. In

the meantime there are some funny turns by Andy Nyman as a hypochondriac, Peter Vaughan as the irascible old uncle, Kris Marshall as the student who has put the hallucinogenics in a vallium bottle and American Alan Tudyk who has the most difficult role of all, the ordinary young man who has been given the wrong vallium and who hallucinates accordingly. Peter Dinklage (The Station Agent) is the mysterious dwarf.

Old style British comedy with a 21st century tone.

DNEVNOY DOZOR (DAY WATCH)

(Russia, 2006, d. Timur Bekmambetov)

In 2004 Night Watch broke box office records in Russia and did quite well in other parts of the world. In 2006, the sequel, Day Watch, did even better. However, it is very Russian in tone and atmosphere, which makes it rather difficult for non-Russians to appreciate.

And, then, it is edited in a way that goes against the more solemn, slowly-paced Russian cinema tradition. Its director comes from commercials and music videos and is a master at the swift cut editing style, so that the film races ahead – and one needs to concentrate on who is who, who is good and who is bad and what is happening. This is a film of visual, effects and technological flair.

Based on a series of novels by S who has adapted them for the screen, the basic plot is the confrontation between good and evil. A parallel from the English-language cinema is the Underworld series.

The film opens with some spectacular scenes of the Mongol chief Tamerlane, his invasions and sieges but, more particularly, his gaining of a piece of chalk (why chalk?), the Chalk of Destiny which one can use to change history and destiny. The vampire powers of darkness are after the Chalk but their leader wants blood spilt by the Night Watch so that apocalyptic destruction can be achieved (quite spectacular when it does).

What follows is a battle between good and evil in the forms of those who are good with special powers (the Night Watch) and the descendants of vampires (the Day Watch). All the activity goes on against a background of seedy Moscow locations as well as a grand hotel with characters moving in and out of zones as they try to outwit each other. It is set in the Communist era since the sunshine ending is in 1992.

If you do not become involved (a risk because of the film's being difficult to follow at times), then it will be a long two hours. For those on this fantasy wavelength and interested to see how the Russians do it, no worries.

THE EX (FAST TRACK)

(US, 2007,

A brief, sometimes breezy, sometimes blustery, romantic comedy – about marrieds. Zach Braff (Garden State, Scrubs, The Last Kiss) is a restaurant chef who stands up to his puffed up boss (Paul Rudd) and finds himself sacked just as he expected to be promoted. His wife (Amanda Peet) goes into labour and they have a beautiful son.

What is to be done? Go back to Ohio and work for his father-in-law in a sales company that has overdosed on New Age camaraderie and creativity. Dad is played by Charles Grodin and mum by Mia Farrow.

However, there is a demonic Iago at work who used to date 's wife, now finds all kinds of insidious, sneering but surface respectable ways of putting down, undermining him, while he plans to go to a top firm in Barcelona. All of which comes to a comeuppance head but not until after some hard slapstick as tries to defend himself (and gets himself further in a mess) because is a wheelchair bound paraplegic. Is played by Jason Bateman with quite some relish.

The film is in favour of marriage and love, shows the difficulties (and some amateur counsellor's attempts to resolve conflicts), the hardships in trying to work while continually under pressure.

In many ways, it's a throwaway film but one that is entertaining enough while on screen.

FEAST OF LOVE

(US, 2007, d. Robert Benton)

Feast of Love could pass for a very old-fashioned kind of serious romantic comedy were it not for the frequent sex scenes which might surprise an older audience attracted by the plot and by Morgan Freeman.

This is a small town story with Morgan Freeman as Harry, a retired University professor still grieving at the unanticipated death of his doctor son from a drug overdose. Jane Alexander is his strong and supportive wife. The screenplay provides for a voiceover narrator and Freeman's resonant voice and delivery are a pleasure to listen to (whether it be for *The Shawshank Redemption* or *The March of the Penguins*).

Harry spends a great deal of his spare time at a coffee shop owned by Greg Kinnear as Bradley, an amiable man who does not recognise the deeper feelings of people, and suffers the loss of his wife (Selma Blair) to a lesbian athlete, who marries an attractive estate agent (Radha Mitchell) who admires him but does not love him. Harry is a good supportive friend though he does not make decisions for people. Rather, he tries to enable them to make decisions themselves. This is especially true of the young man who works at the coffee shop and the young woman (Alexa Davalos is particularly glowing) who applies for a job – the two falling in love.

There is plenty of talk about love – and we see much of the sexual side of it. We also see sex without love, so that we are continually wondering what love is and making comparisons between the various couples: the elderly devoted couple, the youngsters who are in love and committed, the middle aged adults who are confused and move in and out of relationships.

The title rather inflates the plot and the relationships. Not a feast, not a famine, but somewhere rather ordinary in between.

GEORGIA RULE

(US, 2007, d. Garry Marshall)

HALLOWEEN

(US, 2007, d. Rob Zombie)

Rob Zombie's excursions from the music world into film directing are marked by a ruthless obsession with blood and gore in the context of extreme horror movie conventions. *The House of a Thousand Corpses* and *The Devil's Rejects* (much of the same in both) were experiences of the ghastly.

It is easy to understand what impelled him to write an update of John Carpenter's 1978 classic as well as to direct it. After all, there were four sequels to *Halloween* and an update to 1998, *Halloween H2O*. While Carpenter's film was a 'breakthrough' in visual terror and horror in the 1970s, it was violent in its way and, of course, paved the way for various imitations as well as the *Friday the 13th* franchise and Wes Craven's *Nightmare on Elm St* series (and all the variations on those films) as well as for Rob Zombie.

His version of *Halloween* keeps close to the original for a lot of the time as well as developing for almost an hour, the more interesting themes of the childhood of Michael Myers (and his clown mask) and the killing reasons for his internment in the mental institution. William Forsythe as his stepfather is

loathsomely murderable. His mother, played by Sherri Moon Zombie, is far more sympathetic. There is gore but more Carpenter-like than Zombie-like.

However, as Myers escapes from the institution, the body count rises as does the blood flow, though no more than in other like films. But the film sorely lacks the presence of Jamie Lee Curtis and her strong screen impact. This time the sister is a screamer but not as sympathetic or interesting. However, we do have Malcolm McDowell in the Donald Pleasence role of Dr Loomis. He orates with great gusto, enunciating and declaiming as if the screenplay were by Shakespeare.

What drags the impact down is that syndrome of terror movies, the interchangeable young adults who are sex-obsessed and readily disposable (and are disposed of). Some more 'ordinary' characters or characters behaving ordinarily would be far more effective than this knife-a-victim lot. (But, it was already in 1980 that Friday the 13th introduced this group of characters so they have been with us – before being sliced and gutted – for almost thirty years.

This Halloween was better and more thought through (despite its limitations) than expected.

THE HEARTBREAK KID

(US, 2007, d. Peter and Bobby Farrelly)

The Farrelly Brothers have made a name for themselves in movie comedy. They take ordinary situations – and then some! The then some is usually in the realm of crass jokes, especially bodily function jokes and pain jokes. Ben Stiller was tormented in *There's Something About Mary* (probably their funniest film). Mental disorder and Jim Carrey were in *Me, Myself and Irene*. Obesity and Gwynneth Paltrow featured in *Shallow Hal*. Matt Damon and Greg Kinnear were Siamese twins in *Stuck on You*, probably their 'nicest' film.

This time they have gone back to an Elaine May film of 1972, *The Heartbreak Kid*, which was written for the screen by that master of the one liner and observer of the foibles of human nature, Neil Simon. There is still quite a bit of Neil Simon still there – and that is nice. But the rest is the Farrelly brothers reminding us of how much comedy has changed in three or four decades and how the 'grossout' jokes are not confined to grossout films.

That should serve as a warning to those who remember the original film with some affection and may not be prepared for all the innuendo (and explicit jokes and scenes) and the quota of crass – though many will miss two of the crassest jokes during the exodus, now seemingly mandatory, as soon as the final credits begin.

Having said that, Ben Stiller is always very good at playing the put upon victim (both physically and psychologically) and sustains his character here even though he falls out of love with his wife on their honeymoon and is attracted by a young woman visiting the resort. (Charles Grodin was the original shy and awkward heartbreak kid and Cybill Shepherd the girl of his dreams.) Ben's father, comedian Jerry Stiller, plays his motormouth father. Michelle Monaghan is girl next door as the ideal but the show is stolen by Malin Akerman as the initially attractive wife who turns into a nightmare.

There is much to enjoy in this interpretation of *The Heartbreak Kid*, but...

HOT ROD

(US, 2007. d. Akiva Schaffer)

The polite word for this kind of ratbag comedy is 'undemanding'. It is a star vehicle to set Saturday Night Live comedian, Adam Sandler, on his cinematic way. Sandler does not look entirely unlike Adam Sandler. It shows him as a gawky nerd whose ambition is to be a stunt man like his father (who worked

with Evel Knievel). The only (main?) trouble is that he is no good at it, despite all his attempts – quite a lot of literal knockabout slapstick for Samberg as he fails and fails and fails.

He also gets knocked about by his stepfather, a tanned Ian McShane who looks as if he had spent the last year in a solarium. And, of all people, Sissy Spacek is his carefree mother. But Dad needs a heart transplant and, in order to help him survive so that he can finally beat him and be a man, Sandberg, with the help (that is an overstatement) of his stepbrother, his slacker friends and the girl next door (Isla Fisher), he plans to ride his bike over fifteen buses (more than Knievel).

Since this is basically a feelgood (despite all the bruises and breakages) movie, the event becomes special for the town and for the television audience – and a traditional happy ending is had by all.

IN MEMORIA DI ME

(Italy, 2007, d. Saverio Costanzo)

In Memoria di Me is set in contemporary Venice. A young man is interviewed about himself, his life, faith and love. He enters the seminary of a Catholic religious order and begins his novitiate training. The regular life, the quiet, the prayer and meditation, the study and conferences give him the opportunity to examine the nature of his faith. It also gives him the opportunity to observe his fellow novices, assess their characters and their spiritual struggles. They also express their opinion of his shortcomings, especially his arrogance and being prone to judge. He also has intellectual discussions with the novice master and the superior. Finally, as one of the novices decides to leave, he has to face his own choice.

The film is well made, atmospherically composed and shot and moves with serious solemnity. Reviewers took this exploration of faith in an ascetical context quite seriously.

Had it been a piece of theatre, it might have been very powerful. However, as a film, and a film presented as 'realistic', even 'naturalistic', it raises all kinds of issues for Catholics and those who have experienced this kind of life in the Catholic Church during the last forty years. To that extent, it seems to bear little relationship to contemporary church life and life within religious orders. There is practically no evidence of the Second Vatican Council (except in the less rigid wearing of religious garb by priests and novices). There is practically no evidence of the kind of renewal asked for in the 1960s for orders to re-examine their 'charism' and their spirituality. In fact, we are told nothing about the order, its history, its style of spirituality, its mission (and there are no scenes of Eucharist, which seems very strange).

The journey of the young man is predominantly intellectual. While he is interiorly emotional, his demeanour and behaviour are particularly phlegmatic. He is interested in the content of his faith – as are the books he reads and the lectures he participates in. Faith is an intellectual exercise to be dealt with rationally. There is very little of faith as a personal commitment to God, to fellow human beings or to the order. The religious experience is cerebral. (There are no scenes of community recreation, practically no speaking at meals, no human connectedness in the ordinary daily routines.)

Only when his friend leaves the seminary, declaring that he would go to do some ministry and the tones of the African 1950s Missa Luba peal out, is there any inkling that one's spiritual life and one's life of faith have community and charity dimensions.

The 'purist' Church of In Memoria di Me is closer to the asceticism and rigour of The Nun's Story than the realities and challenges of everyday faith.

I NOW PRONOUNCE YOU CHUCK AND LARRY

(US, 2007, d. Dennis Dugan)

The first challenge of this Adam Sandler comedy is: how do you make a widely acceptable comedy about gay men and about civil partnerships and gay marriages? Actually, an Australian film of 2004, Strange

Bedfellows, with Paul Hogan, Michael Caton and Pete Postlethwaite already did it with a plot that is (suspiciously?) similar to this one. Chuck and Larry tries the 'don't worry about good taste' approach which means that at times it is funny, at times it is crass, at times it is offensive and, ultimately, it becomes an appeal for understanding and tolerance.

The situation of two men trying to get social benefits by going through a civil marriage as a gay couple and trying to convince observers that there is no fraud involved (fraud leading to jail), living with the ambiguities and the innuendo, finding difficulty in the workplace has a lot of potential. However, the film begins in what seems a homophobic humour atmosphere but then does a little preaching against prejudice, aggressive language and labelling and bigotry.

The trouble this time is that it seems too aggressive in its humour at first and mocks a lot of the stereotypes and camp behaviour (especially in the musical theatre tendencies of Larry's son). The other trouble is that the film takes a 'realistic' tone at first but then moves into broad comedy, slapstick and farce.

Adam Sandler is Adam Sandler. Kevin James is earnest as Larry. Jessica Biel is pleasant as their lawyer. Ving Rhames is a macho fireman in the closet. Dan Aykroyd is the boss. Richard Chamberlain presides over the hearing. But, as so often happens, Steve Buscemi steals the show with his performance as the unmasker of frauds.

IRINA PALM

(Belgium, 2007, d. Sam Garbarski)

In the Belgian Irina Palm which was set in London (and filmed in Luxembourg), Marianne Faithful gives a performance than many thought would win the Best Actress award in Berlin 2007. But she did not win. Seeing Marianne Faithful as a 60 year old suburban, rather frumpish widow, is a shock, especially as she is so convincing. When her sick little grandson needs an expensive operation in Australia she decides she will find the money but going to work.

To her amazement, she finishes up in a sex club in Soho, making the option to service the clients after her original shock and distaste. She soon achieves a reputation and is given the name Irina Palm.

One of the effects of seeing this film about a sordid world is the realisation than while the ugliness and vice continue, there is some transcendence shining through the sordid. The ageing woman becomes friend with the Balkan manager of the club (Miki Manojlovic) and the friendship transforms them both. On the other side, there is the moral dilemma that the son and his wife have to face, the son angrily rejecting his mother and her money at first, the daughter-in-law appreciating what she has done. While the synopsis might sound like an illness telemovie of the week, the hard edge of the situations and characters give it more substance.

IT'S A FREE WORLD

(UK, 2007, d. Ken Loach)

Ken Loach is back in his familiar world of current problems in the United Kingdom. As usual, he makes strong comments and offers a critique. With his collaborator of the last ten years or more, Paul Laverty, Loach looks at the situation of migrants, especially from Poland and Eastern Europe, their easier access to Britain on tourist or student visas, their looking for any kind of work (often below their skills and talents), their being ripped off by recruitment companies, factory and business owners and the struggles for many to support families.

Loach has often been accused of preaching. In a way, he does. But, he does it through narrative and characters. This is very true of It's a Free World.

The film opens with interviews in Katowice, Poland, with so many men and women, of all ages, wanting to get work. Angela is doing the interviews with the aid of translators. She continues this interviewing in London but falls foul of her bosses whom she accuses of tricking clients. She is fired. However, at 33, looking after her 11 year old son who is having problems at school and lives with her parents, she decides to set up her own business with her flatmate, Angie and Rose's Recruitment Agency.

Angie (a completely convincing performance from Kierston Wareing) is nothing if not enterprising, despite the constant wariness from Rose, apprehensive about whether they are staying within the law). She is soon up and running, with a centre, digs for workers (which brings in money), visits to bosses and sending groups out to work. It is still exploitative but she tries to do her best by people, especially an Iranian man without papers whose family she helps with accommodation.

But, inevitably she falls foul of bosses who don't pay, angry workers who need their money - and her father's disapproval and concern for her son. When she goes too far with some illegals, even Rose has had enough.

Loach is perhaps a touch more optimistic in this film insofar as Angie has learnt hard lessons. On the other hand, the exploitation continues. Loach knows the problems and highlights them and is condemnatory of exploiters. He also shows the frustrations of the migrant workers. But, given the situations, he suggests that if some of the agents took a more moral stance, the workers would benefit. (For a companion film which is much more pessimistic, Nick Bromfield's Ghosts can be recommended.) A SIGNIS commendation at the 2007 Venice Film Festival.

THE KINGDOM

(US, 2007, d. Peter Berg)

The pre-credits sequence is very interesting in itself. It traces the 20th century history of Saudi Arabia (The Kingdom), especially in terms of its relationship with the US and its oil power. Then there is an expertly staged, if quite ghastly, attack on the American compound in Riyadh, first shooters, then a tremendous explosion. Many are killed.

Move then to the US with experts on Capitol Hill debating the response: the hawks eager to take action, the doves reminding hawks about diplomacy and national sensibilities. However, a team of FBI investigators is able to arrange an entry, though they are hampered by protocols and permissions at first, finally persuading one of the many princes to support their search for evidence and gain some police collaboration. They bring some American know-how but also a great deal of American superiority attitude which means they need a little sensitivity and inculturation.

So far, so good – with Arizona and Abu Dabi locations standing in for the Kingdom. The investigation is interesting. But, when they find the suspects, as they say, all hell breaks loose. It seems the film implodes in its shift from intelligent drama to an all-out action show, lots of chases, explosions, shooting, the abduction of one of the team, the breakthrough in discovering the perpetrators and general confusion and mayhem.

The makers have opted for action for the multiplex rather than stay with the politics, diplomacy and intrigue of a film like *Syriana*.

Much is made of Jamie Foxx's character as a loving father and children are a motif throughout the film, including offering the key evidence for the climax. Other team members are the tough older hands-on-and-get-dirty expert, Chris Cooper, wisecracking Jason Bateman and, for glamour, Jennifer Garner. Ashraf Barhom (an Israeli actor) is particularly sympathetic as the Saudi police liaison.

The final lines of the film bring us back to the harsh realities of extremists, whether they be terrorists or US officials.

SEI, JEE (LUST, CAUTION)

(US, China, Taiwan, 2007, d. Ang Lee)

Lust, Caution, is a fine film from Ang Lee. Ang Lee has never repeated himself in his genres; comedy in the wedding banquet, English sensibilities and Jane Austen in Sense and Sensibility, American morals in The Ice Storm, the civil war in Ride with the Devil, Chinese martial arts with Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, comic strips with The Hulk, sexual issues in Brokeback Mountain.

He returns to China with Shanghai and Hong Kong settings. The film is set during the Japanese occupation of Japan, beginning in 1942, arousing audience curiosity about the central character, a young woman (a powerful performance from Tang Wei) who plays Mah Jong with a group of matrons, wives of men who have collaborated with Japanese. It then goes back to 1938 and builds up a story about the resistance to Japanese occupation. It focuses on a group of young students who form a drama company. The young woman is chosen to become the mistress of their main target. When he moves from Hong Kong back to Shanghai, their plans collapse - and are reinstituted.

The film design is excellent, one feels that one is in Shanghai and in 1942. There is a meticulous attention to detail from the smallest interior to the trams in the streets.

The film is interesting in terms of audience knowledge of Japanese occupation, of the Chinese resistance during the war, of the Japanese occupation.

The focus of the title is gradual. However, it is only after 90 minutes that the film moves to 'full on' in explicit lust sequences, with Ang Lee portraying the raw passion of the two people concerned, sadomasochistic touches. Some audiences will find these sequences too explicit. However, this also helps us to understand the psychology of what happens when the assassination attempt occurs.

The performances are excellent. The film shows Lee's strengths in storytelling, eliciting performances, creating a world and a mood as well as raising moral issues. Winner of the Golden Lion in Venice, 2007.

MICHAEL CLAYTON

(US, 2007, d. Tony Gilroy)

This is a drama for those who really enjoy the novels, say, of John Grisham. It deals with lawyers, fixers, corrupt companies, class actions and deceit concerning products that damage human life. It is also a drama about family and the complex elements all come together with justice being finally done. It was written and directed by Tony Gilroy who was responsible for the story of *The Bourne Ultimatum*. Like this thriller, *Michael Clayton* also shows a great deal about surveillance, industrial espionage and the technology for destruction.

Michael Clayton, played with less glamour by George Clooney, is a 45 year old part success but seeming whole loser in his life and profession. He is an expert fixer for a legal firm and has the skill to come in, assess a situation and go into action. However, when an associate (Tom Wilkinson) has a breakdown, he finds that he is unable to help him. Part of the breakdown concerns his six years of being devoted to demolishing a class action against a powerful chemical company (represented by a rather sinister Tilda Swinton).

The opening of the film leads to some immediate interest and suspense and then the screenplay moves back to four days earlier to build up again and move through the legal crises, the deal crises as well as to spend some time on *Michael Clayton*'s personal problems and those of his son and his brothers.

The film is dark, serious and thought provoking in that Grisham kind of way (which is a compliment) and has a strong supporting cast including Sidney Pollack as the head of the legal firm.

MR WOODCOCK

(US, 2007, d. Craig Gillespie)

This is a brief take-it-or-leave it comedy. It is black-humoured comedy that seems not to have caught the American audiences or tickled their funnybones. It is not exactly subtle but it is quite ironic in tone and that did not appeal locally.

Which means that it may have more chance outside the US. In fact, I found the screenplay quite funny in its ironic dialogue, situations and characters, often quite clever in its observations and barbs.

Seann William Scott plays John Farley, a young man who has written a self-help bestseller – and he knows what he is talking about. He was a lone child, devoted to his mother, grieving his dead father. But he was also on the obese side, hopeless at sports, picked on – especially by the merciless gym coach, Mr Woodcock. Mr Woodcock has to be heard to be believed in the way he runs his class, allotting laps and push-ups and devastating insults in his deadpan tone. The fact that he is played by Billy Bob Thornton absolutely seriously makes the portrayal of Mr Woodcock more effective.

When the young author arrives back in his home town for a local honour, he is shocked to find that his mother, Susan Sarandon, is dating again, a man whom she finds loving, gentle, altogether attractive: Mr Woodcock. In disbelief and gradually abandoning all his self-help principles (which are spouted with chapter reference by his old school friend), John devises ways for his mother to see the light. The backfiring of these plots and the unflappability of Mr Woodcock provides some comedy.

There is a thought at the end – that people like Mr Woodcock can traumatise young minds, although, as Mr Woodcock remarks, it was only a gym class.

If you don't like it, no problem. But, you might.

THE NANNY DIARIES

(US, 2007, d. Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini)

The Nanny Diaries is based on a satirical novel of 2002, written by Emma McLaughlin and Nicola Kraus who had spent a total of eight years as nannies in about thirty families in affluent upper-Manhattan. The novel had a scathing portrait of the people of the upper-Manhattan area - the film is scathing but less so, a touch more benign despite the horrible behaviour of some of the characters.

The film takes an anthropological point of view, especially in the opening sequences in the museum and the tableaux of various people in New York City. This is a story of a girl from New Jersey, from a poor family, who accidentally becomes a nanny, becomes attached to the child she is looking after, is used as a slave by inconsiderate employers.

Scarlet Johansson is good as the nanny. Laurel Linney gives a superb performance as a selfish and arrogant New York matron. Paul Giamatti is very good as the neglectful husband.

The film contrasts the world that Annie came from with the world in which she finds herself, immersing herself, and writing a kind of anthropological essay about this different culture. She does have the opportunity at the end to make a video to voice all her criticisms and target the Laurel Linney character, Mrs. X.

The writer-directors, Shari Springer-Berman and Robert Pulcini were responsible for the excellent film, American Splendour with Paul Giamatti.

ROCKET SCIENCE

(US, 2007, d. Jeffrey Blitz)

Rocket Science is riding on the fact that Jeffrey Blitz made that delightful and frightening documentary *Spellbound*, the film about the national spelling bee competition and its effect on the contestants and their families. Blitz won the directing award at the Sundance Festival. This time the subject is junior debating and the film is a fiction rather than a documentary.

Many audiences will concentrate on the adolescent story, the focus on Reece Thompson as Hal Hefner who is a moody young man, clashing with his brother, saddled with a huge stuttering problem. Meanwhile, we see a number of high school students who are as dedicated to debate and preparation and delivery as were those young spellbound contestants. And the pace at which they deliver seems just too much, too fast to make debating sense: speed for speed's rather than intelligence's sake.

When a driven girl, frustrated at the champion surrendering the trophy that she coveted, picks Hal to be her associate, it is clear that there is trouble in store. He is clever but stuck on enunciating his words. He is also love-struck.

The audience around me was obviously very taken with Hal and his misadventures. I was wanting to do the same but found I was not drawn into the film. It's not the subject, though watching such competitive kids become even obsessive can be wearing as well as their so breathless to be meaningless style. I think it was Hal himself. Reece Thompson did a very good job in performance but his belief that he could debate, his oddball work with a coach to help him get over his impediment, the cantankerous atmosphere in the house and the smug win-at-all-costs girl did not really appeal.

THE SERPENT

(France, 2006, d. Eric Barbier)

A French style crime thriller, intense in its plot and in its characters.

We have come to expect American versions of French films and books but not expect French versions of English language novels. However, with Guillaume Canet's very successful film of Harlan Coben's *Tell No One*, it shows how well these plots can be transferred to France. *The Serpent* is based on a British thriller by Ted Lewis, author of the novel, *Get Carter*, which had a successful film version with Michael Caine.

Yvan Attal plays Vincent, a fashion photographer, who is in the messy middle of a divorce from his German wife, the daughter of his boss. He is deliberately targeted by a gang who set up rich businessmen with a model and take compromising photos for blackmail. The opening of the film sees them in action with a lawyer, played by the veteran comedian-clown of so many funny comedies in the 1970s (including the *Blond Man with Shoes* films), Pierre Richard. The gang is led by Spender (the name of the original novel), played by Clovis Cornillac. He is a strange and sadistic type whose motivation is quite mixed – which becomes clearer as the film goes on and Vincent is more and more entangled in accusations of murder.

The film builds up suspense, not with whodunit but whydunit, Vincent becoming more and more desperate until some action and melodramatics involving an escape from police custody and the body of Spender's mother bring the two protagonists to a final confrontation.

Attal, Cornillac and Richard bring some acting class to this glossy thriller.

SLEUTH

(UK, 2007, d. Kenneth Branagh)

Sleuth is a remake of Anthony Shaffer's play, Sleuth, and the film version directed by Joseph L Mankiewicz in 1972 with Laurence Olivier and Michael Caine. Michael Caine now takes on the Olivier role.

The film has been rewritten for the screen by playwright, Harold Pinter, using the basis of Anthony Shaffer's play, but introducing the dialogue so typical of Pinter himself and his plays like The Birthday Party, The Caretaker... But, whether it works well on screen rather than on stage? And how does Caine compare with Olivier and Law with Caine?

The film is set in a rather lavish modernistic mansion with very few scenes outside the house. The film focuses on a popular novel writer who is visited by a part-time actor who wants to persuade him to give his wife a divorce because the actor is living with her. The actor then plays a psychological and physical game with the visitor. In the second part of the film, the visitor assumes the disguise of a police inspector, and turns the tables on the novelist.

The film is interesting verbally, for its performances, for its sleight of hand with the performance by the actor. It has a rather sudden ending - something of a shock to the system.

Branagh has directed the thriller and mystery, Dead Again. He has followed in Laurence Olivier's footsteps by directing versions of Henry V, Hamlet, and performing as Iago in a screen version of Othello. He also directed versions of Much Ado About Nothing, Loves Labours Lost and As You Like It.

SHOOT'EM UP

(US, 2007, d. Michael Davis)

Despite every inclination not to and every injunction in my head to loathe this film, I could not help but like it. Certainly, others may not. Even more certainly, many others did not. Having disliked Sin City and, even much more, the two Grindhouse films, Planet Terror and, especially, Death Proof, I was wary of graphic novel adaptations which end up like live cartoons.

As can be gathered instantly, this is a shoot 'em up cartoon. Audiences straying into the cinema or starting the DVD will know immediately whether they will like it or not. Clive Owen (not a great actor for comedy), obligatory black coat, carrot in hand or munching it, comes across a young woman who is about to give birth. She is being pursued by thugs who start a ding-dong shootout. Clive, with one hand on the

gun and the other on the carrot, reminds biblically inclined viewers of the refrain, Saul killed his thousands, David his ten thousands (which doesn't sound like a PG section of the books of Samuel). Actually, not all are dead because they have to make their way back to the Mr Big to report what has happened and be ready to meet Clive again. In the meantime, the mother is dead, so Clive has to replace his gun (not the carrot) and pick up baby with the other hand.

This all has a guilty pleasure ironic appeal.

And so it goes. Mr Big is played by Paul Giamatti with all stops out and over the top, exasperated as his henchmen bite the dust and Clive continually frustrates him. But, there is an even Mr Bigger who, it seems, is running a scheme to harvest children for organ supplies, especially to Mr Biggest who is... but that would be giving it away.

Clive visits a prostitute whose professional skills enable her to suckle and look after the baby. The pair and baby are then pursued throughout the film with lots of set pieces that should make Quentin Tarantino jealous and remind him of his successful origins not his latest witless escapades. And, after all that, it is happy ever after!

Shoot'em up clearly does not ask to be taken literally or too seriously. Rather, it is a clever parody of the action film, using the exaggerated deadpan style.

SUPERBAD

(US, 2007, d. Greg Mottola)

Yet another comedy about sex-preoccupied high schoolers. It was written by Seth Rogen and Evan when they were very young – and watching American Pie as the epitome of comedy. It's the type of comedy that older teens, if they mature at all, grow out of rather than recycle for a Hollywood movie (which, like Wild Hogs, which Seth and Evan could be in danger of growing into, has brought in big bucks in the US).

It has been produced by Judd Appatow who directed the successful comedies The Forty Year Old Virgin and Knocked Up which combined jokes about sexuality with an underlying moral stance and some touches of niceness. This one, on the other hand, with its young teenage sense of humour and crassness, is strong on the jokes about sexuality (but not with very strong jokes), has no particular niceness and is stuck in some pre-moral stances.

It is not entirely a crass-fest like so many teen comedies. Evan and Seth might be sex-preoccupied and dither as well as make gauche approaches but, lurking in the background, is the potential for some moral sense and judgment ('some', that is, not 'much'). Jonah Hill has some resemblance to Seth Rogen (largish and curly-haired) as Seth. Evan is played very well by the thin, often gawky, Michael Cera. For those who want to make comparisons between Jonah Hill and Seth Rogen, Rogen plays one of the two oddball cops (the other is Bill Hader) who tangle with Evan and Seth and their uber-nerd-like friend, the bespectacled Fogell (Christopher) who calls himself McLovin.

It's all a bit prolonged for anyone wanting post-16 comedy. It's a kind of combination of American Pie with Police Academy.

SYNDROMES AND A CENTURY

(Thailand, 2006, d. Apichatpong Weeresethakaul)

Syndromes and a Century was written and directed by Apichatpong Weeresethakaul, the director of the Cannes film festival award winner, Tropical Malady. As with Tropical Malady, this is a film which is difficult to decipher.

The film moves around in time, explores memory, is particularly subjective in its approach to dreams and memories. The film is abstract but emotional. The director said it is about recollections of his parents who were doctors.

The film is in fragments, difficult to put in linear time. There are snippets of memories that move from one to another. There are various strange characters including a dentist who wants to become a singer, infatuated with one of his parents. There is a Buddhist monk who wants to become a disc jockey. Another doctor proclaims his love, and Doctor Toey, the woman doctor at the hospital, explains a story about her love for an orchid expert and her visit to his farm. Another woman doctor hides liquor inside a limb. And another monk tells the doctor of dreams he has been having about chickens. There is also a young patient with carbon monoxide poisoning who hits tennis balls along the corridor of the hospital.

The film also focuses on a doctor interviewing a young medic who comes from the army who also wants to work in the hospital. These two are the representatives of the director's parents.

The film was funded, along with a number of films from Asia, by the city of Vienna for the celebration of the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the birth of Mozart.

TAKVA

(Turkey, 2006, d. Ozer Kiziltan)

Takva is set in Istanbul. It focuses on a man who lives quite a solitary life, faithful in a very literal way to the injunctions of the Koran. He was worked for the same company for thirty years. We see the plain daily routines of his life. An imam decides that he is just the person to do collections from debtors for the welfare of the mosque and the religious order and trainees there. This means an enormous transformation in his life, the loss of the regularity of his routine and a challenge to his beliefs.

Decked out in a better suit and given the use of a car and driver, along with advice from the business manager, he is flattered and conscientious. But his new tasks expose him to a world he is not familiar with at all: poor families, afternoon alcoholics, wheelers and dealers who offer bribes. His immediate reaction is stern, according to the letter of the book. In the meantime, he is constantly troubled by the sexual nature of his dreams – in real life, he is socially awkward with women. What is he to do? He frequently wonders whether he is losing his mind.

The director declares that he is an atheist but is interested in the problems of what he calls 'ancient ideologies'. Can someone live according to the precepts of a 7th century religious life in the contemporary globalised world. How can one be holy? Is compromise the answer or is a descent into madness? Tavka presents this dilemma with great force and challenge.

WAR

(US, 2007. d. Philip Atwell)

There's no mistaking the theme from the title. However, this is a particular war, a war between police authorities and a notorious and ruthless killer working for the Yakuza, killing for the Triad representatives in San Francisco, but, ultimately for himself. His name is Rogue.

Jet Li, doing far less martial arts action as he grows older but still skilfully wielding a sword, obviously relishes the opportunity to play the sneering and murderous Rogue. On the other hand, Jason Statham is his usual screen self, grim and laconic, as the officer who is upset at the murder of his partner and family and is determined to get Rogue.

This means that there are various set pieces of mayhem as Rogue goes about his business, as the Chinese and the Japanese try to outdo one another and the lone policeman pursues his prey.

It is all stylishly made, a cut above several of the more recent American vehicles for Jet Li.

However, there is an absolute whopper of a plot twist at the end which defies belief – and which makes the other plot twist seem rather small even though it is crucial.

NOVEMBER SIGNIS REVIEWS

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THE ASSASSINATION OF JESSE JAMES BY THE COWARD ROBERT FORD

(US, 2007. d. Andrew Dominick)

The Assassination is a fine piece of filmmaking. It is a Western, but not in the Hollywood vein.

It is based on a novel by Robert Hanson, read by Andrew Dominic who was intrigued by it and, as an Australian and an outsider to the American West, was an interesting choice to adapt the novel and to direct the film. The film is quite epic in its length and narrating of the legend of Jesse James - without going back into the past but rather focusing on the last year of Jesse James' life.

The film is unlikely to be a big commercial success. It is far too serious for many of the multiplex audiences, despite the presence of Brad Pitt as Jesse James. The film is also strong in its breakthrough performance for Casey Affleck as Bob Ford. Affleck was in the background of a number of films including the three Ocean's films as well as Gus van Sant's 'Jerry' with Matt Damon. He was then to appear in his brother's first film as director.

The film is on a large screen but rather dark in its presentation of life in the American West, especially in Missouri in the 1880s. The seasons are Autumnal and Wintery, the countryside is bare or under snow. The towns are rather bleak, especially the new houses in what were to become the suburbs of the cities of Missouri.

The film does present some action, opening with the last train robbery performed by the James brothers and their gang. By this time, after 15 years of activity since the end of the Civil War and their fighting for the south, most of the early partners in the robberies were in jail or dead. They now have a new group of men, especially the Ford brothers. Bob Ford, very young, tries to persuade them to take him on - and he finally becomes a companion for Jesse James.

The film shows the respectable life that Jesse James lived as Thomas Howard in the cities - although he and his wife and family were continually on the move. Something was happening to Jesse James, a mental condition - perhaps psychopathic in his early years, a depression setting in, an even more determined cruelty to destroy those whom he thought were betraying him as well as a seeming resignation, at least in this plot outline, that Bob Ford should kill him.

Brad Pitt gives a very fine performance showing the deterioration in the character and psyche of the outlaw. Casey Affleck leads a very strong supporting cast including Sam Rockwell as Charlie Ford, Mary Louise-Parker as Zee, Jesse James' wife, a cameo by Sam Shepherd as Frank James, Jeremy Renner as one of the gang.

While the film does supply a long look at the way that the James brothers did their robberies, the main part of the plot is Jesse tracking down the various members of the gang, suspicious of them, destroying those he thought were betraying him, finally confronting Bob Ford.

The film is interesting in its movie history of the James brothers, silent films and those of the 30s emerging at the end of the 30s with Tyrone Powel as Jesse James and Henry Fonda as Frank James who also appeared in *The Return of Frank James*. This was the period of presenting many of the outlaws including Robert Taylor as Billy the Kid. During the 1940s and 50s there were some small budget films focusing on these outlaws and their exploits including 'I Killed Jesse James'. By the 1970s, there was a demythologising of the American West in such films as 'Doc' and 'Dirty Little Billy', deconstructing the myths of Doc Holiday and Billy the Kid. But, by the end of the 70s, Walter Hill made an epic, 'The Long Riders', with the various sets of brothers in the outlaw gangs including the James brothers, the Fords, the Youngers.

In the 1990s and the years following there was some kind of glorifying of the outlaws again. This film takes audiences back to the demythologising.

With Andrew Dominic as director, there will be many theses written about the comparison between the psychotic criminal, Mark "Chopper" Reed, the subject of Dominic's first feature film and award winning film for Eric Bana as Chopper and Brad Pitt's performance as the psychotic killer, Jesse James.

BLACK SHEEP

(New Zealand, 2006, d. Jonathan King)

This is no nursery rhyme, politely enquiring whether the black sheep have any wool! Rather, it is a very successful blend of horror and deadpan humour. It is as if the writer-director, Jonathan King had a dream in which he asked Alfred Hitchcock and Peter Jackson whether he could combine their influences, Hitchcock's *The Birds* and Jackson's macabre early films like *Brain Dead*; they must have both said yes and King went on to further dreams concocting *Black Sheep*.

He capitalises on the New Zealand landscapes around Wellington (and the many sheep) so that the film could only take place in this location. He draws on the long tradition of genetic experiment films so that monstrous specimens are produced – and, of course, they bite people. First off is an ideological environmental protestor who, in turn, bites the landowner and proud backer of the experiments. Then all his guests get it in the neck, so to speak – and the mad doctor and her staff. We get a variation on the *Dawn of the Dead* Ewes and Rams.

This all works better than usual because it avoids the cliches of young things in peril and concentrates on the adults. It plays the horror straightforwardly as well as for laughs. With the humorous dialogue and some deadpan, audiences will find themselves sometimes really laughing out loud. And, there are a lot of NZ sheep jokes.

King's menacing sheep are like Hitchcock's birds – they only have to be there to be frightening. Intermingled with the splatter and the jokes, King has achieved what he set out to do.

BLAME IT ON FIDEL

(France, 2006, d. Julie Gavras)

Julie Gavras is the daughter of celebrated director, Costa Gavras. Costa Gavras' films of the 1960s and 1970s were impassioned political films, critical of oppressive regimes. He won an Oscar for *Z* and made *The Confession*, *Section Speciale* as well as *Missing*. His daughter seems to be following in his footsteps with this political film, albeit a far more domestic and gentle film than those of her father.

Based on an Italian novel, *Tutta Colpa a Fidel* by Domitilla Calamai, this is a portrait of a young girl in 1970-71, Anna. Her French mother (Julie Depardieu) has married a Spaniard (Stefano Accorsi) from a well-to-do Franco-supporting family. However, his sister has been actively involved in politics, and her brother, feeling guilty, becomes involved himself, especially for Chileans in France, supporters of Allende. They give up their bourgeois home and wealth, have a stream of refugees and dissidents in their small house, while the mother interviews women, especially concerning pregnancy and abortion, for a book.

Anna, used to finer things and good manners, is appalled. She cannot understand it. Sent to a Catholic school for a better education, she is forbidden by her father to go to catechism classes. A succession of foreign nannies – and their food – dismay her and she is bewildered by her change of fortune and, being a very strong character, she rebels. Her younger brother, however, has no difficulty adapting (and is always hungry and enjoying his food). Gradually, Anna comes to terms with change. She has a very enquiring mind, forever asking questions of her parents, the visitors in the house and her teachers. She learns about human solidarity, the uncertainty of certainty, the love of her parents – and is prepared to be a questioner in life.

Nina Kervel-Bey is an impressive little girl and brings Anna alive. Benjamin Feuillet as her brother, Francois, is a scene stealer.

The screenplay assumes that the left-thinking parents are in the right – and the film makes its case for seeing bourgeois traditions as selfish and greedy.

DADDY DAY CAMP

(US, 2007, d. Fred Savage)

Fred Savage used to be the young boy from TV's *The Wonder Years*. Looking at this film, we might wonder how he can bear to go back to the themes of those days and make this comedy for, probably, 8 year old boys. It is one of those raucous shows where the kids are shown as rowdy, greedy, thoughtless, pushy, fight-loving, over-competitive and generally obnoxious – and all for laughs.

Distracted at the behaviour of the kids and the slapstick, the word to describe this came to mind: *Bratfalls*. (So, the experience was not entirely wasted.)

The other dismaying thing about presenting American kids like this is that too often they are seen as knowing little adults rather than kids. And when Colonel Buck arrives at the camp to get them (a ragtag group) into shape to beat their rivals at the nearby camp which has all the mod cons, he so instils army discipline into them that one almost expected him not to urge them to win the egg and spoon race but, instead, to invade Iraq. And they would have done it!

But, then the screenplay moves towards the side of loving but exasperated father, Cuba Gooding Jr, who suffered under his militaristic father but who is considered overprotective with his own son. While our misfit champions win the contest (the affluent are cheaters but the little guys have a few tricks up their sleeve, which, of course, are not cheating just using their wits for comeuppance), the film ends with some warm hugs and love is in the air.

These review thoughts are those of an adult watching Daddy Day Camp. The target audience will just go with the jingoistic, then love, flow.

THE DARJEELING LIMITED

(US, 2007, d. Wes Anderson)

Very limited.

The film was co-written and directed by Wes Anderson who has become something of a cult figure in American cinema for off-beat comedy: Bottle Rocket, Rushmore, The Royal Tenenbaums, The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou. This film is not as good as these previous films although many audiences have found it admirable and entertaining. However, it is difficult to know whether the name Wes Anderson is an explanation or an excuse.

The film will be enjoyed by those who like slacker comedies for the sake of slacker comedy. Those who do not enjoy slacker comedy for its own sake - without some sense of irony, some sense of purpose, even some form of sentiment, will find the film somewhat stupid and, sometimes, distasteful.

The title indicates India and it shows three brothers, three nongs, meeting in India go on what they think is a life changing quest. However, it is not so much a spiritual journey or a life-saving quest, but rather a shallow excursion into some kind of self-understanding which may, or may not, last. For many Indian audiences, the exploitation of their land, people, religious rituals and customs may also appear as very exploitative and patronising on the part of Americans, who feel that they can come into a land, take over, and achieve their spiritual quest.

Perhaps that is taking the film too seriously. It is meant to be light-hearted. Owen Wilson portrays a slacker, characteristically, but is also uncharacteristically a control freak. Jason Schwartzman (who wrote the screenplay with his cousin Roman Coppola and Wes Anderson) is a narcissistic, lascivious brother.

Adrian Brody is the middle brother - who does share some signs of potential normality and some kind of integrity but the screenplay does not allow him to follow this through.

The film has the characters getting on and off a train - put off with just fine reasons at times. However, one of the times they are off the train leads them to an act of nobility, trying to rescue some boys in a river and a waterfall. When one of the boys dies, the community accepts them and invites them to the funeral, sees them off as heroes. They are really on a journey to meet their mother who has withdrawn from the family in Boston and become associated with nuns in the Himalayas. When they finally reach her, we find that she is played, quite well, by Angelica Houston.

Bill Murray has a cameo role as a man who misses the initial train. There are some Indian performers - who are cast in some caricature, stereotypic and slightly demeaning roles.

The film is preceded, not in theatres, but on the DVD with a Part One, a 13 minute short film, Hotel Chevalier, where the Jason Schwartzman character has been in seclusion in this Paris hotel for some time, meets up with his girlfriend, played by Natalie Portman (who appears in a glimpse in the Darjeeling Limited but this story is referred to). The film then becomes Part Two. However, during the funeral of the little boy, there is a flashback to the funeral of the three brothers' father (and some farcical aspects concerning his car, the mother not being there, their being late for the funeral).

In terms of editing, this slows up the film and the boy's funeral seems contrived just to have this flashback. It might have been a good idea to excise this from the feature film and have it as a second short, it becoming Part Two and the film itself becoming Part Three. It is quite effective, as it is at present in having the short at the opening of the film and then going into the film.

Wes Anderson's comedy is certainly an acquired taste.

THE DARK IS RISING

(US, 2007, d. David L. Cunningham)

On paper, this looks like a cross between Harry Potter and Lord of the Rings. On screen, it is a slight fantasy that has its moments – but loses a lot more. (Writer of the original novels, Susanne Cooper, must be disappointed that the material is reduced to less than a hundred minutes and, while set in England, is very Americanised.)

A young American boy, the seventh son of a seventh son, is revealed as The Seeker, a boy with hitherto unknown talents to find the hidden signs to save the world from an overwhelming darkness. A group of elders, who have lived in many historical periods, appear to protect him from the power of Darkness, The Rider, who wants to get the signs and control the earth. The Seeker has five days and the film highlights the drama in discovering each sign. In the meantime, the weather, darkness and storms, begin to play havoc with civilisation as we know it.

The family will seem too American for a non-American audience: mother, father and six children in an English village. The boy (Alexander Ludwig) lacks the oomph for this kind of hero. The elders do a lot of standing about in a group and talking, though Ian McShane is strong and Frances Conroy brings some motherly charm. Christopher Eccleston, having abdicated his role as Dr Who, is the Rider and seems to be enjoying some villainy.

Like Eragon, this is a fantasy that misses out on its intended grandeur and is reduced to something of a Saturday matinee show.

EASTERN PROMISES

(UK/Canada, 2007, d. David Cronenberg)

This is an excellent film. However, it is one that cannot be recommended without a caution. It is a picture of a Russian mafia-style group in London and there are some graphic scenes of sexual behaviour and, particularly, criminal brutality, that some audiences will not want to see,

Written by Steve Knight (a long way from Who Wants to be a Millionaire, which he co-devised), it is a companion piece to his gritty and alarming 2002 screenplay for Stephen Frears' Dirty Pretty Things. That film, set in central London, focussed on deals and crimes for trafficking in organ transplants. This time, as has been said, the focus is on a criminal organisation which originated in Stalinist Russia and flourished in the gulags and prisons, its strict codes, its absolute ruthlessness. The story is interestingly and sometimes excitingly told by veteran director David Cronenberg (who also shot a grim film in London some years ago, Spider, with Ralph Fiennes).

This is a London which is both recognisable and hidden. Part of the hidden life is the traffic in human beings from Eastern Europe, the false promises (Eastern Promises) that are made to young girls who are smuggled into England and then lost in a world of prostitution. When one fourteen year old dies in childbirth, assisted by a midwife whose father was Russian, a tale that combines humane feeling with ugly manipulation and violence begins.

Naomi Watts is believable as the concerned nurse. Sinead Cusack appears as her mother and director Jerzy Skolimowski is impressive as her old-style, auxiliary KGB uncle whom she asks to translate the dead girl's diary. When she visits the Trans-Siberian club run by a grandfatherly Armin Mueller-Stuhl, her suspicions are aroused when she encounters his dissolute son (a vigorous performance by Vincent Cassell) and the hired chauffeur, a man who seems to be emotionless and implacable, played very well indeed by Viggo Mortensen (who had appeared in Cronenberg's A History of Violence as a completely opposite kind of character).

The son is a drunkard, cowed by his father who, despite the calm exterior, is in absolute control of the criminal activities and has no scruple in eliminating anyone in his way. There are some unexpected moves along the way which finally gives the film more complex perspectives. Cronenberg seems to be quite

correct when he describes *Eastern Promises* as ‘a mob crime thriller intricately interwoven with familial dramas – all unfolding in a subculture that dwells within another very strong culture’.

ELIZABETH – THE GOLDEN AGE

(UK, 2007, d. Shekhar Kapur)

Some Catholic condemnations greeted this sequel to the 1998, *Elizabeth*.

The main problem with *Elizabeth – the Golden Age* is that it treats an extremely sensitive period in English history in a jingoistic and overly partisan manner: the aftermath of the excommunication of Elizabeth, the aftermath of the executions of Protestants by Queen Mary as well as the persecution of Catholics by the government, the tensions with Spain, the execution of Mary Queen of Scots and the attack of the Spanish Armada and its defeat. This is all stirring stuff and has been included in various films and television programs about Elizabeth and about Mary Queen of Scots.

The problem with this film for all audiences and especially for Catholics is the tone, the simplistic English patriotism and the blackening (literally in their dress) of Catholics. Some of the dialogue sounds quite outmoded, straight out of those antagonistic days of suspicions of other churches, something that applied to all suspicions and spats between Papists and, in the schoolboy jargon of previous decades, ‘Proddy dogs’. Serious advisers to Elizabeth tell her that every Catholic in the realm is a danger to her, a potential assassin. While the film rightly shows the plots of Philip II of Spain, the Babington attack on Elizabeth and some Catholic conspirators, the ‘every Catholic’ rhetoric is a bit much. Fortunately, Elizabeth herself is given some lines which moderate this extremism – although she is also made to say that if the Armada lands it will bring the Inquisition which seems to be on board. She proclaims freedom of thought, which is not quite accurate in view of her persecutions and executions.

This is a film which would not be helpful as a basis for ecumenical discussions between Anglicans and Catholics.

As a film, it is a colourful spectacle that covers 1585-1588, momentous years with the death of Mary Queen of Scots and the Armada. The title is misleading. Elizabeth’s ‘golden age’ was to follow this period, the subject of the next sequel, perhaps. Another fact is that Elizabeth was 52 at the opening of the film and, despite Cate Blanchett’s best efforts (and she is one of the reasons for seeing the film), she does not seem near 52. There is romance with Clive Owen’s debonair piratical Walter Raleigh, intrigue with Geoffrey Rush’s world-weary Walsingham, and Drake’s confrontation of the Armada is dwarfed by Raleigh’s heroics (who uses his cloak over the puddle as his ticket of introduction to the queen). But, while the film has many interesting sequences, the total lacks the forceful impact of the original.

Demonising the enemy can be a deliberate plot – or, as in this case it would seem, not a plot but lazy scripting, black versus white stuff. Philip II is played as devilish caricature, with a bandy-legged walk, fidgety in the extreme (often with his rosary beads), blessing the armada, denouncing Elizabeth with epithets of ‘bastard’ and ‘whore’ and proclaiming Catholicism in a style reminiscent of the current president of Iran when he rants against the west. He is surrounded by grim-visaged monks and perpetual religious chant – with all in black. Rhys Ifans also turns up as a fanatical Jesuit (parallel to Daniel Craig’s assassin priest in *Elizabeth*). No redeeming features here – except, perhaps, the dignity with which Samantha Morton’s Mary Queen of Scots shows on the gallows.

We do not usually talk about ‘angelising’ but this is what this film does for Elizabeth. While the screenplay helpfully shows the weaker sides of Elizabeth’s behaviour, her infatuation with Raleigh, her jealous outbursts against her lady in waiting, Bess Throckmorton, most of the film proposes her as angel to Philip’s devil. Beautiful, beautifully gowned, articulate, noble demeanour, she becomes more and more the competent stateswoman, eventually donning armour to support the troops against the Armada, sitting horseback offering rousing encouragement in the manner of Olivier’s Henry V and then, ethereal in

nightdress, roaming the fields and standing, in a long shot, like an angelic icon on the cliffs confronting the enemy, a guardian angel of her soldiers. And that is describing it mildly.

Elizabeth – The Golden Age is something of a surprise and a letdown. The potential to make a 21st century historical epic that was able to acknowledge the passionate beliefs on both sides along with the wrongs would have made stimulating and relevant cinema. Bias, as always (think Braveheart or The Patriot) would have been inevitable but, unfortunately, this film gets carried away with itself.

GOOD LUCK CHUCK

(US, 2007, d. Mark Helfrich)

To pilfer from Ang Lee, the quick review for this film is: Lust, Caution.

It is a lust comedy rather than a sex comedy. While it tries to have a feelgood moral ending, it is too blatant to be funny along the way – despite a nice performance from Jessica Alba. Dane Cook is a smug Lothario but Dan Fogler portrays one of the most obnoxious, sexist, chauvinist characters for a long time. (Actually, that describes the film as well!).

The press notes are up front: ‘Helfrich (the director) had a proven talent for comedy – he edited all three Rush Hour films – and his instinct was that Good Luck Chuck, which was originally conceived as a PG-13 film, would be far more successful as an R-rated comedy. He urged Stolberg (the writer) to take another pass at the script and push it into more risqué territory. ‘There was so much potential that could be mined with an R-Rated version. The language we could use and what we could show was unlimited’.

So, there you are.

THE HUNTING PARTY

(US, 2007, d. Richard Sheperd)

The Hunting Party is a sardonic look at the war in the Balkans. It has many touches of irony - and communicates its very strong message and critique through comedy and irony.

The film was written and directed by Richard Shepard (Matador). He had visited the Balkans and absorbed something of the atmosphere of the place as well as the history of 1990s wars.

The film opens with some graphic footage where Richard Gere and Terrence Howard are involved in reporting the war for television. They get a buzz out of all the danger, the adrenaline flowing, a sense of being alive. However, finally the atrocities have their effect on the Richard Gere character, Simon Hunt. He breaks down and denounces everybody on prime time television. His career goes into a slide and he works in many wars for the television industries of small countries. In the mean time, Howard is promoted to New York.

The focus of the film is Sarajevo in the year 2000. Howard comes to Sarajevo for a 5 year memorial of the war's end, with the TV front (James Brolin) and the son of a vice president, Jesse Eisenberg, (Roger Dodger, The Emperor's Club, The Squid, and the Whale).

When Simon Hunt gets in touch again, he proposes that they seek out the Fox, the man responsible for atrocities. Organisations such as the UN and the CIA have not been able to track him down in the Balkan Mountains where he is being protected by loyalists.

The irony of the film (which is said to be based on actual events but that the ridiculous aspects are the true aspects) indicates that these three journalists, mistaken by everybody for CIA agents, can actually track down and capture the Fox. This is a blend of thriller, action, ironic comedy. However, they achieve their mission and justice is seen to be done.

In the final comments, the full irony is manifest as it is pointed out how all the organisations have not been able to track down several of the Balkan War criminals whereas independent people can do it. It also raises the question - and this is the final comment - about the possibilities of tracking down Osama Bin Laden and the reasons why these people have not been found as well as the political deals behind these failures.

Not one of the great Balkan films, but a very interesting and challenging look. Other Balkan films include Saviour, Welcome to Sarajevo, Ulysses' Head.

INTERVIEW

(US, 2007, d. Steve Buscemi)

Interview is one of three films based on original Dutch films written and directed by the murdered director Theo van Gogh. The other two films were directed by Stanley Tucci and Bob Balaban.

Interview is a two-hander, strongly played by Steve Buscemi and Sienna Miller (Factory Girl).

The interview is between a political journalist who is down on his luck and assigned to have dinner with a celebrity actress, prominent for gossip about her and her appearing in horror films. The film is a battle of wits between the two. The political journalist expresses exasperation at having to interview the celebrity. The celebrity is at first playful, then critical, then resorts to drug-taking.

As the evening progresses, and the journalist is hurt in an accident and looked after by the celebrity, they interact in her house. She asks provocative questions, he is more interested in what is going on in Washington. At the end, when there is a certain sympathy for the journalist as he talks about his

relationship with his wife and his responsibility for her death, we find that he has been manipulating the actress. On the other hand, she wins out in the end, with a phone call and a switching of tapes.

The film is interesting in its presentation of journalism, the world of celebrities, the edge in the rat-race – and the public which goes along with this kind of celebrity journalism.

IN THE VALLEY OF ELAH

(US, 2007, d. Paul Haggis)

In the Valley of Elah is a very fine film, the best of American storytelling. It was written and directed by Paul Haggis who contributed to a number of action films including *Casino Royale*, but who also wrote the Oscar-winning *Million Dollar Baby*, wrote and directed the Oscar-winning *Crash* and contributed to Clint Eastwood's war films, *Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*. In the Valley of Elah is a writing and directing accomplishment.

Only those well versed in the Old Testament books of Samuel will recognise the reference in the title. Elah is the valley where Saul led the Israelites to confront the Philistines, the valley where Goliath challenged the Israelites to battle and where David with his sling and stone defeated the giant and won victory for Israel. This story is recounted twice during the film, once by the war veteran played by Tommy Lee Jones and the second time by the police woman played by Charlize Theron. It is told twice to a young boy, David, so that he will understand something of what it is to be a man, something of what fear is, something of what confrontation and victory are.

This is one of the earliest films reflecting on America's participation in the war in Iraq, reflecting on the rights and wrongs on the actual invasion, the incompetence of the Americans in the aftermath, the attitudes of the soldiers in Iraq, the conditions that they worked under, their bigoted and antagonistic attitudes towards Iraqis.

This film should be seen in the context of Brian De Palma's 2007 film *Redacted*. *Redacted* is a much harder film. De Palma uses various devices, the communications media of the present including a video diary, television reportage, television interviews, the work of embedded cameramen and women during battles, internet websites especially You Tube, the chat rooms. By using all of these devices he emerges his

audience in the reality of a special squad who are at a particular checkpoint in the city of Samara, their behaviour, their interactions, the hard attitudes they developed while in service, a raid, and, based on a true story, the rape of a 14 year old girl and the massacre of her family.

Redacted is an in-your-face condemnation as well as an alert to the realities of war, not focusing on nobility and patriotism but rather the squalid and cruel aspects which emerged in the media in the immediate years after the invasion.

Much of this kind of material is incorporated into the plot of *In the Valley of Elah*. The opening credits include some kind of video diary film - which later is sent through e-mail to various characters. Once again, the modern means of communication technology are to the fore. However, this is a narrative film in the American tradition.

Tommy Lee Jones and Susan Sarandon play the parents of a young man who is missing, considered AWOL. He has just returned from Iraq. Tommy Lee Jones portrays the veteran who goes then to Fort Bragg to investigate what has happened. This gives the film the opportunity to take us right into military headquarters, to see the style and life of the soldiers in the fort, to meet the various officers as well as the soldiers who fought with the missing man. It also offers the opportunity for the characters to go into the town of Fort Bragg, to the shops, the takeaway restaurants, and the strip clubs. The film does not stint on presenting these realistic aspects of the background of war.

Charlize Theron plays a local policewoman, a detective, working with her boss, Josh Brolin, with whom she has had a relationship. When it is discovered that the death of the young man and his disappearance took place on army property, the case is taken over by the military (especially by Jason Patric). However, the character played by Tommy Lee Jones is astute, goes to the scene of the crime, realises that the body was dumped on military ground but that the crime took place in the ordinary local jurisdiction.

The film then becomes a murder-mystery and its solving. The plot is complex with Susan Sarandon as the mother arriving to identify her son and grieving over his death. The couple have already lost one child in the military. The film highlights the grief that many American families have felt in the years after the invasion of Iraq.

There is also a sub-plot concerning Charlize Theron and her bringing up of her son - and the occasion for some very moving sequences when Tommy Lee Jones visits the household and encounters the boy with whom he is awkward but with whom he forms a bond.

The film is interesting in its detective work. Various clues are given, followed through and eventually a plot is unmasked. It is not quite what the audience is expecting - and there have been some diversions along the way, especially concerning Mexican drug dealers. This drug theme is very important - even the murdered boy was on drugs, something which his parents would not believe or could not understand, with the other soldiers saying that they concealed this truth because they wouldn't want their own parents to know. This is another comment on contemporary America, the drug culture, the role of the parent generation and the deceptions of the young.

What is finally revealed is the same kind of attitude that was dramatised in De Palma's *Redacted*. There is bigotry against the Iraqis, violence towards them - which has savage repercussions on the emotions and consciousness of many of the young men who have been sent to serve there.

The film offers excellent performances by all, an interesting and intriguing mystery to be solved, an awareness of the reality of the war in Iraq and the occupation, a challenge to presuppositions and expectations about the role of America in the world and its soldiers and occupying forces.

At the beginning of the film, Tommy Lee Jones shows a Latin-American migrant how to raise the national flag, not putting it upside down as he has, that signalling that there is a desperate crisis and the country is in need. Receiving the flag by mail from his son before he left for Iraq, the final gesture of the film is to raise the flag again - but upside down. The message is clear.

Winner of the SIGNIS award at the Venice Film Festival of 2007.

INTO THE WILD

(US, 2007, d. Sean Penn)

This is a very impressive film in its characters, scope and the wonder and beauty of the locations. Many audiences will find it a very interesting and challenging story. On the other hand, it would not be surprising if some audiences did not find the central character interesting or sympathetic and gave up on him and his journey. *Into the Wild* is also quite long at two and a half hours.

In the late 1990s, author Jon Krakauer wrote an article and then a book on the quest of a young man from a comfortable family who, after graduating college, gave his money to Oxfam, took his old car and went on what was a two year journey in search of meaning, of himself and of America. So much of his time was spent alone, in reading and writing a diary. This itself presents a challenge to a film-maker who has to find ways of communicating an inner life while keeping the narrative moving.

Sean Penn began preparing his film a decade earlier and was finally given the green light by the parents and sister of the young man, Christopher McCannless. The cast had many discussions with the family – and their allowing the film to be made is courageous as the parents do not come out of it well. Sean Penn has proven himself as an actor (from *Dead Man Walking* to *Mystic River*) and has directed some arresting films, *The Indian Runner*, *The Crossing Guard* and *The Pledge*. He has fashioned a filmic story by working on several time levels to draw the audience into the complexities of the young hero's life and relationships: his timeline of his journey is followed alongside the detail of the final months of his time in Alaska at the end of the journey. Into these stories (along with chapter headings indicating birth, adolescence, manhood and, significantly, the getting of wisdom) flashbacks of childhood are inserted. These have been filmed in home movie style which makes these parts of the story more credible.

Emile Hirsch has appeared in a number of strong films, especially *The Emperor's Club*, *Imaginary Heroes* and *Alpha Dog*. This is certainly a breakthrough performance as the whole film focuses on him: the brash young graduate, the individualistic young man in search of meaning, the young man who works on farms and in Burger Kings to support his journey, the idealistic and naïve young man who encounters a whole range of people, especially on the margins of society, and finds warmth and friendship rather than hostility, the emaciated young man who finds himself trapped in an old bus in the snow and ice outside Fairbanks. You might not like Chris, who renames himself Alexander Supertramp, and disagree with his attitudes and behaviour, but Hirsch certainly brings him alive.

William Hurt and Marcia Gay Harden have few moments on screen but create strong impressions of the parents. Jena Malone appears and does voiceover story as the sister. Along the way, Chris meets two older hippies, Catherine Keener and Brian Dierker, and is an unaware catalyst for change in them, the man actually mentioning that Chris was like Jesus. Vince Vaughn is also very good as the friend who employs him on the harvester in the plains of Dakota.

Particularly impressive is the encounter with an old man, played with conviction by veteran Hal Holbrook (81 at the time of filming). Since this occurs in the final part of the film and we have already had quotes from Byron, Thoreau, Jack London and Tolstoy about nature, beauty, solitude and relationships, we are ready for their mountaintop discussion where the old man helps Chris realise that he is on a quest for God.

This is a wonderful road movie, with vivid pictures of Dakota, Arizona, rapids and the Grand Canyon, Los Angeles, California deserts and communes, the west coast and its mountains and, as the goal of his quest, Alaska.

One thing that Chris, Alexander Supertramp, comes to realise is that we are not meant to be alone and happiness is life shared.

THE INVASION

(US, 2007, d. Oliver Hirschbiegel)

Received poorly by public and critics, word came out that there was a change of directors for *The Invasion*, producers' intervention and re-editing.

If one looks at the film without knowing anything about the original from the 1950s and the 1978 remake, it might pass as a moderately suspenseful science fiction. (Abel Ferrara also re-made the film in the 1990s.) But, most audiences who want to see the film will be well versed in the other films and will find this version wanting.

It is a pity because Nicole Kidman does her best and the original director, Oliver Hirschbiegel, made that impressive film about Hitler's last days, *Downfall*. I presume he won't be in a hurry to rush back to Hollywood after this experience.

This version takes place in a big city of personal anonymity rather than a small American town. There is frequent reference to today's world troubles, especially Iraq and Afghanistan. When a spacecraft breaks up on return to earth, alien forces infiltrate earth and take possession of human beings who become conformist and emotionless pods. Nicole Kidman portrays a mother anxious to protect her son, especially from her infected former husband (Jeremy Northam), relying on the help of fellow-scientists (Jeffrey Wright and Daniel Craig whom some critics – not without justification – said it is difficult to tell when he is possessed or not!).

Nicole has to keep awake so that the infection cannot take hold and much of the film has her eluding capture by pretending to be emotionless and trying to stay awake.

One of the main differences from the other versions is the hopeful ending. This time the process can be reversed and the point is made very strongly that while brainwashed conformism might bring about peace in the world, it is at the expense of free will and human error.

JOSHUA

(US, 2007, d. George Ratliff)

Rather a slow-burning melodrama with some elements of horror.

Joshua (Jacob Kogan) is a precocious 9 year old who is terrible at sports but plays the piano well and is interested in the archaeology of ancient Egypt. The film opens with his being hurried off to hospital for his sister's birth. It is clear he is not happy.

The family fuss over the new baby, with plenty of video footage (which contrasts with the footage of his early days, which he watches sadly). He is always in two minds whether his busy father (Sam Rockwell) and his increasingly neurotic mother (Vera Farmiga) really love him.

Gradually the family tensions grow, aggravated by evangelical charismatic grandmother (Celia Weston) and his mother's brother and his music tutor (Dallas Roberts). Things are also a little eerie in the house – there may be ghosts or poltergeists upstairs. Then everything disintegrates – but the question remains: is Joshua just bad seed, or is he psychologically malevolent, or are outside forces creating the havoc?

Despite the low-key tone, this is not the film to recommend to new mothers – or, indeed, fathers.

Quiet horror and terror relying more on atmosphere than on any special effects.

THE LAST LEGION

(UK/US, 2006, d. Doug Keffler)

This is quite an old-fashioned sand, sword and sandals Roman spectacular that is designed for younger audiences but may dissatisfy them since they tend to prefer everything faster, bloodier and more sensational. A pity.

The time is 460 AD, the fall of the Roman Empire. The Goths are in Rome and attack the emperor and his family. Caesar is a young boy who is imprisoned in Capri. Meanwhile, legion commanders who have been in the field for a decade are unable to protect the boy but rescue him from Capri and take him to Britain where battle is done with the local barbarian forces.

There is a tale told in voiceover by the tutor-magician Ambrosinus (Ben Kingsley) that a special sword made by Julius Caesar and hidden by Tiberius in Capri will find its destiny with the boy. The sword is Excalibur and, in Britain, the boy is the father of King Arthur.

Who would have thought of combining Romans, Barbarians and the legends of Camelot?

Tommy Sangster is good as the boy. It is a surprise to see Colin Firth in a legionary's costume rather than in Regency or period dress but he fits into the character and action of the commander surprisingly well. Many British character actors appear, especially a Scots contingent of Peter Mullan, Kevin McKidd, James Cosmo and John Hannah, all of whom except Hannah are cast as brutal barbarian Goths!

Former Miss World and now popular Bollywood and British movie star, Aishwarya Rai, portrays a warrior, whose swordplay and agility would shame the Romans.

Undemandingly entertaining.

LIONS FOR LAMBS

(US, 2007, d. Robert Redford)

This is didactic fiction film-making at its best.

The war in Iraq and the fighting in Afghanistan have produced feature films much more quickly than did the Vietnam War. Both conflicts have been television wars, audiences familiar with what happens, the fighting, the destruction, the deaths on both sides. It was only some years after the surrender of Saigon that films like *The Deer Hunter*, *Apocalypse Now* and *Coming Home* appeared. This year already there have been *The Kingdom*, *Redacted*, *In the Valley of Elah* and *Rendition*, cinema challenges to understanding the conflicts, to appraising political and military authorities and their arguments as well as questioning the role of the media.

The writer of *The Kingdom* (which began as a kind of CSI in Saudi Arabia and then erupted into gung-ho action), Matthew Carnahan also wrote this film which is stronger on thought although it does include action. This is obviously a heartfelt work, at times like a piece of theatre with its dialogues and personal interactions. It will be liked and loathed (as lobby groups in the US have already indicated) according to one's partisan stances and beliefs.

The film has been directed by Robert Redford which gives it a kind of critical 'liberal' imprimatur. Redford directs with confidence: scenes in the Capitol, in a university and, in action in the Afghan mountains. The three strands have been intercut so that the film keeps moving while offering its range of points of view.

The action takes place over an hour and a half, capitalising on the different time zones so that there is mid-morning action in Washington, early morning in California and night already in Afghanistan. There is some variety as flashbacks about the university are inserted into both the Californian story and the action in the Afghan mountains.

The core of the film is the discussion in Washington. Here we have government politics, strategies and attempts at spin in the form of a senator who calls in a network reporter who had praised him and his career some years earlier. He is offering her an exclusive, which really means he wants a favourable story planted about a successful strategy which will win over public opinion. Here the screenplay has plenty to offer on different angles on the past six years, not only on politics, failed military strategies but also the connivance of the media with the government, making it a vehicle of propaganda in the midst of an increasing glut of TV entertainment. With Tom Cruise at his best as the smooth and charming Senator and Meryl Streep at her unvarnished best as the veteran reporter, there is plenty to chew on here with the meaty dialogue.

Meanwhile, Robert Redford portrays an ageing political science professor who is challenging a typical bright student (a fine Andrew Garfield) who is becoming more lazy, cynical and uninvolved. Redford is one of those catalyst lecturers who is able to inspire and transform ordinary and extraordinary students. Once again, the dialogue has a great deal on involvement and detachment, how to work with political processes rather than bypassing or ignoring them, of integrity in doing something rather than indulging in the luxury of opting out. There are flashbacks showing the student's capabilities.

In Afghanistan, the commander of the base (Peter Berg who also directed *The Kingdom*) is initiating the new plan, to put small groups on mountain tops to occupy them before the Taliban does. Two earnest young men are amongst the squad. When the plan faces disaster and they confront the Taliban, there are flashbacks to their university days and their interactions with the professor, especially when they want to put their beliefs into action and enlist and do something for America.

Audiences who do not want to be challenged by these ideas will not like the film. They might say it is too 'talky'. Some potentially sympathetic audiences have found the film too preachy, even 'sanctimonious' in its presentation of its arguments. However, with its fine cast, Redford's direction and its 94 minutes' running time, it is cinema debate at its sharpest.

THE LOOKOUT

(US, 2007, d. Scott Frank)

A small film but one which is very effective within its own limits.

For the first half, the film is a portrait of a bright young high school hockey athlete who is responsible for the death of two friends and severe leg injuries for another because of his driving bravado and a crash. He himself has been brain damaged and has lost a lot of his memory and, especially, his ability to recall detail and make connections. He goes to a school for training, especially in sequential thinking, and boards with an older blind man. He does cleaning jobs in a bank.

Chris is Joseph Gordon-Levitt (from *Third Rock from the Sun* to *Mysterious Skin* and *Brick*) and he brings humanity to this complex character, not just making him an object of pity or sentimentalising him, but showing more realistically - his successes, failures and his frustrations. Jeff Daniels is very good as Lewis, his blind (but rough-mouthed) friend. There is a very edgy sequence at a Thanksgiving dinner when Chris takes Lewis to meet his wealthy parents.

Chris is helped in a bar by a seemingly friendly young man who also introduces him to a former lap-dancer and Chris is drawn in by the contact and the infatuation. Gary (British Matthew Goode) is really planning a bank robbery with a group of thugs and wants Chris's co-operation and information. The dancer, Luvlee, is played by Australian Isla Fisher.

This means that the second part of the film is the planning and execution of the robbery, Chris's part in it and the effect that it has on him. The consequences of the robbery are not what we might have anticipated, which gives the film some forcefulness and a more rounded picture of Chris.

Plot, performances and tension make this a very good film.

MR BROOKS

(US, 2007, d. Bruce A. Evans)

For many years it has been fashionable for critics to rubbish Kevin Costner (overlooking his performances in such small films as *The Upside of Anger*). Mr Brooks has critics praising him – and stating that the screen persona that they have not liked is perfect for this film, presenting a smooth and charming front.

Costner is certainly good as Mr Brooks. From the first moment, we realise that there is something wrong psychologically with him as he talks to himself in a mirror. Actually, he is talking with his other self, an alter ego played with evil bemusement by William Hurt. Costner is Earl Brooks. Hurt is Marshall. Together they combine into the psychopathic Mr Brooks, a millionaire serial killer who is expert at covering his tracks, especially after his discussions with Marshall. Soon there is a brutal murder. Earl says it will be his last. Marshall knows better.

Earl's social life is prosperous. His factory and business are booming. He has a charming wife (Marg Helgenberger) who does not suspect anything and an attractive daughter (Danielle Panabaker) who soon manifests a strong will and a desire to take over from her father.

Meanwhile, a harassed detective, going through a messy divorce because she is, in fact, a millionaire and her ex-husband and lawyer are after all they can get, is upset because a killer she arrested has escaped and is after her. She also gets caught up in the serial killer case. It is good to see Demi Moore back on the screen and she plays tough as the detective.

The plot certainly thickens and becomes quite complex, especially as Earl (not Marshall) admires the detective and is keen to help her. This becomes possible when he encounters the escapee. It becomes even more interesting because an amateur photographer (Dane Cook) has evidence on Mr Brooks and, as blackmailing fee, wants to go along to participate in a murder. Marshall does not think this is a good idea either but Mr Brooks very cleverly outwits the blackmailer, the detective and Marshall.

This is an intelligent thriller with clever dialogue and plotting (a tricky dream at the end as harbinger of what is to come) and effective performances.

NANCY DREW

(US, 2007, d. Andrew Fleming)

Nancy Drew, like her male counterparts, *The Hardy Boys*, comes from the 1930s when a series of small budget films were made with Bonita Granville. Now she is updated to 2007 with a contemporary look but a plot that would have been at home seventy years ago.

Nancy Drew is a teenage sleuth. As portrayed by Emma Roberts, she is good at her hobby and has the marked assurance of the professional. We see her in action at once as she confronts some thieves, helping them to give themselves up and to seek psychological counselling – she is that kind of precocious girl. She does not fall from the guttering of the local church because she has her sleuthing kit with her, which

contains rope for descending buildings. Police, press, friends acclaim her, though her father (Tate Donovan) has his reservations.

When they visit California, Nancy promises her father not to sleuthe. Of course, she does. She has accepted rental of a house where a famous and glamorous movie star lived, disappeared and was murdered. This teenage Miss Marple (including her older style fashion and primness of manner) discovers the clues and the star's daughter (Rachel Leigh Cook), exposes the murderer (who will not be a surprise) and even sets a fashion trend in trendy LA.

Old-fashioned story in new-fangled clothes – for teenage girls and their mothers (and long-suffering fathers and brothers).

THE NINES

(US, 2007, d. John August)

The Nines is an intriguing film. It focuses on contemporary media. It focuses on philosophical and even theological questions about the world, human identity, creation, and the role of God.

John August was a writer on such films as the Minority Report. However, in reflecting on the role of the writer, the writer's creation of characters, the writer giving them a life of their own and having to let them go, he decided to be a director for this film and also to ponder about the nature of his control of his characters as director.

The film has three parts with Ryan Reynolds, Melissa McCarthy, and Hope Davis having three different roles.

The film opens with the Ryan Reynolds' character in despair, setting fire to his girlfriend's possessions, going to find some crack, driving and drinking, finally being arrested because the house is burnt down. The film then moves into the three sections.

The first is called Prisoner where the same character is confined to house arrest. The film shows him meandering around the house. It also shows the role of his agent, Margaret (Melissa McCarthy), and her supervising him. He also has a curious next door neighbour played by Hope Davis. He does get out and finds a young girl who is mute and uses sign language. However, he is returned to his home and confined with a leg brace, which will indicate his going beyond the barriers set down. This section of the film, which was made on 16mm film, starts to raise questions about the identity of the character as well as of the two women.

The film then makes a transition to the second part in which Ryan Reynolds plays a screenwriter for television. Hope Davis is the production manager. Melissa McCarthy is the star (playing herself, with her real life husband playing himself). The film was made on ordinary digital video. With a crew of five, there is an intensity and immediacy about this story. The film traces the preparation of a pilot, its filming, the testing of the pilot with an audience and the decision to change the main star. The film also is a documentary about all of this. Everything is being filmed and sometimes the characters turn to the camera. The film is also a critique of the use of testing for the success of pilots - adapting, as the author suggests, the film to the stupidest people in the room and their understanding. In this part of the film, the same questions of that identity are raised and a kind of parallel universe has been created with parallel characters.

The third part of the film is filmed in 35mm with all the best technical equipment. This time Ryan Reynolds plays a family man who is a creator of video games. Melissa McCarthy is his wife, Elle Fanning his daughter, Hope Davis a stranger he meets on the road when the car breaks down in the forest and he seeks help. In this part of the film, something of the mystery is unravelled.

What John August is intending is that one can understand something of the nature of God and the best of all possible worlds with the image and analogy of the screenwriter. While God might be a number ten, the

screenwriter is a number nine. There are many illusions, real and mystical to the number nine throughout the film.

The philosophy of the writer is that everybody does the best that they can, creating a world, trying to understand, but failing to create the best world. In this sense, the film is an analogy about God and incarnation because Ryan Reynolds' three characters have also been on earth for many, many years, the characters are being called back out of the world which will then self-destruct - or will it?

Ryan Reynolds, best known for action films like Blade or many comedies in which he plays a slacker, is a complete surprise in his skill in these three roles. Melissa McCarthy uses the reality of her size and weight to advantage in her characters. Hope Davis has proven over many years that she is a strong performer in independent films.

A film, which raises a lot of questions. It also entertains as well as intrigues.

ONCE

(Ireland, 2007, d. John Carney)

Once is a modest film that was turned down by many festivals but was released in the US to a very popular response. It is the simple story of a singer and his encounter with a woman from eastern Europe who encourages him. They are played sympathetically by Glen Hansard and Marketa Irglova. The film is brief. The singer lives at home with his father repairing vacuum cleaners. He is anxious to record an album and much of the film covers the recording sessions.

It is a film of music and about music – and the impact of the film will depend on how one responds to the singer and his songs. Not everyone will be on the wavelength of the music and may not be able to get into it (as was the experience of this reviewer). But this is a matter of taste.

Glen Hansard, from an Irish group, Frames, is the composer of the songs and the performer and this makes the film something like a visual album of his songs.

RATATOUILLE

(US, 2007, d. Brad Bird)

A delightfully entertaining film that can be recommended for young and old.

Unless you have a phobia about rats. This film will probably be welcomed by any Association for the Rehabilitation and Protection of Rats. The danger is, perhaps, that some kiddies may get the idea that they should have a rat for a pet!

Pixar Studios have a long record of making animated films that please both adults and children. They have won Oscars for Finding Nemo and The Incredibles and their other films, all of which are worth seeing, are the two Toy Story films, A Bug's Life, Monsters Inc and Cars (this one may be their least successful).

The film, as the title suggests, is also about food – in France, Paris to be precise.

We are introduced to one of the most genial of rats, Remy, who has a gourmet gift of smell and taste for good food – and is, therefore, something of a misfit in the colony where his father and brother, Emile, are not discriminating in the garbage they collect and eat. These opening sequences make the rats quite congenial, though not for the old lady who watches cooking programs which also delight Remy as does her kitchen. When she wakes to find her house infested by the colony, she grabs a shotgun and chases the rats down the sewers.

Luckily Remy washes up in Paris just near the restaurant of his favourite chef whose TV programs and book proclaim, Anyone Can Cook.

Unfortunately, the restaurant has hit hard times after bad reviews and the death of chef, Gaston. The reviews come from the miserable food critic, Anton Ego, 'the Grim Eater'. It must be mentioned that he is voiced by Peter O'Toole at his best and, thankfully, he appears again towards the end of the film. O'Toole gives the voice his oratorical best and is highly entertaining.

The plot is not entirely predictable, especially when Remy sees the young garbage-putter-outer, Linguini, interfering with the soup and remedies the crises to the ecstatic responses of the customers. A deal is worked out where Linguini does the work and gets the credit while Remy hides in Linguini's chef's hat, directing him and his actions by pulling the left and right tufts of his hair! His success drives the chief chef, a scheming villain Skinner (voiced by Ian Holm), paranoid and beserk. In the meantime, the only woman cook allowed in the kitchen is Colette. Linguini, of course, falls for her.

Actually, there is plenty more plot, so the story keeps up the interest. While Linguini is a variation on the Napoleon Dynamite type and not too bright, Remy is full of ideas and skills. However, his crisis is whether he will help the humans according to his talent or acknowledge his rodent roots and return to the colony as his father wants.

There are several peril sequences which work extremely well: the rats hunted by the old lady, Remy gushing through the sewers, Remy pursued all over Paris by Skinner.

Just when you think it is all over for everyone and Linguini and Remy are unmasked, enter Anton Ego to pass judgment on the new young chef. The sequence where they prepare a wonderful meal is unexpected and a joy to watch.

Writer-director Brad Bird has a fine sense of humour to go with his exuberant talent for making cartoons come alive.

RAZZLE DAZZLE

(Australia, 2006, d. Darren Ashton)

What an enjoyable surprise.

Expecting one of those many recent films about dance, dedicated teachers, problem students, sullen heroes who turn out to be champions, competitions and victories (like Step Up, Stomp the Yard, Take the Lead, even Strictly Ballroom), we discover it is, except...

Facts and statistics are given at the opening about how many children take dance lessons and how many enter into annual competitions. Looks like a documentary touch. But it is only a touch because the main style is that of the Mockumentary (especially made popular by Christopher Guest and his troupe in such

films as *Waiting for Guffman*, *Best in Show* and *A Mighty Wind*). As such, it is very funny, lots of entertaining spoof, Australian deadpan comic observations (made so popular by Kenny), heightened characters and some extreme situations.

The style is a blend of serious interviews with some hilarious comments, a cinema verite style of wandering around the schools, into the homes, eavesdropping on conversations and, then, the razzle dazzle of the dance competitions themselves.

Ben Miller is very good indeed as Mr Jonathan from England who runs his school quite unconventionally, getting the students to imagine grim and gruesome situations (like the massacre of their pets) to explore and mime their feelings. And his repertoire is based on the world's social problems (his first choreography was on the Kyoto agreement and his finale is on the Taliban's oppression of Afghan women and their rebellion for freedom). Jane Hall is Miss Elizabeth, the model of prim, elitist, authoritarian education who refuses to face the possibility of defeat.

But Kerry Armstrong stands out as one of the most oppressive of stage mothers, yet makes her quite credible in her vanity, vulnerability and lack of scruple. Nadine Garner is the more sensible mother who acts as a foil. Toni Lamond and Noeline Brown turn up as judges along with Leo Sayer and Paul Mercurio has some moments as himself, a dance instructor. Tara Morice is the silent costume designer.

The children perform well – although the reaction to these dance schools, performance and competition is to wonder how wise it is to turn most of the dancers into precocious rhythmic-gyrating mini-adults.

Familiar plot but very entertainingly varied – and funny.

RENDITION

(US, 2007, d. Gavin Hood)

Impressive and alarming.

Rendition is an odd word, a kind of literary term which obfuscates the reality it is meant to name. During the Clinton years, rendition and extraordinary rendition was a term devised to describe the 'unofficial' and undocumented transferring of individuals suspected to terrorism to overseas countries for 'interrogation' – since the US does not deal in torture. That is the theory. And why use the word 'rendition' and what does it actually mean as a word let alone a name for what seems reprehensible behaviour?

Since September 2001, rendition has been practised more extensively for any suspicious, possible terrorist and stories have been circulated in recent years (along with information about treatment of internees at Guantanamo Bay) about the torture in questioning of these suspects. Some European countries have been named as receiving prisoners in rendition. Airports (including in Scotland) have been identified as places for refuelling rendition aircraft.

A full documentary on rendition would prove frightening.

However, *Rendition* is a feature film from Hollywood, made for the widest possible audience, a drama that proposes many strands of a story and brings them together at the end of two hours. Since we respond so well to stories, this kind of drama of rendition is a way to inform as well as emotionally stir the worldwide audience.

The film has been well written by Kelley Sane (although the end reveals that there have been different timeframes throughout which makes for some confusion, although it adds to the motivation of the character who is in charge of interrogation and torture). It has also been well directed by Gavin Hood who made the 2006 Oscar-winner, *Tsotsi* – and offers his South African signature by opening this film in Cape Town with fine views of Table Mountain). Hood, as an outsider, can be a touch more dispassionate in his story-telling

than Americans. And, while all the strands come together at the end, he finishes his film without any intrusive, sentimental or spelling-it-all-out close-ups on the final knots and bows.

These strands include the abduction and rendition of an Egyptian-born American from Washington airport (and his name simply deleted from the computer passenger list). He is taken to an unnamed North African country where a suicide bomber has made an attempt on the life of the chief interrogator. Moroccan locations stand in for the anonymous country. This man's daughter has unwittingly taken up with a member of a local fanatical jihad group. In the meantime, his pregnant wife has been searching and lobbying a senator's assistant in Washington. A junior analyst has escaped being killed in the bomb blast and has to take the place of the hands-on member of the American staff and witness the questioning and torture.

There is no lack of plot.

While the film moves with both action and discussion, its cast is a major strength. Omar Metwally is sympathetic as the captive – and we are not spared his torture and his anguish, nor his answers invented to stop the torment. Jake Gyllenhaal is the young official facing his 'first torture', whose sensibilities and conscience are challenged by what he sees. Reese Witherspoon is the captive's wife, Peter Sarsgaard the senate assistant and Alan Arkin the senator.

What makes the scenario all the more frightening is that the person who coldly authorises the rendition with minimum evidence, who uses the war on terror as a cold principle to work on and cuts herself off from any feelings, and has no trouble in public denials of what is happening, is that this character is played by Meryl Streep.

Rendition, its human rights issues, the political implications and the moral questions, should be firmly on the public agenda.

RESIDENT EVIL: EXTINCTION

(US, 2007, d. Russell Mulcahy)

This is the popular third in the film series which has computer game origins. The first dealt with infections and destruction. The second dealt with the consequences and destruction of the world: Apocalypse. The third takes up the theme with a devastated US (Las Vegas is just disappearing ruins in the desert sands), people turned into the undead, Dr Frankenstein-like scientists experimenting with clone warriors who are tested for skills in evading capture and then thrown out as rubbish when they fail. They are played by the heroine, Alice (Milla Jovovich).

The real Alice is loose but evading capture as well as avoiding humans because she brings destruction with her (and she is tracked by satellite by an Artificial Intelligence little girl). She encounters a group in the desert trying to survive and find a haven. She defends them but they have to take a helicopter used by the scientists and flee to Alaska for safety.

Her friend Carlos, from the previous film, is prepared to sacrifice himself and Alice enters the lab to fight it out with the mad doctor (Iain Glenn) who has become hyper-infected. Lots of action and effects and a film buff's catalogue of references to Dawn of the Dead, 28 Days Later, Mad Max 2, A-I, Kill Bill...

Australian director takes over the reins and brings some experience in action films like Razorback, Highlander, Ricochet.

SILK

(Canada, 2007, d. Francois Girard)

Silk is a very picturesque, even elegant film. However, it moves at a very sedate pace indeed which might try the patience of even a generous viewer.

Set in France in the 1860s and 70s, it shows a regional town buoyed up by an entrepreneur (Alfred Molina in a lively performance) who introduces silk worms, establishes factories and makes the town prosperous. He continues to import silkworms from Japan (illegal at the time because of Japanese isolation). The young Herve (Michael Pitt in a too-passive performance) journeys several times to Japan and is infatuated with a concubine. This affects his whole life and makes him also feel guilty as he is happily married to the lovely Helene (Keira Knightly).

The film has both a joyful and a melancholy air about it. There is prosperity and failure, illness and death, doomed love and regrets. Italy stands in for the French village. The location work was done in Japan itself.

Francois Girard made two films with a musical focus, 32 Short Films about Glen Gould and The Red Violin. This adaptation of a 1990s short novel by Alessandro Baricco is more ambitious but will satisfy a more limited audience. The film is pretty but the central character and his sometimes depressed voiceover narrative conveys a pall of gloom as well.

STARDUST

(UK. 2007, d. Matthew Vaughn)

Stardust is a fairy tale, a fairy tale for adults – and for those who enjoy their fantasies with more than a little spoof and satire. It is in the vein of such imaginative predecessors as The Princess Bride and Terry Gilliam's The Adventures of Baron Munchhausen and The Brothers Grimm.

It is all a bit of a surprise, especially knowing that the director, Matthew Vaughn has produced gangster films like Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels and directed Layer Cake. This is something completely different.

Based on a story by Neil Gaiman, set in the 1850s and narrated by Ian McKellen, Stardust is basically a tale of boy meets girl, some perilous adventures and a happy ending. Except... The boy (Charlie Cox) is from England but his mysterious mother comes from the kingdom of Stormhold and he has crossed The Wall from England into Stormhold to retrieve a star that has fallen to earth for his snooty girlfriend (Sienna Miller). The star is really the girl of the romance (Claire Danes), a star who was knocked out of the sky when the signet ring of the kingdom was thrown by the dying king (Peter O'Toole) and collided with the star. Behind the scenes, the king's sons literally battle it out for the inheritance (and, as they die, they form a ghostly observation bench to watch the proceedings). So far, so good – and bad.

On the bad side are three witches who depend on the heart and blood of a star to keep them young (but have lacked a star for four hundred years). They draw lots to go and recover the star – except that one of them cheats, Lamia, who is played in grotesque make-up by Michelle Pfeiffer. But, not to worry, when she is rejuvenated at times, we see the beautiful actress herself.

On the good side, there is a pirate ship's crew led by Captain Shakespeare who is a gruff macho ruffian in public but a gentle, cross-dressing, can-can dancing 'whoopsie' behind closed doors. And this is Robert de Niro.

Chases, quests, betrayals, magic. They are all here. And there is excitement as the surviving brother, Septimus (an excellent Mark Strong), black clad, closes in on the star who is wearing the signet ring about her neck. He has to confront Lamia to do battle for the ring.

There are a few little twists before the end, but it is a genial enough fantasy for those who can be delighted by movie magic. Realists beware.

STELLET LICHT

(Mexico, 2007, d. Carlos Reygadas)

The impressive winner of the Jury prize in Cannes 2007.

However, *Stellet Licht* is a demanding film, not least because of its cinematic style. With only two films before this, Carlos Reygadas is not a predictable director. His *Japon* (2002) was a strange blend of realism and mysticism in the Mexican countryside. His *Batalla en el Cielo* (Battle in Heaven) (2005) was an in-your-face, ugly, brutal and uncompromising glimpse of the underside of Mexico City, culminating in a pilgrimage to the Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Reflection on these two films leads to a realisation that Reygadas feels a great affinity for his Mexican locations, wants to face the harder and harsher aspects of the human struggle, but is fascinated by the religious, prayer and moral implications of his stories.

This interest in the religious and the prayerful is very much to the fore in *Stellet Licht*. In fact, the visual style and the camerawork ask a contemplative response to the plot and characters. It is unhurried, with long takes of the landscapes and still, focused close-ups on the faces of characters. The film opens with a very long take of the move from the dark of night and the stars to dawn, the rising sun and light pervading the open fields – and the film ends with a corresponding reverse from sunset to darkness.

Within that framework and with a long running time, Reygadas tells a rather simple story of a family, love tensions and betrayal. The characters are Mennonites, descended from 17th century religious refugees from Germany who settled in Mexico, live a more simple life as they farm there. Different episodes show in detail some domestic scenes, like breakfast, scenes of harvesting and the rituals for a laying out of a body before a funeral.

Prayer, of a private kind is important for the Mennonites, especially the lengthy silent grace before meals. The more public and communal prayer is seen the funeral wake.

But morality and conscience is at the core of the film: the husband unfaithful to his devoted wife and the mother of his many children, his dilemma in seeking advice from his preacher father and his attempts at honesty with his wife and his mistress. The characters of both women are very well portrayed, important because it is through their final mystical experience from death to life and the gift of love that the film can reach a conclusion.

Stellet Licht is a film that is going to be included in many courses on religious cinema.

YOU KILL ME

(US, 2007, d. John Dahl)

A film on AA, quite a number of meetings – and more.

During the 1990s, director John Dahl made a number of effective thrillers, *Red Rock West*, *The Last Seduction*, *Unforgettable*. He has gone back to this kind of thriller – except that he has made it comical.

Ben Kingsley looks particularly sinister as a hit man – but then sleeps through his hit because he has an alcohol problem. His boss sends him to San Francisco to get help, take an ordinary job while he attends AA meetings. Bill Pullman is his rather sleazy Californian connection. Luke Wilson is an AA sponsor who works on a bridge toll booth and Tea Leoni is a lonely and sympathetic woman whom he meets at his job – preparing corpses for burial.

The plot and the film are slight but it is all quite well done and has good performances and dialogue, especially from Kingsley who is persuasive as the hitman with a vocation from earliest days, but who sees the light and is earnest in reform (of his drinking, that is).

There are some mob sub-plots involving Philip Baker Hall and Denis Farina as ageing bosses.

Not one for the memory, but an offbeat pleasure while you watch.

SIGNIS FILM REVIEWS DECEMBER 2007

30 DAYS OF NIGHT
AMERICAN GANGSTER
ANNA M
AUGUST RUSH
BEOWULF
BEE MOVIE, The
BELLA
BRICK LANE
CHROMOPHOBIA
CLOSING THE RING
CODE NAME: THE CLEANER
ENCHANTED
FRED CLAUS
HE WAS A QUIET MAN
HITMAN
I AM LEGEND
I'M NOT THERE
INFINITE JUSTICE
I SERVED THE KING OF ENGLAND
JANE AUSTEN CLUB, The
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MAGIC FLUTE
MR MAGORIUM'S MAGIC EMPORIUM
PRET-MOI TA MAIN (I DO)
REDACTED
RESCUE DAWN
SHROOMS
TALK TO ME
THIS CHRISTMAS
VERY BRITISH GANGSTER, A
YOUTH WITHOUT YOUTH

30 DAYS OF NIGHT

(US, 2007, d. David Slade)

The vampire race does not die. Neither do the vampire movies. Here is one which has quite an exotic setting and a different variation on the theme.

The setting is northern Alaska, the town of Barrow, small population, some homes, stores, generating plant and a sheriff. For 30 days, the town is in complete darkness. What better time than this for some wandering European vampires to come across the straits to North America and wreak destruction?

This is an above average vampire film though it will best be appreciated by fans who want something a little more substantial than shocks and gore. It opens like an eerie thriller just before the sun sets for a month. There are suggestions that something is wrong so that by the time the small community is set upon by the vampires, we are feeling more than a little edgy.

Josh Hartnett plays the town sheriff and for the first part, he acts just like a sheriff with a town in difficulties and afraid. When the situation becomes more desperate and the citizens are either destroyed or trying to hide from the onslaught, he takes on a heroic stand. This is complicated by his estranged wife missing her plane to get out, his grandmother being killed and his younger brother being part of the lessening number of survivors.

A lot of the action has the group hiding, trying not to be discovered and then having to flee to safer places of refuge. In the meantime, the vampires take over the town. Their leader is played by Danny Huston as a dominating and terrifying presence.

While dawn comes again after the 30 days, the tone of the ending is rather downbeat and heroic rather than everything neatly solved.

AMERICAN GANGSTER

(US, 2007, d. Ridley Scott)

American Gangster will probably go straight into the canon of outstanding gangster films.

It is not mythmaking like Coppola's Godfather trilogy. It is not operatic and rhetorical like the films of Martin Scorsese. Rather, it is a matter-of-fact recounting of the career of Frank Lucas from 1968 to 1975 and the work of a special anti-drugs squad led by Richie Roberts. It tells its story while vividly re-creating the period and using the New York locations effectively. At moments it is almost documentary-like. However, piece by piece, it builds up two portraits, two ways of life, two codes of ethics moving towards an action climax and a justice epilogue.

The screenplay was written by Steven Zaillian and other writers. Zaillian made a great impact with his ability to fashion a screenplay for Schindler's List and then for Gangs of New York (geared to Scorsese's style). Direction is by Ridley Scott, who always capitalizes on his talent for quick storytelling from his hundreds of commercials. For almost thirty years, Scott has been making popular entertainments but has made classics of science-fiction (Alien), futuristic fables (Blade Runner), feminism (Thelma and Louise), costume epics (Gladiator).

Frank Lucas, from North Carolina, had a deprived childhood and then, in New York became the chauffeur and collector for crime boss, Bumpy Johnson. When Johnson died in 1968, Lucas took charge, drawing on his experience and creating a crime empire, an African American empire employing his family, which the Italians and the authorities could not readily believe or accept.

With Denzel Washington as Frank Lucas, the character has charm, has learnt urbane ways and has begun to move in New York society. But episodes in the film leave us in no doubt he could be ruthless and cruel. By going to market sources in South East Asia and bribing the military to bring the purest of heroin to the US, he undercut his rivals with quality drugs. He received some protection from the Mafia but was also pursued by corrupt police for their cut of the profits.

With Russell Crowe as Richie Roberts, the detective whose private life could be a shambles was, nevertheless, incorruptible and persevering with his squad and finally finding a way to bring Lucas down.

Much of the quite long film (over two and a half hours) is painstaking in its delineation of characters, the steps Lucas took to consolidate his work (including trips to Asia) as well as the careful work of Roberts. The tracing of the growth of imports from Asia, the addictions of many of the American forces and the trade on the streets is also filled in with some detail.

A gallery of top character actors fill out the supporting roles. These include Chiwetel Ejiofor as Huey Lucas, Ruby Dee as Mrs Lucas, Josh Brolin as a corrupt detective, Armand Assante as the Mafia protector, Ted Levine as the officer in charge, Joe Morton as Lucas's counselor.

Not as violent or verbally assaulting as Scorsese's films like *Goodfellas* or *The Departed*, but it does have its moments though they are comparatively brief.

ANNA M

(France, 2007, d. Michel Spinoso)

The French do fascinating portraits of individualistic people, and people touched by madness. *Anna M* is one of those films – only more so.

Isabelle Carre gives a credible and frightening performance as Anna. She is a quiet woman, works at a library, diligent and basically inoffensive. She lives with her problematic mother. She could have lived a quiet life of obscurity. However, depressed, she wants to end her life and walks in front of a car.

We have assumed that she is normal enough, balanced enough. But, within a short time, we see how mistaken we have been. Attended to by a perfectly ordinary doctor who is professionally pleasant and helpful, she turns him into an object of obsession. The rest of the film is a disturbing journey through Anna's psyche, an extraordinary labyrinth of single-minded pursuit of the doctor, full of intrusive, inappropriate behaviour, wearing the doctor and his wife down. She interprets – misinterprets – everything he says and does. She is in complete self-delusion and in denial. Her mother can't cope with her. The doctor cannot persuade her otherwise.

Towards the end of the film, Anna takes a job as a governess of some children of a busy father – and her ultimate dealing with the children is also frightening, especially their game of digging a mine (which happens to be their floor and the roof of the doctor's apartment) and her losing it with the children.

Where can she go? How can this end?

Isabelle Carre is fine in a role that Isabelle Huppert would have done chillingly in the earlier part of her career. Gilbert Melki shows us the ordinariness of a sympathetic doctor, the bewilderment of the object of unwanted affection, the exasperation that his life is being taken over.

If you are looking for a disquieting psychodrama, this could well be it.

AUGUST RUSH

(US, 2007, d. Kirsten Sheridan)

If you are a reader of reviews by the more 'serious' critics, you will find a rather universal dismissal of this film as far too emotional and sentimental. If you are a reader of reviews which try to communicate with the general audience, you will find the film praised for its entertainment and values – and the admission that it is unashamedly emotional and full of sentiment. It was W. Somerset Maugham who remarked that sentimentality is only the sentiment you disapprove of.

I very much liked *August Rush* – and it was very tear-inducing, especially because of its joy and happiness.

This is a modern fairytale full of coincidences of plot that would have made Dickens both tearful and pleased.

It is also a film about sound and music. The writer, director, musical director and composer, sound engineer have all been at great pains to alert audiences to the myriad sounds around us, even the clanging and shrill blasts of the inner city. They are all part of nature's and human enterprises' contribution to potential music.

Evan Taylor is a young orphan, bullied at the orphanage, especially because he claims to hear his parents. His are the ears through which we listen to the world's and the universe's music.

We then learn who his parents were, their individual stories (both musicians, he modern, she classical), their briefest of encounters, the forces that pulled them apart, their not knowing they had a son. Jonathan Rhys Meyers takes a break from villains and Henry VIII to play Louis, the Irish father. Keri Russell, who was so good in *Waitress*, is the American cellist mother.

The good news is that Freddie Highmore is Evan. After *Finding Neverland*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *A Good Year*, we know that he is a talented and pleasing screen personality. He runs away from the orphanage to find his parents hoping that the social worker, Terrence Howard, will help.

I don't know if I have made this sound like a modern *Oliver Twist*, but it is, especially when Evan befriends a young street musician and The Wiz, the partly humorous, partly sinister man who takes care of the group of boys and the money they get from busking. He is played with some glee and some frightening intensity by Robin Williams. The Wiz wants to be his manager and exploit him with the name, August Rush.

The rest of the story concerns Evan's encountering an African American church which recognizes his musical genius. He studies, composes and, like Oliver, falls into the hands of The Wiz who becomes more and more like Bill Sykes. And there is an ending, full of music, which will have all but the most hardened sensibilities (the critics!!) reaching for tissues.

Kirsten Sheridan wrote *In America* (full of sentiment also). She is the daughter of Jim Sheridan (*The Field*, *My Left Foot*).

THE BEE MOVIE

(US, 2007, d. Steve Hickner, Simon J. Smith)

This is a likable animated story, genial rather than great.

About ten years ago, Woody Allen as Z in *Antz* did the unexpected and the undesirable thing. He questioned the long tradition of work and conformism in the ant colony. He went out and saw the world. Perhaps Jerry Seinfeld went out and saw *Antz* and was inspired to write *The Bee Movie*.

Seinfeld voices the hero, Barry Beston, who, along with his friend and stickler for the rules, Adam (voice of Matthew Broderick), graduates, is taken on a tour of the honey production plant where they are all to work – and to choose a job which they will have all their lives. That doesn't seem right to Barry who is also a disappointment to his parents (Kathy Bates and Barry Levinson). Barry goes out with the nectar collecting squad and has a succession of unfortunate accidents (pratfall laughs for the audience) and ends up almost killed by a vain tennis player (Patrick Warburton) but is saved by a nice florist Vanessa (Renee Zellweger). Despite the bees' rule not to talk to humans, Barry does and becomes firm friends with Vanessa. Surprised by the fact that a bee could talk, she soon gets used to it and they chatter along amiably.

A key event is the discovery of mass produced honey which deprives the bees of their livelihood and income – under the brand name of Ray Liotta. A court case ensues presided over by the judge (Oprah Winfrey) and defended by an outlandish Southern drawl lawyer (an amusing turn by John Goodman). Barry is interviewed on TV by a Larry King bee lookalike. Ray Liotta comes into court and loses his cool. Sting is called as a witness to be unmasked as Gordon Sumner exploiting a serious bee characteristic for his commercial name and gain.

We understand these bees because they are just like us – and we too would be sympathetic if we could have conversations with them! In the meantime, this is pleasant bee social-minded propaganda.

BELLA

(US/Mexico, 2006, 6. Alejandro Gomez Monteverde)

The popularity of Bella is something of a fairytale in itself. Made on a small budget by an aspiring Mexican writer-director in Los Angeles, it took the prize for the People's Award at the 2006 Toronto Festival, beating many big name films. After doing some of the rounds of festivals, it eventually received an American commercial release in October 2007.

The film is very appealing with its romantic overtones but with its underlying sadness.

Popular singer and actor, Eduardo Verastegui, plays a young man whose life went wrong but who was able to overcome what had happened to him and be positive in someone else's life. The film opens and closes with his character, Jose, sitting on a beach. He watches people pass by, especially the children. As his memory goes back, he remembers the time of promise when he was going to be a star footballer but a car accident changes everything in a flash and destroys his hopes as well as the lives of others.

His memory also goes back to a significant day when he rescued the waitress who is sacked by his brother from the restaurant where he works as the chef. She has her moods and a temper – which is not helped by her discovery that she is pregnant. Jose takes the day off and they – and we – share some momentous events during that day: whether the waitress will have the child, a visit to Jose's family (and meeting his entertainingly lively and undiplomatic brother), words of wisdom from both father and mother, the reality of support from Jose.

And then, we are back at the beach, wondering what happened to the waitress, Jose, what about the child - because it is four years later.

Verastegui has great charm and presence. Tammy Blanchard is very good and convincing as Nina, the waitress. And the film, made by a young man in his late 20s, is a blend of realism and sadness, joy and redemption, plenty of sentiment, but great hope.

BEOWULF

(US, 2007, d. Robert Zemeckis)

Watching Beowulf, I had the sometimes wonky experience of rapidly changing moods and moving from dislike to admiration to dislike again. Perhaps a useful clue is given by some reviewers: it will appeal to the 300 crowd. 300 was a macho, macho actioner, based on a graphic novel, some absurd dialogue from absurd accents and designed to look like a moving image graphic novel.

While taking its inspiration from the old English epic poem, Beowulf, the screenwriters (with graphic novel backgrounds and enthusiasms) have tried to make the poem more coherent in plot and in motivation. They have succeeded. However...

Before writing about the 'However...', acknowledgement must be made of the extraordinary production qualities. Firstly, the film was made in 3D – and, if you must see it, try to see this 3d version see it and on an IMAX screen. It is often breathtaking. Never has there been such clear 3d photography and projection. So much seems literally in your face and often movement seems to be coming over our shoulders and flying towards the screen. This is top technology.

The other important aspect is that Robert Zemeckis introduced what he calls captured performance in his family film, *The Polar Express*. This is a form of animation film-making. The actors use skintight clothing, have sensors all over their faces and wear electronic helmets. They perform within a limited 'black box' space with cameras moving rapidly and intricately through the action. The sensed material is then the foundation for the computer work as the designers and costumers, the set decorators and the make-up artists, using the basic filmed performances, flesh them out bringing form and colour, gearing the mouthing of the dialogue to the performance.

This means that some characters look like the actors (especially Anthony Hopkins and Angelina Jolie), some more or less like (John Malkovich) or artificial (Robin Wright Penn) or completely different: Ray Winstone is transformed into an almost two metre high sleek warrior hero. He also stands in for the dragon while Crispin Glover is the monster Grendel. The dragon fight is quite spectacular.

Back to the however... The film is a mixum gatherum of Danish carousing, perilous sea adventures and killing of monsters, political intrigue, fidelity and infidelity, epic action and all too human sins. Some of it works well, some of it is difficult to gauge as the actors sometimes declaim as if they are voicing animation while others act more naturally. And the accents... allegedly Welsh (following Anthony Hopkins) but not really suggesting 6th century Denmark.

Beowulf is something of a 'guy' thing. But it does have Anthony Hopkins saying, "See you in the morning, Odin willing"!!

BRICK LANE

(UK, 2007, d. Sarah Gavron)

Monica Ali's novel about Brick Lane and Banglatown in London made quite an impact when it was published in 2004. Not everyone was happy with its portrayal of migrants from Bangladesh, especially of women, in London and there were rumblings before the making of the film version – then the Prince of Wales actually cancelled his presence at a Royal Command Performance. All this seems quite unnecessary when we see the film.

Taking part of the novel (as film versions must do), this is a very quiet, even low-key presentation of a young woman in the 1980s who leaves her home and her sister in Bangladesh after the suicide of their mother. Her memories of this childhood with her sister glow and are filmed beautifully. She is sent to London and the film moves forward to 2000. The young girl is now middle-aged, still rather inenuous, wife in an arranged marriage with two daughters, the older of whom is a discontented teenager.

Nazneem (a gentle performance by Tannishtha Chatterjee) lives an enclosed life in an estate of flats and balconies. She ventures out only for shopping. Her husband, who means well, is fired from his job when he expected promotion and intends to return to Bangladesh. While this has been a desire of Nazneem, it soon becomes a difficulty as a neighbour gives her a sewing machine and she can work at home, the young man who brings the work is attracted to her and she to him, and her daughter does not want to leave London.

In the meantime, September 11th occurs and the young man becomes more and more radicalized. Nazneem does move out a little, attending a rally and, eventually, having to chase her daughter who wants to run away.

Combining Muslim religious strands and culture, with a constant subtext of UK wariness of migrants from the subcontinent, the film offers food for thought and an emotional entry into the lives of its characters and for the plight, even fate, of women in Brick Lane.

CHROMOPHOBIA

(UK. 2005, d. Martha Fiennes)

Chromophobia is not a word that falls trippingly from the tongue. It actually refers to an art work, a plasma screen piece that reflects colours according to different stimuli. But, maybe that is a red herring.

The film is really a contemporary drama where we are introduced to a range of characters who, we know, will eventually all be connected. This works quite well and offers the audience plenty to think about.

Performances are very strong and each cast member is given a substantial amount of screen time. The general setting is the affluent business world with political and newspaper connections. There is a sub-plot which concerns a Spanish migrant, her young daughter and a social worker.

Whether it is the screenplay or whether it is the strong presence of Kristin Scott Thomas, the centre of attention is most frequently on Iona, a modern neurotic wife and mother, who is into every fad and movement that one could think of. It is she who buys the Chromophobia piece – which seems more important to her than her emotionally neglected and clever son. Her husband is a hotshot business adviser (Damian Lewis) who is promoted by his boss (Anthony Higgins) and asked to look after the extensive portfolio of a wealthy Labor party peer and minister, a blind trust which covers financial and political corruption.

His father is a High Court Judge (Ian Holm) who has his own secrets. His university days' friend (Ben Chaplin) is an ecological journalist who is invited to a deer hunt but has his own ambitious pursuit of double dealings going on.

The sub-plot stars Penelope Cruz as the terminally ill prostitute mother and a very sympathetic Rhys Ifans is a social worker.

Rounding out the central characters is the young boy's godfather (Ralph Fiennes), an art auctioneer who has his own sexual problems and is the victim of violence.

Put that all together in a very British way, sometimes laconic (even when characters are desperate), sometimes frenetic (especially when the press scents blood) but generally very civilised by both the pretentious and unpretentious alike.

Martha Fiennes had previously directed *Onegin*. She has taken on quite a task here – and has made it both interesting and entertaining.

CLOSING THE RING

(UK/Canada, 2007. d Richard Attenborough)

With director Richard Attenborough at 83, we are not expecting an avant garde film. No, this is old-fashioned film-making which appeals to older audiences and those with a romantic vein. It boasts a good cast, a chance to see Shirley MacLaine in her early 70s doing her acerbic thing and Christopher Plummer, nearer to 80, exerting his charm.

Actually, the plot is quite complicated. There are two time eras, the 1940s and the 1990s and there are two place settings, the Michigan and Belfast. The film moves from place to place, time to time with plenty of flashbacks. It is a bit like the cyclic indication of the title. We move around the ring and finally it is closed.

In the 1940s, three young men are great friends, enlist together after Pearl Harbour, train together and go on flying missions to Europe. At the centre of this circle is Ethel Ann (Mischa Barton) who loves one of the three, promising to love him forever. Caring for Ethel Ann, he asks one of his friends to look after her if anything should happen to him. This leads to some complications after the war and its effect on the older Ethel Ann (Shirley MacLaine).

In the meantime in Belfast, people have to shelter from raids. The IRA is active and the British troops watchful. Then the good-time Americans come.

In the 1990s, the young Belfast fireman from the 1940s (Pete Postlethwaite) continues to dig on the mountainside at the edge of the city, helped by an exuberant young man (Martin McCann) who finds Ethel Ann's ring. As might be imagined, this opens up all the memories, probes into the secrets, especially for the only surviving pilot friend (Christopher Plummer) and Ethel Ann's daughter, Marie (Neve Campbell). A visit to Belfast and an experience of terrorist bombs lead to some resolution of the events which have bedeviled the characters for almost fifty years.

Despite the time and place shifts, this is plain and classic storytelling. Definitely not for those with Tarantino sensibilities. An entertainment and some emotions for those who like the old-style films.

CODE NAME: THE CLEANER

(US, 2007, d. Les Mayfield)

An innocuous time-passer for an undemanding rainy afternoon. And for fans of Cedric the Entertainer and his particularly American style.

It's a spoof of Bondish spy films as well as the world of videogames and their effect on the imaginations of susceptible males.

Cedric wakes to find himself next to a dead body - and his memory gone. As flashes come back, he believes he is Colonel Bowman, a special forces expert involved in secret government missions. Suddenly he is picked up by the glamorous Nicolette Sheridan as if she were a desperate housewife to Cedric. Needless to say, she is on the side of the villains. Then the chases start.

Cedric is helped by a waitress, Lucy Lui in Charlie's Angels vein, who can serve up some martial arts moves as well. Needless to say, she is on the side of the goodies.

It's all to do with a Seattle company trying to manufacture an encoded chip which can't be broken and planting it in the Colonel Bowman game. There is a whistleblower, the FBI, a rogue agent, a businessman who is also into martial arts, a rap-singing janitor and Cedric trying to remember who he is.

Well-produced but with a script that is both corny and basic, it is a film that is here today, gone tomorrow.

ENCHANTED

(US, 2007, d. Kevin Lima)

You would have to be a bit of a stone not to enjoy this engaging fantasy. If you don't enjoy the romance, you will certainly enjoy the spoofs and the irony.

The opening of the film transports us back to the heyday of Disney films and their animation style. Here is Giselle, not a princess, but a dreamer like Snow White, who knows that one day her prince will come. And he does, listening to her song wafting over the countryside. She confides all her hopes to the biggest collection of supporting animal cast since Bambi. Unfortunately for Giselle and Prince Edward, his wicked stepmother (straight out of Snow White and Sleeping Beauty) puts a curse on Giselle and sends her as far away as possible, down a well - into a busy Times Square and in the human form of the charming Amy Adams.

For those who were wondering what the film was getting at, once they are in New York, they will be at ease, except that they will be laughing a lot.

What happens when you blend the innocence and charm of fairyland with modern New York City? For the cartoon characters, it can be life transforming. Giselle finds that being human is not being a two dimensional drawing with one dimensional thinking and feeling. Grateful for any help, she is looked after by a businessman (Patrick Dempsey on leave from *Gray's Anatomy* and obviously relishing a substantial film role) and his daughter. He is generous but mystified and exasperated but his daughter is enraptured by Giselle who gradually becomes more Cinderella-like. As with *Crocodile Dundee* and ingenuous others from out-of-town, there is a lot of comedy to be had from misunderstandings and mix-ups in the big city.

This is further complicated when Timothy Spall turns up to do the wicked stepmother's evil behest to get rid of Giselle. Lots of comedy in his disguises and his frustrated and failed attempts.

Then more complications when Prince Edward materialises in search of Giselle. He is even more of a *Crocodile Dundee*, but without the innate sense of humour and shrewdness. He remains amusingly two dimensional in the fine performance by James Marsden (who was also very good in his role as the MC in *Hairspray*). His one dimensional thinking, feeling (and expectations that he and Giselle should be singing romantic songs) do not change.

Then, at last, at a ball, the stepmother materialises in the form of Susan Sarandon. Battle begins.

There are some romantic songs from Alan Mencken and Stephen Schwarz which often receive the spoof treatment – and the lyrics are often very funny. There is a chipmunk who can speak in fairyland but can only make noises in the real world and is forced to do charades which Prince Edward continually misinterprets.

There is enough for the kids to enjoy (well, maybe not boys between 11 and 16), enough for the adults – and enough for the cynics as well.

FRED CLAUS

(US, 2007, d. David Dobkin)

If you're crochety, especially about cheerful films set at Christmas, then you will probably imitate Ebenezer Scrooge and mutter, 'Bah humbug' – and be advised to watch something else.

On the other hand, if you are a Christmas movie junkie and, if you enjoyed *Elf*, then go ahead and indulge.

Apparently, her eight year old asked writer-producer, Jessie Nelson, whether Santa had any brothers or sisters. That sparked an idea... what if there were sibling rivalry between Nicholas and his older brother, Fred? And Fred Claus is what happens when writers have these kinds of ideas.

Kathy Bates is Mrs Claus who dotes on her younger big fat baby, Nicholas. Mr Claus will be a nice surprise for Vicar of Dibley fans because he is Trevor Peacock (who does not get the opportunity to say, 'No, no, no, no, no... yes!'). When the children grow up after an edgy childhood with Nicholas so nice and generous, Fred storms away to modern Chicago where he is something of a con man, even with his fiancée, Rachel Weisz. Vince Vaughn enjoys himself as Fred. Paul Giamatti is a fine Nicholas, with Miranda Richardson as his wife.

Fred gets himself into financial trouble and gets in touch with Nicholas for a loan, but has to go to the North Pole to work to earn the money. Things are more than a bit iffy at the North Pole with all the orders to fill and the elves flat out at the assembly lines. What is worse, a time-efficiency expert is inspecting in order to shut the North Pole down and outsource the production of presents. He is played by Kevin Spacey with the appropriate air of supercilious disdain.

When Fred and Nicholas have a snow fight, Santa's back is put out, the expert closes production and..., well, you will just have to see what happens. Will it spoil the film to say that the ending is not sad?!

This is a different angle on Christmas stories and is undemandingly pleasant. (For film buffs, there is a marvelous segment where Fred goes to a meeting of Siblings Anonymous and has to listen to the woes of the real Frank Stallone bemoaning the pressure of Rocky, its sequels and Rambo, of Roger Clinton having to deal with his brother the president and Stephen Baldwin trying to deal with rage and projecting his antagonisms towards Alec on to the members of the group. One hopes that Sylvester, Bill and Alec enjoy the spoof as much as we do.)

THE GOLDEN COMPASS

(US/UK, 2007, d. Chris Weitz)

The Golden Compass, based on Philip Pullman's first book in His Dark Materials trilogy, is well-made, with a lot of intelligent dialogue, including the word 'metaphysics' a couple of times. Much of the film requires attention as well as some developed vocabulary. It looks very good: sets and design, effects for fantasy, and Nicole Kidman wearing a large array of costumes and gowns. The cast is strong with Dakota Blue Richards as the feisty (non-cute) heroine, Lyra, who, along with her daemon (more about that word later), Pan, who is the external version, the physical manifestation of her 'soul' with whom she can speak and argue, is ready to take on all comers – and does. The talented young actor, Freddie Highmore, is the voice of Pan.

The Golden Compass itself is a powerful mechanism that tells the truth and reveals what others wish to hide.

Apart from Nicole Kidman, who seems to be relishing the opportunity to be glamorous, charming and ruthlessly villainous, there is Daniel Craig as Lord Asriel, Sam Elliott, exactly as he is in the many Westerns he has appeared in, as Mr Scoresby and a long list of distinguished British stage and screen actors including Derek Jacobi, Christopher Lee, Claire Higgins, Tom Courteney, Jim Carter and the voices of Ian McKellen (particularly strong and heroic) and Ian McShane (villainous) as the rival bear kings. The film certainly has class. Interestingly (and perhaps surprisingly), writer-adapter and director is an American, Chris Weitz. After assisting his brother, Paul, with the directing of *American Pie* and the Chris Rock comedy, *Down to Earth*, they went to England to direct the film version of Nick Hornby's *About a Boy*. Obviously, things English have appealed to him.

The plot offers, one might say, some variations on most of the fantasy films listed above. Afficionados will enjoy pointing out the comparisons. Yes, there is battle between good and evil – and in remote locations like the Rings Trilogy. Yes, there is a young central character, this time a girl, a kind of working class Hermione who lives in a college and has to do Harry Potter-like actions. The king bear, a literally towering figure, is reminiscent of Aslan in *Narnia*. There is a happy continuity in the imagination of all these films.

With a girl as central and with a number of battle sequences, the film should appeal to its boys and girls target audience – and the adults will probably enjoy it too (but may have to ask the children some clarifications of plot and characters).

There are some aspects of the film that may raise a religious eyebrow. The opening of the film speaks of parallel worlds, a feature of all of the best film fantasies. In our world, our souls are within us. In the parallel world, the soul is outside us, in the form of a symbolic animal called a 'daemon' (not a devil but a 'spirit' according to the origins of the word).

The other word is the 'Magisterium', the name of the all-powerful ruling body which is authoritarian and intent on eradicating free will so that all people, especially the children they abduct and experiment on, will lose their daemon and be completely conformist and happy. Science fiction has treated this plot in the several versions of *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. The Magisterium heads are embodied by Derek Jacobi and Christopher Lee who spurn tolerance and freedom and speak of heresy. Magisterium is, in fact, the word used for the authoritative teaching of the Catholic church, so that is clearly a critical element – though, as will be quoted later, Pullman says he is not anti-Catholic but anti-rigid and authoritarian religion.

The Golden Compass, is suitable for most with a warning that there are some frightening scenes and battles for the younger audience.

[For comment on the controversy about Pullman's religious agenda and the controversy on the film's release, see the SIGNIS Desk Statement on The Golden Compass.]

HE WAS A QUIET MAN

(US, 2007, d. Frank A. Cappello.)

Unusual title – the kind of comment people make about someone who bursts out violently and shoots people in a school or a mall. This is an unusual film, although film buffs may well be thinking of Fight Club and Mr Brooks as they watch it.

Christian Slater, playing against his screen type, is a rather mousy man who works quietly in an office, lives at home, clashes with his more domineering workplace associates and quietly dotes on one of the young women in the office.

We are given voiceover comment to explain the quiet man but there are other voices operating as well.

One day, there is a shooting incident in the office and a young woman is shot and paralysed. The quiet man has been able to divert some attention from the shooter and, at least, saved the life of the young woman. When the quiet man visits her in hospital, she is resentful and wants to die. Gradually, he wins her over and they become close.

Not an entirely unexpected plotline. But when the goldfish start to talk (which does seem a bit too corny for the general seriousness of this film), you begin to wonder if you haven't already: just who is this quiet man?

Christian Slater gives an interesting performance. Elisha Cuthbert is the young woman. William H. Macy is the boss who complicates the quiet man's life no end because of his attentions to the young woman.

Not essential viewing, but it has many intriguing moments.

HITMAN

(US, 2007, d. Xavier Gens)

Except for a couple of bloody shoot-ups scattered through this thriller, this is not a bad film version of a video game. It presupposes a worldwide conspiracy where a completely hidden company has genetically modified assassins for hire. (And the credits show the orphan children chosen and experimented on – supervised by a cleric to the strains of Ave Maria! – but nothing is really made of this except that the dramatic finale is in an Orthodox church and tower.)

The setting is Russia (with city and countryside sequences filmed in Bulgaria, looking very attractive at times) with a commission to kill the Russian president in public. There is quite some double-dealing here – and dealing in doubles – with Dougray Scott representing Interpol and being thwarted by the head of the new Russian secret service (Rob Knepper).

The focus is on Agent 47, no name, a kind of illegally authorised 'license to kill' undercover no-name agent. He is played with suave menace by Timothy Olyphant (better known for rather slacker or sleazy roles). His manner, walk and violent and asexual behaviour means that he is rather like 'Roboassassin'. (And the Russian security guards are overdressed in armour that would be more at home defending Darth Vader.)

An above average version of this kind of thing for the fans – and those who enjoy action and conspiracy thrillers.

I AM LEGEND

(US, 2007, d. Francis Lawrence)

I Am Legend has an interesting history. It was written as a novel by Richard Matheson who also wrote prolifically for the big screen and for television, including a number of the Roger Corman adaptations of Edgar Allan Poe stories in the 1960s and other horror films. The novel was brought to the screen in a small-budget production filmed in Italy with Vincent Price as The Last Man on Earth in 1964.

In the early 1970s, it became an intriguing film, *The Omega Man*, with Charlton Heston, a film with interesting religious overtones.

There are religious overtones in this version which reverts to Matheson's original title. There is God-talk, talk about evil and destruction and the absence of God, talk about prayer and providence.

This time Will Smith is Robert Neville, a scientist as well as a military man who has witnessed the destruction of the human race because of a virus run rampant, an alleged cure for cancer (explained in the prologue of the film by an uncredited Emma Thompson) that proved the arrogance of scientists and the destructive consequences for human beings (a constant theme of science fiction films and an issue going back, at least, to *Frankenstein*). Neville drives around New York City – and the effects to show the empty city, the damage, the abandoned cars, the weeds now growing are excellent. It looks really real.

Psychologically, the film is interesting in its dramatizing of a man, immune from the virus, whose only companion is the family dog, who lives in grief-filled memories of his wife and daughter and the evacuation of the city, and replays of TV news bulletins (and watching and mouthing to Shrek). He broadcasts out of New York just in case there are any survivors.

He patrols during the day, works in his laboratory at night to try to find a remedy. During the night he is in danger from hordes of mutants (straight out of special effects for ghoulish movies) whose minds have gone and are innately vicious. The only hope for humanity is if there is a small community of people who are not infected and if there is a remedy to prevent the spread of the infection and heal victims.

Will Smith has a presence and charm that means there is no difficulty in his keeping our interest and attention throughout the film. There are moments of eerie tension, moments of shock, moments of life-and-death combat and the will to survive.

One of the advantages of *The Omega Man* over the present film is that the mutants were victims of radiation but that they had not lost their intelligence. Rather, they were like a brotherhood of darkness, puritanical, bent on the destruction of civilization which they blamed for what had happened. They were led by a sinisterly charismatic leader (Anthony Zerbe) who was humanly plausible in his appeal, but deadly. Another interesting feature of *The Omega Man* was Charlton Heston's self-sacrifice, a lance piercing his side against the background of a cross with blood flowing into the water.

I Am Legend has opted for the horror film scenario in its creation of its mutants and a more 'secular' imagery for its sacrifice. Nevertheless, this is a smooth and effective thriller which raises all kinds of issues about life, survival – and a reminder as we look at all the 'things', all the possession left behind, that they are ultimately nothing compared with the basic human values and with life.

I DO (PRETE-MOI TA MAIN)

(France, 2006, d. Eric Lartigau)

This is a cheerful French romantic farce with the genial Alain Chabat as a 43 year old 'nose' (an expert who creates perfumes) who is dominated by his matriarchal family (mother, Bernadette Lafont and five sisters – although for twenty five years they have been doing his laundry). Disappointed in love in the 1980s, he has been avoiding marriage commitment despite the pressure from his family council.

There is a crisis in the company. There is a crisis in his life. What better than hire someone to pose as his fiancée and then skip out on the wedding day, leaving him disconsolate – and free. Well, the best laid plans.... actually, they go more than awry! Charlotte Gainsbourg is the chosen fiancée, but she strikes a hard financial bargain. Of course, compared with the gallery of women his family have foisted on him to date, she charms everyone.

The French obviously got a kick out of the comedy and the romance and nominated the three stars for Cesar awards. It's an old story, of course, and that, along with the verve of the cast, means that it travels beyond France quite well.

I'M NOT THERE

(US, 2007, d. Todd Haynes.)

I'm Not There is a very ambitious project. It states that it is based on the life and times of Bob Dylan.

Todd Haines has directed only a few films, but all of them somewhat offbeat, independent features including Safe, Savage Grace, Far From Heaven.

In constructing this film about the life and times of Dylan, he chooses six actors to portray the core of the singer's career and life. These include Marcus Carl-Franklin, a young African-American boy, as the youngest of the actors. He calls himself Woody Guthrie to give the link between Guthrie's songs and Bob Dylan's folk songs in the late 50s early 60s. It is a very strong performance. After that comes Ben Whishaw - who is seen throughout the film, in a black and white interview style. The criticism is of the young Dylan and of his whole life, especially his protest activities.

Christian Bale follows as the protest singer of the 1960s, the friend of Joan Byers (fictionalised and performed by Julianne Moore), who upsets people by his drinking, his un-thought-through answers at press conferences and awards. These are followed by apologies. However, there is a lot of criticism of Dylan and his protest songs and his songs of the earlier 60s. Later, Bale portrays a religious experience by Dylan and his conversion to a Pentecostal church. The next actor is Heath Ledger who portrays the singer in his acting career as well as his marriage. Charlotte Gainsbourg is the French wife, artist, mother of their children. It is

in this period that the Vietnam War is strikingly presented, frequently as the characters watch television reportage.

The next character is Richard Gere portraying Billy the Kid, the character that Bob Dylan portrayed in Sam Peckinpah's 1973, *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*. Pat Garrett was played in that film by Kris Kristofferson who does the overall narrative for this film.

The film is interesting in its presentation of Dylan by Cate Blanchett who won the actress award at Venice 2007. The androgynous Dylan is well portrayed by this actress, who does a strong impersonation as well carry the later part of the film. She portrays the Dylan who is under attack by audiences and fans, especially in his changing to electronic music which is seen as a betrayal.

Throughout the whole film there is a wide selection of Dylan's songs so that the film becomes an anthology of his music, sung in particular social settings, in the context of American politics and protest of the 20th century.

INFINITE JUSTICE

(UK, 2007, d. Jamil Dehlavi)

Directed by a Pakistani based in England, this is a speculation about contemporary terrorism and journalists. It is loosely based on the abduction and execution of Daniel Pearl (which was itself the subject of Michael Winterbottom's *A Mighty Heart*).

The film focuses on an American Jewish TV journalist (Kevin Collins) who is in Pakistan investigating financial dealings which he hopes will lead him to the leader of a terrorist movement. He is abducted and held by a fanatical group – and by a British Pakistani, with flashbacks to his and his friend's experience in an English Christian school where they were discriminated against because of Islam in the 1980s, a reason for their radicalisation.

In the meantime, the American bosses do their best to secure his release. The film flashes back to the journalist's work in the US and his girlfriend's trying to persuade him not to go.

There are the expected scenes of torture and the forcing of the journalist to make a video confession, especially that he is part of a Jewish conspiracy.

The film is small-budget, with a short running time, but tells its story and makes its points directly.

I SERVED THE KING OF ENGLAND

(Czech Republic, 2006, d. Jiri Menzel)

A film set in pre-World War II days as well as offering glimpses of the war itself. It comes from the Czech Republic, from veteran director Jiri Menzel who began making ironic, tongue-in-cheek comic portraits of his people in the freer moods of the mid-1960s. He returns to this vein to quite some effect in *I Served the King of England*, presenting the picaresque adventures of a short young man, Dite, whose ambition is to become a millionaire and who is not above some trickery to achieve this. The episodes (even one filmed as a silent comedy) are amusing, sometimes charming, sometimes bawdy in a very genteel way as Dite rises through the ranks of the staff of the most elegant hotels.

Then Hitler comes into the picture and the film turns more serious as well as critical. Dite defends a young German woman (Julia Jentsch) who is attacked by some Czech youths and he is smitten. She is the very model of a Hitler-infatuated, racist, supremacist ideologue and Dite sides with her.

We know how it ends right from the beginning as we see an older Dite coming out of gaol after fifteen years. After the war the communist regime caught up with him.

There is quite a lot to think about as we watch the seemingly idyllic luxury 30s, the transformation of the German occupation and the hold of Nazism. And the older Dite has the opportunity to become wiser.

THE JANE AUSTEN BOOK CLUB

(US, 2007, d. Robin Swicord)

This is a book of product placement (and this is not meant to refer to the many scenes in and mentions of Starbucks). It is product placement for Jane Austen and her novels. While the screenplay tries to explain the many parallels between its characters and Jane's, those not in the know might be hard put to appreciate what the characters are actually talking about. Buy the books!

Another difficulty is that the men in the film have not read Jane Austen's novels while the women definitely have and love them, are happy to discuss them and to see the parallels in their own lives. It may be the same for audiences – though for the women getting the men to watch the film with them, they will be consoled that the men do read the books and finally become part of the Jane Austen book club.

One might call this an allegory of Jane Austen characters and situations. The six members (five women and one man) take a novel each and the film shows us the six months while each takes a turn in leading discussion on a particular novel. And the parallels and the references are there to enjoy. Yes, it is contrived. In fact, it is very, very contrived. Those not into this kind of structure may be wearied and put off, but those who enter into it and draw on their memories of the books and characters may well be fascinated.

There is a good cast. The attractive Maria Bello is unmarried but breeds dogs and tries to control people's lives – for their benefit, of course. She is an Emma. She doesn't realize she has met her Mr Knightly in the form of young science-fiction expert, Hugh Dancy, who tries to persuade her to read Ursula Le Guin. Amy Brenneman's husband, Jimmy Smits, has walked out on her for another woman. She is a Fanny Price, serious and dutiful, from *Mansfield Park*. Her daughter, Maggie Grace, is in lesbian relationships. Her book is *Sense and Sensibility*. Emily Blunt is a buttoned up daughter of a hippy (Lynn Redgrave) and is dismayed by her one-of-the-boys husband. She and he have to go through a *Persuasion* experience. Hugh Dancy has taken on Northanger Abbey and set up a kind of Ghost Train experience in his house for the club meeting. A flamboyant Kathy Baker, founder of the club, has been married six times and ventures on a seventh in the spirit of Elizabeth Bennett.

While the film traces the ups and downs of relationships, it moves definitely at the end to up and up.

THE KITE RUNNER

(US, 2007, d. Marc Forster)

This is a very moving film which can be recommended.

The novel, *The Kite Runner*, by Khaled Hosseini, topped the best seller lists for a long time and developed a devoted following.

As with most film adaptations, readers who cherish the novel express their disappointment at what has been omitted or at the different emphases on characters. Listening to some of the readers speak about their disappointments, I found that what they said they did not find in the film was actually what I experienced. Practically all of what they valued had been communicated to me as a film viewer. Which means that many films do convey the emotional experience of the novel and the impact of characters – but differently. A page of text might be conveyed in only a few moments through a richly designed set, costumes and a facial gesture. But the reader misses the experience of reading the text and dwelling on it and so does not always perceive what can be conveyed and communicated in even some seconds of moving images and sound.

It seems to me on listening to the readers that *The Kite Runner* is a respectable adaptation – many readers tend to forget that the film is not the novel itself but an adaptation to a different medium and is an interpretation of the novel.

The Kite Runner offers glimpses of Afghanistan from the 1970s, times of greater peace and prosperity for many despite the Communist rumblings, through the 1980s and the Russian invasion to the 1990s and the rule of the Taliban. The film concludes in the year 2000. For most of us who have general impressions of and ideas about Afghanistan which have now been overshadowed by the conflict since 2001, the film could be something of an eye-opener.

The central character is a young lad from a well-to-do family, Amir, who idolises his father who, he thinks, does not think highly of him. His best friend is a servant, Hassan, the son of the manager of the household. Together, along with the children of Kabul, they excel in flying kites (a great symbol of freedom and exhilaration) and are determined to win the city competition (as the boy's father had done years earlier). The servant boy is a devoted friend, loyal, loving. Hassan becomes the victim of a crisis which will haunt Amir and torment him in regret for the way in which he acted.

The family escapes the Russians by fleeing with great danger to Pakistan and thence to the United States. The sequence where Amir's father stands on principle against the Russian soldier wanting to exploit the women is impressive.

The central part of the film portrays the migrant experience in America in the 1980s and 1990s, education, work, becoming acclimatized, the brashness of the younger generation and the hardships of the older generation who have had to assume a completely different way of life and work in more menial circumstances than they did at home. The experience is both an American welcome and a humiliation.

The third part of the film shows the now adult, Amir, returning in secret to Afghanistan to seek out Hassan's son and rescue him. We are amazed and appalled (but, perhaps, not surprised) to see the havoc that the Taliban have wrought on Kabul, on society and on people's rights and security. There is a personal challenge for Amir which serves as a kind of atonement for what he did and did not do as a spiteful child. And kite-flying is again the symbol of freedom and, now, of hope.

The performances, especially of the young Hassan who is memorable and Homayan Ershadi who is very moving as the father, are fine and convincing. So, too, are the locations – and it is something of a shock to find that *The Kite Runner's* Afghanistan sequences were actually filmed in China (Kabul, the city, the desert and all).

Direction is by Marc Forster, the Swiss director who made a mark with *Monster's Ball* and has since made films in a variety of genres: *Finding Neverland*, *Stay*, *Stranger than Fiction*. He is slated to direct the next James Bond film. *The Kite Runner* is a film he can be proud of.

THE MAGIC FLUTE

(UK, 2006, d. Kenneth Branagh)

The Magic Flute is one of Mozart's most popular operas. It was written for popular production and audience. A lot of significance has been read into The Magic Flute, especially sinister Masonic connections (although critics say that in many countries in Europe at the time, the Masonic brotherhood was not as sinister as was later made out).

However, these aspects are not to the fore in this lively and attractive version of Mozart. Already, in 1976, Ingmar Bergman had made a film version of The Magic Flute. This time, Kenneth Branagh brings his awareness of theatre and the staging of musicals on screen to presenting The Magic Flute. He has also decided to use an English language libretto – adapted by writer and actor, Stephen Fry. The text of The Magic Flute sounds particularly well in English.

The setting is World War One and the film opens with a long shot (compiled by clever editing) as the camera sweeps over the battlefields of World War One and life in the trenches. This setting of the trenches is important for the central character of Tamino, the hero and Papageno (who keeps the canaries to detect the presence of gas in the trenches and has an American accent). However, the film makes the transition from the trenches to the magic kingdom which is ruled over by Sarastro. The Queen of the Night asks Tamino then to rescue her daughter Pamina from Sarastro. However, things are not what they seem, villains are not necessarily villains and the Queen of the Night is not necessarily a queen on the side of light.

For film buffs, the staging of the opera, the presentation of the singers and their songs, the performances illustrate the talent of Kenneth Branagh. He had already brought to the screen versions of Shakespeare, Henry V, Much Ado About Nothing, Hamlet, Love's Labour's Lost (as a 1930s musical incorporating songs from Cole Porter, the Gershwins and others). At the same time he directed a version of As You Like It.

The film is exhilarating in its visuals, performances, singing, Mozart's music – a satisfying adaptation of Mozart for the cinema screen.

MR MAGORIUM'S WONDER EMPORIUM

(US, 2007, d. Zach Helm)

A children's film created by writer-director (Stranger Than Fiction) Zach Helm – who spent some time working in a toy shop which gave him inspiration for this fantasy about a New York shop – no, it is a huge, colourful emporium – which is managed by Mr Magorium who is over 200 years old. His deputy is a young woman, Molly Mahoney, called plainly Mahoney. A young friendless, Eric, boy spends a lot of time there.

Mr Magorium calls in an accountant (a cross between an accountant and a mutant!) who has no imagination. Mr Magorium (quoting King Lear: 'He dies') has decided that it is time for him to go, spend a last happy day on earth – dancing and using a public telephone – and hand the emporium over to Mahoney.

Mahoney feels she does not have the magic to run the store and wants a career as a pianist to develop her potential.

Needless to say, there is a lot of magic, and magic will win the day.

The cast is good with Natalie Portman charming as Mahoney. An odd-wigged and speech-impaired Dustin Hoffman obviously enjoys himself as Mr Magorium (playing as if it was an audition to play Gene Wilder as the old-age Willy Wonka). Jason Bateman has to be serious and then let his hair down as the accountant. Zach Mills is the boy.

The big question is: who will really enjoy it? Little kids may enjoy the colour but miss the references to King Lear. Older children may dismiss as too much for the littlies. Parents may be curious but find it an odd mixture of the twee and the cerebral. Adults alone may not last the distance.

MY KID COULD PAINT THAT

(US, 2007, d. Amir Bar-Lev)

This is a very well-made documentary, so well made that I don't know whether I really wanted to see it. Not that the subject is controversial in the usual sense. Rather, it deals with families and the possibilities of commercial exploitation in the art world and the effect on a little girl.

As the title indicates, this is a film about painting. When Marla Olmstead was four, a family friend put up one of her paintings in a local restaurant. A patron wanted to buy it and Marla's mother facetiously mentioned a price of \$250.00. By the end of the film, with Marla only six, her paintings were selling for \$25,000.

Director Amir Bar-Lev takes his audience on a journey from scepticism to sympathy to upset and final questioning and uncertainty. He says that all documentaries are shaped by the film-maker and, while emphasising this, he tries to avoid too much influence on audience reaction.

Most of us are sceptical about child prodigies. We see Marla as an ordinary little girl in her reactions and wanting to play. Did she do these paintings which are abstract in style and many quite beautifully composed? Did her father influence her, help her? Her mother says they are striving for her to be a normal little girl. By the time she has been taken up by the art world (with journalists and curators talking to camera), we are shocked by a Sixty Minutes program which questions the authenticity of Marla's work.

This means that we have been moved to interest and sympathy and then this is being challenged. The rest of the film is the director's attempt to film the family objectively, though the children are more interested in playing with him than with painting and work.

So, tantalising questions remain about the child and her talent, the role of the parents and questions about their letting her be exposed to the commercial world as well as questions of what is art, how subjective is it and does this matter.

This brief film is an interesting but very uncomfortable experience.

REDACTED

(US, 2007, d. Brian De Palma)

After *The Black Dahlia* and such films as *Femme Fatales*, *Redacted* is not the film one would expect from Brian De Palma in 2007. It is a strong, even fierce, polemic against the American presence and behaviour in Iraq.

De Palma had made a film about the Vietnam War in the late 1980s, *Casualties of War*, with Michael J. Fox and Sean Penn. He knows what he is talking about in terms of making war films. He has written and directed this one – even though it gives the impression that it is documentary with a variety of styles.

The styles include the video diary of one of the soldiers (and he wants to use it to get into film school when he gets back from Iraq). There is also a French documentary with French commentary about the checkpoints and what happens for the Iraqis as well as about the behaviour of the Americans. There are also some embedded journalists, interviews during action as well as reports on television. Then there are internet chat rooms where the soldiers speak with their family. There are also video clips on the web sites showing atrocities, even including the execution of one of the Americans. There is a final collage of graphic photos.

The film focuses on a small unit, the audience getting to know their personalities, their interactions, and their work. They are at a checkpoint, doing long, hot, boring sweaty work. They are under orders to let no cars through - but the point is made that many Iraqis can't read and so do not know what is required from the signs. There is a graphic incident where the Americans gun down a car trying to get through the checkpoint only to kill a pregnant woman.

The film has its basis on reports from actual atrocities in Vietnam. Particularly graphic is an unwarranted attack on a home and the abduction of the father of the family. Two of the soldiers then decide to return to rape his young daughter. They do so - and massacre the family.

The film presents images of the ugly American, in their language, referring to the Iraqis as sand niggers and wanting them to be blasted into oblivion. They feel under threat, do not have a wider picture of the situation there or in the Middle East, and have not been very well briefed before their tour in Iraq. They are full of attitudes of American supremacy, patriotism and the despising of the Iraqis.

The film is brief, packs a punch, will not be comfortable viewing for those who are in favour of the Iraq war. It will reinforce the presuppositions about those who are against the war. A companion narrative piece

to Redacted would be Paul Haggis' in The Valley Of Elah - which has many overlaps in showing the behaviour of some American forces.

RESCUE DAWN

(US, 2006, d. Werner Herzog)

Werner Herzog's Rescue Dawn (2006) brings home to its audience the basic drive to life and survival. In some ways, at least in its theme and some of the detail of the plot, it is the same as the many prisoner of war films that were so popular in the 1950s (The Wooden Horse, The Colditz Story, the escape of a German from a Canadian camp, The One that Got Away and, of course, the biggest escape blockbuster, The Great Escape (1963).)

Rescue Dawn is the story of pilot Dieter Dengler, the subject of a documentary by Herzog in 1997, Little Dieter Needs to Fly. This time he has fictionalized the story somewhat 'Inspired by a true story...').

He crashes in Laos in 1965 and is placed in a remote camp guarded by a few peasant soldiers. Herzog shows in great detail, the steps both minute and large, that Dieter Dengler (Christian Bale in yet another different and powerful performance) took in order to escape with his fellow prisoners. The point is the motivation of 'I want to live'. Survival is all important and drives him to the extremes of physical exertion, to eating whatever protein was available in worms and snakes. Herzog, who had taken to the jungle for his epics Aguirre and Fitzcarraldo has no hesitation in putting his cast through the toughest of shoots, making them lose weight so that Steve Zahn and Jeremy Davies look completely emaciated. The exhilaration of the rescue and Dieter welcomed back by his troops confirm that he really wanted to live.

It is surprising that, at this stage of his life, for Herzog to make a film which can be released as a mainstream drama. But, Herzog for the last forty years has never been predictable with his features or with his documentaries. He brings his attention to location and atmosphere to Rescue Dawn. We really feel that we have been interned with the men, have shared their hardships and feel and understand their humiliations and sufferings. The jungle is both lush and terrifying.

Herzog has made comments on war (Invincible, Lessons of Darkness (about the Gulf oilfields) so one is wondering about his perspective on American action (the devastating bombing of Laos in 1965), the long war in Vietnam, and the morale of American troops (relevant in the context of the Iraq war).

SHROOMS

(Ireland, 2007, d. Paddy Breathnach)

The Irish Film Board put money into this horror slasher thriller. And, director of comedies, Paddy Breathnach (I Went Down, Blow Dry, Man About Dog) directed with Pearse Elliott ransacking every horror film of late wrote the screenplay. (In the vein of Roland Joffe forgetting that he made The Killing Fields and The Mission and directing that ugliest of slasher movies, Captivity.)

Oh! (at least).

It's more than a bit like we see: What you did last summer in a Blair Witch Woods where, after taking the Wrong Road, you had very little Deliverance from Cabin Fever (where they didn't get round to the Chainsaw massacre), with Nightmares on the river, date: Friday the 13th.

Why are groups of young adults who go on these trips so obnoxious, even to one another? No sympathy for them as they get knocked off. The only point of interest really is, who is next? And, for college students, they had pretty limited crass expression, forgot to pack any moral sense and, according to the

norms of this kind of slasher, get what they deserve when all they came to Ireland to take a trip for a trip of mu-shrooms.

Actually, in the bus on the way home, given the final twist, I realised that you could do a telling Jungian analysis of the 'heroine', based on her rebelliousness against the Catholicism imposed by her father, visualised in the tale about the orphanage where the Black Brother with his cane with three inch nail destroyed orphans, tangled with a sense of guilt about sex and drugs and that she struggled with a range of Animus figures as well as being jealous of her Anima figures, let alone the dribbling Shadow characters in the woods, plus the murderous Black Brother. But, the therapy obviously didn't work.

TALK TO ME

(US, 2007, d. Kasi Lemmons)

'Talk to me' was the slogan of US DJ, Petey Greene who came to prominence in the Washington DC area in the late 1960s and continued through until the 1980s.

What is significant about Petey Greene is that he fulfilled the American Dream, that someone with little background and material benefits going for him can reach the top of a profession. As the film opens, we hear Petey on the prison radio where he is serving time for theft. He then encounters Dewey Hughes, an executive at a DC station and makes him promise to give him a job. After staging a heroic talking down of a prisoner from the roof, he is freed and comes for his job, upsetting Hughes and his boss. However, with ratings slipping, Hughes decides to give him an opportunity which fails because of nerves. A second chance has him insulting Berry Gordon and being fired. However, they try again, inviting phone in – and the result is a great success. Petey talks to his audience and listens.

Why this is all more significant than a simple rags to riches story is that Peter Greene and Dewey Hughes were African Americans working at a white-owned station. It is the era of the Civil Rights movement and Petey is on air at the time of Martin Luther King's assassination and tries to calm the rioting and looting crowds. His show provided a voice for many voiceless Americans and he became a figurehead.

During the 1970s, he career blossomed under Dewey's management: more radio, stand-up comedy and television chat shows. However, there came a point on the Johnny Carson Show where he had to take stock of himself, what he was good at and be satisfied with that.

Director Kasi Lemmons (Eve's Bayou) recreates the period effectively, especially the Washington riots in 1968. And she gets fine performances indeed from Don Cheadle as Petey Greene and Britain's Chiwetel Ejiofor as Dewey Hughes. Martin Sheen is the station owner.

In interesting portrait and a reminder of different times.

THIS CHRISTMAS

(US, 2007, Preston A. Whitmore II)

In American films, families usually get together to celebrate Thanksgiving and, at least in cinema lore, dinner usually is the setting for all the crises and dysfunctional relationships come to a head. Many of these films have a touch of the cynical as well as depression.

This time we have a family reunion at Christmas – in the warmth of LA weather. Even though one of the characters is bashed over the head at the opening (which serves as a warning), the first part of the film is generally sunny, bright and happy. It almost seems too good to be true. And then the cracks begin to appear, then to widen and some potential chasms appear. Practically all the problems families are prone to get an airing, or so it seems. In fact, there are no drugs, no alcoholism and no sexual identity problems. Rather, they are the old-fashioned ones of fathers leaving the family, repeated by older son, owing money

to unscrupulous bookies, interracial marriage, army AWOL, infidelity, education and careers versus home management, divorce, and a younger son who can't tell his mother about his singing career.

This gives an idea whether you would enjoy this film or not. Needless to say there is a happy, very happy, ending. In fact, the ending has all the main cast, African Americans, except the white actress, dancing to the camera for many minutes with infectious exuberance.

It is all very (very) Americanly extroverted! (A white American equivalent for a Christmas family gathering was *The Family Stone* – much more acerbic and critical. This Christmas is much more cheerful.)

A VERY BRITISH GANGSTER

(UK, 2007, d. Donal MacIntyre)

It seems that everyone else was in the know that this was a documentary about actual people. As I watched it, I was presuming that it was a fiction told in a documentary style, that this was an invented story about a Manchester criminal. No, it is actually a documentary, filmed over several years, about an actual criminal called Dominic Noonan.

As I watched (not aware of the truth), it seemed to me that the film was to some extent glamorising the character and his feats (though he had spent most of his life in gaol). Discovering that it was all real and that Noonan had allowed the film to be made (and probably insisted on re-takes), it seemed that the whole thing was pandering to Noonan's vanity. At the end of the film, he is in prison again but, at least, he has been immortalised on film!

The director has done investigative films for British television and he has an eye for character revelation as well as action. He himself is off-screen asking questions. He had plenty of material to edit and, of course, one wonders about what was left out.

Dominic Noonan is a rather disagreeable, ugly (physically and morally) boor of a man who had a harsh upbringing in institutions but, with an amoral calm, asserted his authority over neighbourhoods in Manchester, moved from petty crime to armed robberies and became a local godfather figure solving people's problems.

And then his Catholicism. The Italian Mafia have given the church woes and, sometimes, a bad name. Noonan cheerfully professes his Catholicism, goes to church to pray, nonchalantly explains that he can go to confession and get everything forgiven – and then start again. His murdered addict brother's funeral is attended by crowds. But the prayers of the ritual seem ironic and out of place with this mob.

As a portrait it is well done, builds up a character, shows details of his life and relationships (especially with his two sons by different mothers). But, you wouldn't want to meet him.

WEIRDSVILLE

(Canada, 2006, d. Allan Moyle)

The title is, at least, a case of honest advertising. This is one of those 'slacker' comedies that will appeal to slackers of every age and drive most others up the wall.

Two young men whose questionable income is spent on drugs are planning a robbery to square their debts. Their girlfriend uses up all their drugs and seems to have died. What else but to bury her in secret? Chancing upon a group of yuppie Satanists at a closed Drive-in, they are shocked when she revives – and the Satanists think she is the One.

Chases galore ensue, a caretaker dwarf and his friends in pursuit, a wealthy dealer who has had an accident and is in coma but taken home by his wife... and so on, and so on.

Scott Speedman and Wes Bentley give it all they can as the two slackers. There are some semi-attempts at redemption (whether because of fear of violence or by conscience is hard to discern) but, basically, it is a life-on-a-high silly comedy.

YOUTH WITHOUT YOUTH

(US, 2007, d. Francis Ford Coppola)

Francis Ford Coppola has not made a film for almost ten years. He has had his ups and downs with his film career, the collapse of his Zoetrope studios and many disappointments. This is reflected in the story he has chosen to tell in *Youth Without Youth*. It is not a big-budget film, was made quietly in Romania, but has the look and sound of a more ambitious film. But, it is the film that Coppola in his mid-60s wanted to make and make it his way. It is another creative film from the director of *The Godfather Trilogy*, *The Conversation*, *Apocalypse Now* and *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, all fine films by anybody's standards.

The trouble for the average audience is that this is an intellectual film, a philosophical film, a film of comparative religions, and is both emotional and thoughtful. Many may feel that they are not on the wavelength of theme or treatment (maybe no accident that it was made in Europe with a European sensibility rather than American).

For those who are on the wavelength it is an arresting and stimulating film.

The novella was written by Mircea Eliade, a fine writer on comparative religions, who suffered in his native Romania, even spending some time in a concentration camp in the 1940s, who eventually left for the United States in the 1950s. The central character of this story bears some resemblances to Eliade as well as to Coppola: a man who had potential, lamented his not fulfilling it, but a man of ambition and dreams.

Tim Roth gives one his finest and most complex performances as a professor of language. In 1938, he is 70 but has an experience, in-body – out-of-body, that changes him into a physical and intellectual phenomenon, his age and metabolism reversing as his powers of understanding, memory, linguistics and, even, telekinesis increase.

His story is something of an allegory of the experience of many intellectuals of the time: he is tended carefully in his native country, is made a target for research by the Nazi government, escapes to Switzerland living out the war, experiencing the range of cataclysmic world events of the 1940s and into the 1950s. It makes for a different way of looking at that era and what it meant.

The professor's life is complicated by the appearance of his double and the dialogues he has with his other self, tempting him like a bad conscience. Then he encounters a young woman who is involved in a mountain crash. She also exhibits unusual powers, seemingly the reincarnation of an Indian woman of centuries earlier. There is discussion about metempsychosis, the transmigration of souls, and the same actress, Alexandra Maria Lara, plays the woman, the professor's lost love of the past and the incarnation of the Indian woman, reinforcing this idea.

The ultimate question, as always, is about personal integrity, love and self-sacrifice.

Coppola is a storyteller and has framed his intellectual explorations within the story. This means the film can have a narrative emotional emphasis while the dialogue can make explicit the more philosophical dimensions of the themes.

It is not going to be a popular film but it is worth seeing by those who want something different from their cinema. It may not enhance Coppola's reputation as a box-office savvy producer but it will enhance his reputation as a creative film-maker.

end

BERLINALE

AWAY FROM HER

(Canada, 2007, d. Sarah Polley)

This Canadian film stars a British icon: Julie Christie. Actress, Sarah Polley has adapted from Alice Munro's short story, *The Bear Came Over the Mountain*. The screenplay and its maturity and insight into old age are quite striking considering that Sarah Polley was in her early and mid-twenties when she wrote and directed the film.

The story focuses on a couple in their sixties, he has been a professor, she has stayed at home. Now, her memory is beginning to fade and she accept the oncoming of Alzheimers disease. She decides to enter a nursing home. Julie Christie has often been described as radiant on screen. This film comes more than forty years after her Oscar-winning performance in *Darling*, after *Doctor Zhivago* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*. She is most definitely radiant here, persuasive as a woman who accepts what is happening to her and what the consequences will be.

Canadian actor Gordon Pinsent is her husband. The film is poignant in presenting how much loss there is for the spouse who has to relinquish care of the Alzheimers sufferer and watch, almost helpless, as the partner of so many years drifts away. This is an admirable film on a difficult contemporary reality.

BEAUFORT

(Israel, 2007, d. Joseph Cedar)

Beaufort is an austere film about the 2000 withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanon. Beaufort is an old crusader castle (which has seen many wars over many centuries) and is in Lebanese territory. During the occupation from 1982 to 2000, it served as an impregnable fortress though the continued target of Hezbollah rockets.

The film confines its two hour running time to the castle and the preparations for leaving, the continued bombardment, defusing bombs, packing, dreams of what the soldiers will do in the future. The commander, very young, is psychologically affected by the orders to leave and the seeming surrender of the castle as well as the final orders to blow it up.

The film remembers the war with Lebanon, its 18 years and the cost to Israel and the difficulties for some Israelis for face the withdrawal whereas others welcomed it.

Finished before July 2006, Beaufort has very strong resonances with what happened in the Israeli invasion of Lebanon last year and the confrontation with Hezbollah and the question of whether that is the right way to go and how futile it is.

THE BUBBLE

(Israel, 2006, d. Eytan Fox)

The Israeli film *The Bubble* featured in Panorama at the Berlin Film Festival, *The Bubble*. It was co-written and directed by Eytan Fox whose previous films, *Yossi and Yaeger* and *Walking on Water* also screened in Berlin.

The Bubble is something of a surprise to outside viewers. The director, producer and the cast all live in Tel Aviv and they wanted to tell a Tel Aviv story, a story about men and women in their 30s. Many Israelis consider that the citizens of Tel Aviv are not always connected with reality and live in a bubble.

The central character, Noam, played by Ohad Knoller who has featured in Fox's other films, is first seen at a checkpoint where Palestinians are profoundly humiliated by the military – something which will be shown again towards the end of the film as a number of Palestinians travel from Israel to Gaza for a family wedding. Whatever the fears about terrorists, the film implies that there must be more humane ways of treating the Palestinians.

Noam works in a music shop and shares accommodation with friends, one the owner of a restaurant and the other a woman who works in a cosmetics shop. Fox's films have gay themes and these are prominent in *The Bubble*. What complicates matters is that he begins a liaison with a Palestinian whom he saw at the checkpoint. His friends arrange for the Palestinian to have an Israeli cover to work in Tel Aviv.

What is different is that Noam and his friends are against the occupation and stage a rave concert in support of protest against the occupation. The question for outside audiences is how prevalent these stances are amongst younger Israelis.

Much of the story is autobiographical, especially in the detail of the day-by-day life for these characters. Fox opts to portray contemporary stances on Israel-Palestinian relations, terrorism as well as gay relationships and so the film turns pessimistic as it goes on.

DESERT DREAMS

(China, 2007, d. Zhang Lu)

Desert Dreams is set in the deserts of Mongolia where a lone man does battle against the elements by planting trees to save the steppes (even though the wind continually uprooted them). This terrain has been made famous by *The Story of the Weeping Camel* and *the Cave of the Yellow Dog*.

This time the man's family goes to Ulan Bator for treatment for the little daughter's hearing problems, leaving the man alone – but only for a short time as a mother and son, refugees from North Korea, turn up and begin to share the isolated life. There is plenty of incident, but on a small scale in the desert region and with the woman and her son. Eventually, the man joins his family in the city and the Koreans have to make a decision as to whether they will stay or move on.

This is one of those films, shot in beautifully exotic landscapes, that requires patience and a capacity for contemplation of people and issues.

GETTING HOME

(China, 2007, d. Zhang Yang)

The winner of the Ecumenical prize in Panorama, a bit of a Chinese shaggy dog story.

We are introduced to a middle-aged worker and his drinking companion, only to find that the companion is dead. He had promised to take his friend's body back home should he die, so it is only right that Zhao do the same. This is an amusing and moving odyssey, a Chinese road movie where Zhao, as he keeps faithful to his promise, becomes all the more endearing as he goes through all kinds of adventures and misadventures – being robbed by bandits in a bus, being robbed in a hostel by a truck driver, meeting all

kinds of people on the way, even an impoverished mother of a university student (will he go back to her for the sequel!).

A humane human comedy.

LOST IN BEIJING

(China, 2007, d. Li Yu)

Lost in Beijing is set in the capital, a modern story with some squalid situations involving a husband and wife who come in from the country and get entangled in what seems to be a surrogacy problem, the wife working for a massage centre boss to whom she becomes attached and her husband getting involved with blackmail.

Chinese authorities had difficulties with the film because of the critique of corrupt officials, the issue of abortion and some more explicit bedroom scenes than one usually finds in Chinese films.

The film is well-made, feature the modern Beijing – but is permeated by a somewhat pessimistic, sometimes sour tone.

Venice introductions

KANTOKU BANSAI! (GLORY TO THE DIRECTOR)

Japan, 2007, 104 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Takeshi Kitano

Takeshi Kitano is one of Japan's best known directors. After a series of crime films in the 1990s, he won the Venice Golden Lion for Hana-Bi. He has continued to make films that get world wide release. This film is a playful examination of his career.

It begins with a dummy/doll being examined for an ECT. During the film Kitano and the doll interchange. There is also a voice-over commenting on the current films that he has made, and it starts with a gangster sequence with a massacre and a comment that he promised not to make this kind of film again. What follows is a number of spoofs on the various types of films popular in Japan in the recent years. He tries his hand at a romance - but it is rather boring. He imitates the style of the celebrated Ozu - and this is also boring. He tries his hand at a horror film and it is quite effective. He does some martial arts in the crouching tiger vein and sends them up.

He also tries something with special effects and also a space film- at this the film veers towards a particularly Japanese audience where he draws on his audience's knowledge of comedy styles in Japan, Kitano's own television programmes and characters. Much of this is lost on a non-Japanese audience and does not seem particularly funny. This goes on for quite a long time with some comic characters, especially a mother and daughter who want to marry the hero, are angry with the doll and burn him, and find themselves in the midst of crises.

Kitano himself appears in all these films under various guises - and his deadpan appearance is quite suitable to the kinds of spoofs and comedies that he presents. However, it is a film for Japanese audiences - and for those who are following the career of Kitano.

REDACTED

US, 2007, 90minutes, Colour.

Izzy Diaz, Daniel Stewart Sherman, Patrick Carol, Mike Figueroa, Ty Jones, Rob Da Vinci, Kel O'Neil.

Directed by Brian De Palma

After *The Black Dahlia* and such films as *Femme Fatales*, *Redacted* is not the film one would expect from Brian De Palma in 2007. It is a strong, even fierce, polemic against the American presence and behaviour in Iraq.

De Palma had made a film about the Vietnam War in the late 80s, *Casualties of War*. He knows what he is talking about in terms of making war films. He has written and directed this one – even though it gives the impression that it is documentary with a variety of styles.

The styles include the video diary of one of the soldiers (and he wants to use it to get into film school when he gets back from Iraq). There is also a French documentary with French commentary about the checkpoints and what happens for the Iraqis as well as the behaviour of the Americans. There are also some embedded journalists, interviews during action as well as reports on television. There are also internet chat rooms where the soldiers speak with their family. There are also video clips on the web sites showing atrocities, even including the execution of one of the Americans. There is a final collage of graphic photos.

The film focuses on a small unit, the audience getting to know their personalities, their interactions, and their work. They are at a checkpoint, long, hot, sweaty work. They are under orders to let no cars through - but the point is made that many Iraqis can't read and so do not know what is required from the signs. There is a graphic incident where the Americans gun down a car trying to get through the checkpoint only to kill a pregnant woman.

The film has its basis on reports from actual atrocities in Vietnam. Particularly graphic is an unwarranted attack on a home and the abduction of the father of the family. Two of the soldiers then decide to return to rape the young girl. They do so - and massacre the family.

The film presents images of the ugly American, in their language, referring to the Iraqis as sand niggers and wanting them to be blasted into oblivion. They feel under threat, do not have a wider picture, and have not been very well briefed before that tour in Iraq. They are full of American supremacy and patriotism and despising the Iraqis.

The film is brief, packs a punch, will not be comfortable viewing for those who are in favour of the Iraq war. It will reinforce the presuppositions about those who are against the war. A companion narrative piece to *Redacted* would be Paul Haggis' *The Valley Of Elah* - which has many overlaps of behaviour of the American soldiers.

L'AIMEE

France, 2007, 70 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Arnaud Desplechin

L'Aimee is a very personalised documentary film. Director Arnaud Desplechin goes back to one of his grandfathers to explore with him his early experiences and the death of his mother.

The film consists of talking heads; it is mainly in the form of conversation between the two characters at a table. This gives it an intimacy and family value rather than an objective documentary.

The old man does not remember his mother because she died of tuberculosis when he was two years old. She was thirty-five. However, as others in the family have died, the old man is selling the family house. There is a discussion about what will happen with the various pieces of furniture, other family objects, and the portrait of his mother hanging on the wall.

The director is able to present various photos to the old man and together they build up the story of what had happened in the family, to the mother and her illness, her being in a sanatorium and not actually having seen her son for a year. The old man has no memories of these events. Later the director is able to find some letters and documents and is able to go further with the old man so that he can reconstruct the story of what happened. It then takes the story of the old man further, to his being looked after by his aunt, becoming one of the family and, finally, at the age of fifty being legally adopted.

The film ends with a visit to the cemetery and the various graves of the people who have been under consideration during the film.

Some may find the film rather tedious although it goes for only seventy minutes. However, for those who had similar kinds of experiences, it is a moving personal memoir and will evoke personal memories even as we look and listen to the story of the old man who is very well treated by the director. Arnaud Desplechin has made a number of films including Kings and Queens.

NESSUN QUALITA AGLI EROI

Italy, 2007, 102 minutes, Colour.

Irene Jacob.

Directed by Paolo Franchi

This is quite a miserable film. It has winter settings in both Turin and Geneva.

It focuses on a middle aged man who seems to be undergoing a crisis, unable to have children, resenting his artist father, in love with his wife and depending on her but wandering around the city. He encounters a young man who befriends him, takes him home, and continues to follow him everywhere, even to the exhibition of his father's work. As they talk, we see more of the young man, his sexual encounters with his girlfriend, his fantasies about the middle aged man's wife.

It emerges that the young man has killed his banker father to whom the middle aged man was indebted.

However, at the end of the film, we see the middle aged man going to the police to confess that he killed the banker. It seems that the young man was his alter-ego.

While, finally, the plot makes a great deal of sense in terms of this psychological drama, the tone is particularly grim, gloomy - and rather hard going.

SEARCHERS 2.0

US, 2007, 96 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Alex Cox

Searchers 2.0 is a piece of cinema fun for film buffs.

Alex Cox has directed a number of strange films over several decades. His most accessible was Repo Man with Harry Dean Stanton and Emilio Estevez in 1984. He made Straight to Hell as well as Walker with Ed Harris.

He is also done a lot of experimentation in his eccentric way.

However, Searchers is much more straightforward. Two older men who have been extras and stunt men in the movies decide to go to a screening in Monument Valley of a film in which they appeared as children. The director of the film was a sadistic tyrant and they plot to get revenge. They are dependant on one man's daughter to drive them to Monument Valley.

The two men talk incessantly about films, especially about Westerns. For film buffs, there is constant delight with all these references, audience's testing out their own memories and their own likes.

There is a parody of the Good, the Bad and the Ugly showdown at the end of the film as the two men confront the director - with a quiz about stunt men. There is a surprise ending - but it does not build up to a satisfying climax. The film just ends.

However, there is a great deal of Western scenery along the way, references especially to John Ford and John Wayne, respect for so many films, discussions about war films and their meaning. One of the two men has rather conservative political views but very up-to-date views on the environment. The other is from Mexico and the references are made to Mexicans in the United States.

The film will not be to everyone's liking, it may go over the heads of many audiences - but it is one of those films that would have been a great success at midnight shows in specialist cinemas in cities.

THE SUN ALSO RISES

China, 2007, 115 minutes, Colour.

Joan Chan, Anthony Wong.

Directed Jiang Wen

The Sun Also Rises is a lavish production by Jiang Wen, actor (appearing as Old Tang) and Venice Award winning director.

The film is lavish in its production, beautiful locations ranging from forests and rivers to the Gobi desert and the mountains on the Russian border. There is a lavish musical score as well. The cinematic style of the film is exotic, dreams, fantasy, surrealism as well as realism.

However, the plot is complicated with four intersecting stories. These may not be perfectly clear to the audience, especially the non-Chinese audience, and familiar with beliefs about ghosts, afterlife, magic,

ceremonies, and the interconnection of stories. A film to be admired by most audiences - but baffling to most audiences.

USELESS

China, 2007, 80 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Jai Zhang-ke

Useless is a documentary from director Jai Zhang-ke, winner of the Golden Lion for his feature film, Still Life 2006.

Useless is a documentary about factories in China - that leads to a Paris fashion show and the presentation of Chinese fashions and their winning awards to life in China itself, in the factories, amongst ordinary people, in the villages, the shops and markets, the life of the miners, ordinary life in the town.

The film is done with great attention to detail and the director's eye to cinema effect. However, to a non-Chinese audience, while the detail is fascinating, there seems to be an arbitrary attitude towards what is included and what is excluded. This means then that it is a film, which attracts the eye, tantalizes the mind, gives some perspective on Chinese life at the beginning of the 21st Century, but does not have a strong narrative or logical structure.

The material in the film is very similar, in many ways, to Haibins Umbrella (San).

SAN (UMBRELLA)

China, 2007, 123 minutes, Colour.

Umbrella is a documentary about contemporary life in China, the beginning of the 21st Century, the emergence of China as an industrial power, the preparation for the 2008 Olympic Games and consciousness of China throughout the world.

This is a very long documentary. There is no apparent logic to what is presented. Rather, the director sweeps over a range of experiences in China, giving great attention to some, passing over others, offering mundane conversations, offering intelligent discussions, offering chatter- which often gives insight into the attitude of Chinese men and women.

The film opens in a factory, the detailed emphasis on the production of umbrellas, the young people who have moved from the farms into the countryside. After this attention to detail, it moves to the market for selling umbrellas and gives the emphasis to modern life in the cities, commerce, shops, bargains, and details.

The film also follows the progress of the seasons and eventually moves to the countryside, showing the life of those who still remain on the farms. With the summer section with which the film concludes, there is a focus on the wheat crops, the people working in the fields, the limited machinery that they have, the hard work, the seasons, and the rain affecting the crops. The film ends with the reflection of one man, going over the history of China for the last forty years and how its politics and its economics have had an impact on him.

The film is of special interest to Chinese audiences. Non-Chinese will find a lot of the material interesting, but the structure and the seeming arbitrariness of what is included and what is excluded, they may find the material rather difficult to watch, at times even tedious.

LE GRAIN ET LE MULLET (THE SECRET OF THE GRAIN)

France, 2007, 154 minutes, Colour.

This is an intriguing film. It is very long, the last 30 minutes sometimes testing the patience of the audience, especially with the long belly dance as well as the highly emotional outburst of one of the central characters. (While the outburst is justified, the stridency of the performance in the way that it is filmed is very demanding on the audience; the belly dance also contributes to the tension of the film and the situation, but it is also very long.)

The film is set on the Mediterranean coast amongst the French-Arabic community. It focuses on an older man, a worker on the docks for thirty-five years.

It highlights his work, his skills. It also highlights his difficulties with the changing work patterns of the 21st century, the role of Arabic workers, and the role of the French.

The film is very strong in its portrayal of the extended family (while the central character is divorced, we see his ex-wife, nagging) as well as his various children and their families. One of his daughters is happily married but is exasperated with her child's toilet training. Another daughter is very glamorous and poised in life.

Another is quite young. There is also a happily married older daughter with her non-Arabic husband. There are two sons, the older who works on the docks and as a tourist guide is unfaithful to his Russian-born wife. It is she who has the outbursts. The other is a genial young man.

The father also lives in a hotel, is in a partnership with the owner of the hotel and a father figure to her daughter. The central focus of the film is the older man's decision to turn a wrecked and dilapidated boat into a restaurant. The municipal powers are against him. However, he perseveres. With family and friends, he is able to transform the ship. He also holds an inaugural dinner for 100 guests, many of them municipal authorities coming, with the help of his ex-wife making the couscous which is her specialty because she knows the secret of the grain. The rest of the family also do help as do friends from the bar. However, there is a crisis when the older philandering son takes the car to avoid seeing his mistress with the couscous in the back. This has crisis effect for the dinner itself and the final half hour of the film is the way in which the crisis is handled. Then the film suddenly ends, leaving interpretation for the future open to the audience.

The film uses handheld camera quite a deal, with great fluidity in conversations and, especially, the family meal. With the close ups, there is an intimacy and an intensity in the characters' expressing themselves both seriously and comically. To this extent, the film is quite a detailed and intense exploration of characters and their interrelationships, in the context of contemporary France and the issues about migrants, especially from North Africa.

Winner of the Jury Prize at Venice, the FIPRESCI prize and a SIGNIS commendation.

A GIRL CUT IN TWO

A Girl Cut In Two is Claude Chabrol for the 21st Century. For more than 40 years, Chabrol wrote and directed many films about French society, fidelity and infidelity, violence and murder. These are the ingredients of this particular film, which is based on the story of Stanford White and Evelyn Nesbit at the beginning of the 20th century (alluded to in Doctorow's Ragtime and dramatised by Richard Fleischer in The Girl in the Red Velvet Swing with Joan Collins, Ray Milland and Farley Granger, 1955).

The centre of the film is the girl who is cut in two, emotionally, played by Ludivine Sagnier. The two men in her life are an aging writer, famous, married for 25 years but a roué. She falls in love with him, infatuated but in love. She is pursued by the schizophrenic son of an industrial family, played by Benoit Magimel who had appeared in several of Chabrol's films. Ultimately, she marries the young man while always being in love with the older author.

This plays havoc with the suspicions of the young man and, finally, in a public place he shoots the author. The film shows the consequences of the shooting on the young woman who has had to move from naivety and gullibility and ambition in her role as a television weather performer to an interviewer and her future.

She is finally seen, symbolically, working for her magician uncle in the trick of the woman sawn in half.

However, during the final credits, there is a close up of Ludivine Sagnier, whole - and a survivor.

While this may not be one of the greatest of Chabrol's films, it has all his hallmarks of skill and his interesting themes.

Chaos

Chaos is a film by the celebrated Egyptian director Youssef Chahine assisted by Khaled Youssef.

The setting is contemporary, Chahine's criticism of the contemporary middle east, dictatorships, police oppression, fascist styles of justice, an illiterate people, an oppressed people... This is the recipe for chaos.

The film is quite melodramatic in its style, its visuals, the characterisations, and the musical score with themes for particular characters.

The film's focus is on Khaled Saleh as Hatem, the police chief in a particular district in Cairo. He rules it in the manner of a godfather for the locals, who come to him with all their troubles, and with their money. He deceives his superiors- who themselves are corrupt. He arrests protesters, hides them in a secret cell, tortures them.

On a personal level, he is infatuated with his neighbour, a young school teacher, menacing her, stalking her, eventually jealous of her relationship with a young and uncorrupted D.A, he abducts her and rapes her. This leads to a melodramatic style with ordinary people protesting, revelation of his guilt - and his suicide.

The film has the flavour of Cairo and its neighbourhoods; it has many sub-plots, interesting in a melodramatic kind of way. In many ways, it is a courageous film to be made in Egypt or in the middle-east Mediterranean in the 21st century.

Hotel Meina

Hotel Meina is a story of World War II, of the German occupation of northern Italy, of Jews taking refuge on the Swiss border. The hotel is a resort but also a refuge.

The film shows a group of Jewish families, bewildered by what was happening, hearing rumours of the concentration camps, eventually told they are going there-only to be secretly shot and their bodies bound and dropped into Lago Maggiore. The film also focuses on the management of the hotel- a Turkish family.

The Germans are presented in the usual way, the commander being an ideological Nazi, disciplinarian with his men, cruel in his killing of the Jews, lascivious in his approaches to a German visitor. The German visitor herself has to keep up Nazi appearances but is actually helping in the escape of a professor to Switzerland as well as aiding in an attempt to help the Jews escape.

The film is conventional, classical in its making, an attention to detail, the locations, close ups on characters, romantic interactions, and the sense of tragedy.

It was directed by Carlo Lizzani at the age of 84, a veteran Italian director of a range of films from documentaries, spaghetti westerns, features and television work.

L'Ora di Punta

L'Ora di Punta is a strong Italian drama about corruption, social, police, and individual.

The film opens with a portrait of a young police officer, played by Michele Lastella. Audience presumption is that he is honest, ambitious, working hard.

However, it very soon emerges that he has potential for corruption and his captain is also in on particular deals.

The film charts the ascent, monetary and power terms, of the young man. It also charts at the same time, his descent into moral chaos. He tried to blackmail an industrialist by giving him a false report into how well his factory is doing. The shrewd industrialist kept the two forms of the report in order to safeguard himself should the need arise. And this is what happens. He asks the young man for help, who refuses, and then becomes the target (with his stooping then to kill his assailant).

French actress Fanny Ardant appears as a rich woman who manages her husband's business. She becomes emotionally involved with the young man - who betrays her with his former sweetheart (who herself had rejected him, finds herself still in love with him, finds herself also betrayed for a second time).

The film does not have a resolution, rather it shows all the main protagonists at the state where the film ends, open-ended, but looking it seems to further corruption and the young policeman's downfall.

Mad Detective

Mad Detective is another film from the prolific Hong Kong director Johnnie To. In the early years of the 21st century, he made a number of films, which were screened in Venice and Cannes at the festivals. They include

Exiled, the two Election films, Breaking News as well as his collaboration with Ringo Lam and Tsui Hark in Triangle.

This film is more restrained than some of the gangster films of Johnnie To. It is a story of good cop bad cop. We are introduced to the mad detective immediately,

An eccentric police officer who has second sight, who reacts some of the crimes and then declares who the culprit is. However, in his eccentricity, he slices his ear to present it to his commander-in-chief on his retirement. He incurs the enmity of his squad and is dismissed.

However, another crime scene is shown and a young detective who admires the mad detective asks his help. We are introduced then into the mad world of the detective - who is divorced from his wife but continually imagines her presence, fights with her, flirts with her, and takes her to dinner. When they pursue the criminal policeman, considered responsible for the crime, the mad detective sees the seven different personalities within this policeman. They are quite varied - and the audience sees them. The mad detective then pursues the villain, interacts with the various personalities - but ultimately sees that the young officer is also timid, a child personality inside, fearful of the resolution. The resolution is open-ended as the young officer surveys three dead bodies and starts to change the guns from one hand to another, leaving the audience plenty of time to try to work out what has happened, their understanding of the mad detective, the intricacies of the plot and his psychological state.

Blood Brothers

Blood Brothers is a Chinese gangster film with a difference. It is character driven rather than action driven. It is set in Shanghai during the 1930s, a sumptuous period in Chinese history, the influence of Western styles, dress, music, nightclubs. This is the period of Zhang Yilou's Shanghai Triad. It is also the period, which begins Ang Lee's Lust, Caution. Other films utilising Shanghai's location in the 20s and 30s include The White Countess and The Painted Veil.

In one sense, the plot is familiar. However, it is the interest in the characters, their interactions, and their moral crisis that retain the interest. There is gangster activity of the expected kind. There is also a final bloodbath - and the director, Alexi Tan, shows his love for and admiration of the spaghetti westerns.

Several of China and Hong Kong's writing actors portray the three brothers. Two of them are actual brothers, the other their blood brother - and this theme of community is very strong in the gangster world. The main boss is betrayed by his right-hand man, considered his brother. He wreaks revenge on his brother and his former girlfriend. The three central brothers also have to face their life in the village, its poverty, their ambitions to go to Shanghai, the dreams of being waiters in a hotel, rickshaw jobs, eventually being caught up in the gangster world, even killing.

One of the brothers, the central brother, played by Daniel Wu, is a good man who finds himself killing others to save his blood brothers. He is also infatuated with the boss' girlfriend, a would-be actress and nightclub singer. The other brother is dominant, power hungry, successful, and even eliminating rivals. However, he also kills his younger brother, a man affected by the violence, taken to drink, trying to save the hero.

The film recreates the period well, is lavish in décor and costumes, recreates the song and dance routines of the clubs of the 30s and the American style. It is a good character study - but some audiences may be alarmed at the spaghetti western bloodbath at the end.

Medee Miracle

Medee Miracle is written and directed by lecturer and experimental filmmaker, Tonino Di Bernadi. He is collaborating with Isabelle Huppert whom he admired in the past and wanted to work with, eventually re-working the Medea story in contemporary times. Isabelle Huppert brings her customary aplomb to this

performance, looking always the same but somehow or other, incarnating quite a different character from her other films.

Her ire in *Medea* is a refugee from Eastern Europe, having betrayed her father, coming to France with her husband - who then abandons her for a French wife. She supports her children, singing in nightclubs (Crazy Love, Nick Cave's song made popular by Marianne Faithfull). She has the assistance of a nanny, played by the director's daughter, Giulia. She also has a scene with veteran Italian actor Lou Castel who plays her father.

Finding herself a foreigner in France, not accepted, upset by her husband's infidelity, getting revenge on him by having a different man at her home every night, imagining, like *Medea*, that she killed her children out of vengeance, she eventually decides not to follow the path of this violence (hence the 'Miracle' in the title) and moves to the countryside in order to help shelter-less women. At the end, even this is literally a struggle.

This is an art film, a study of a woman, an adaptation of a literary work, experimental video production, and lighting, using both colour and black and white. It is a film for film buffs.

NON PENSARCI (DON'T THINK ABOUT IT)

An engaging Italian comedy-drama, focused on a dysfunctional family.

The film opens with the central character, Stefano, a member of a band who finds himself with writer's block, betrayed by his girlfriend, dissatisfied with his band. He decides to go home to visit his parents. While the reunion is important, he discovers that his younger brother is finding the family cherry factory too difficult to manage and is in debt, while his marriage is breaking up. His sister has not completed her degree but is working with dolphins (something which she loves to do). He misinterprets her lifestyle as lesbian and mentions this to his parents, causing them some shock - and some anger on the part of his sister.

The members of the family tend to confide in him. He also re-meets his old friends, a security guard and a friend who has had a nervous breakdown and who eventually kills himself, following joking comments of the security guard.

The film explores the stories of each of the three children as well as the parents. The father is retired, enjoying playing golf, but sees the situation and finds a way of getting some money. The mother, who has a personal secret in her life, follows a New Age guru for liberation and exercise. The sister is involved with a rising politician who has self-doubts. The younger brother enjoys his children but when the security guard sends a prostitute to meet him, he does not realise this, goes out with her and falls in love with her.

The film has many strands - but, ultimately, the advice of the father is that everybody should follow their own path, whatever they are good at - and the final freeze-frame is the musician actually leaping out to the audience, presuming that they will catch him.

The film is quite humorous in many ways, serious as well. The characters are interesting and, mostly, engaging.

Night Watching

Night Watching is Peter Greenaway's interpretation of the career of Rembrandt, focusing on his painting of the *Night Watch*.

Greenaway, with his artistic and architectural background, came to prominence in the 1980s with *The Draughtsman's Contract*. His films were something of an experience and not necessarily a narrative kind of storytelling. The visuals were important, hidden messages in the visuals, particular codes - this was true of *The Draughtsman's Contract*, and, especially, of his interpretation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, with John Gielgud and *The Pillow Book*.

Having made a name for himself with such films as *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and her Lover* and *The Baby of Macon*, he ventured into more explicit explorations of human nature and sexuality. This was true of *The Pillow Book* as well as *Eight and a Half Women*. Greenaway then made the esoteric series of films, the *Tulse Luper Suitcases*. These were more art house installation films than features. So, it is something of a surprise to see him returning to his old way of making films as well as presenting a narrative.

The film is a visual delight. Many of the scenes are tableaux, imitating the style of Rembrandt's paintings. Many of the sequences are done on sound stages in a stylised way with only a few outdoors.

What is also of interest is Martin Freeman's impersonation of Rembrandt. Martin Freeman is better known as a comedian (*The Office*, *A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*) but he brings this comic talent as well as seriousness to the portrayal of the artist. One gets an impression of eccentricity from the artist, his poor background, his clashes with the burghers of Amsterdam, his shrewdness in getting funds. It also shows his love for his wife, Saskia, and their son, Titus. He is distraught by her death, taking up with the widow Geertje and then finally falling in love with Hendricka, the maid in the house.

It is difficult to know how much truth there is in Greenaway's interpretation. He may be following the leads of his earlier films with secret codes - and the importance of the *Da Vinci Code* in interpreting the Last Supper and the Mona Lisa.

The film has a lot to say about Dutch society at the time, power, greed, intrigue. The interpretation of the painting is that it is Rembrandt not only painting the significant characters in the story but also giving clues that it is a plot, a murder, as well as a condemnation of the moral values and stances of particular people in the painting. When it is finally exhibited, the fathers of the city take a dim view - but decide that it should hang and that ultimately Rembrandt would destroy his career. The film is graphic in its portrayals of sexuality, in its more contemporary earthy language. However, it is another experience as well as some insight into the life and career of Rembrandt, especially seen in his times.

HELP ME EROS

Taiwan 2007, 103 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Lee Kang-Sheng Yen.

Help me Eros is the second film by actor turned director Lee Kang-Sheng. His first film was *The Missing* in 2003. However, he has appeared in very many of the films of his executive producer, Tsai Ming-Liang including *The Wayward Cloud*, *Goodbye Dragon Inn*, and *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*.

In many ways the film is very nihilistic, a comment on the moral climate in Taiwan as observed by the writer-director. He portrays the young man who lost his money on the stock exchange, money being very important for Chinese people. He is also seen trying his luck in the lottery in his state of depression. He almost seals himself inside his apartment, grows marijuana, is stoned a lot of the time, but contacts a helpline. He becomes friendly with the woman on the other end of the line, not knowing that she is rather large, over-fed with the food of her cook-husband. He chats with her on a help line and also communicates by chat room. He also becomes friendly with the girls downstairs who, provocatively dressed, sell beetle nut to passers by.

He becomes lost in this closed-in world, becomes more involved in erotic experiences, which are presented, with striking candour and explicitness (almost as explicit as Ming-Liang's *The Wayward Cloud*).

The film is artistically made - the colours and lights of Taiwan, the city itself, the enclosed world that can lead to drugs and suicide, the enclosed world of erotic experience - that seems to lead nowhere. The film seems to lack any kind of moral framework- something which is the feature of Ming-Liang's films as well. The disciple has emulated his master.

IL DOLCE E L'AMARO

Italy, 2007, 98minutes, Colour.

Luigi Lo Cascio, Donatella Finocchiaro, Tony Gambino..

Directed by Andrea Porporati

Il Dolce e l'Amaro is yet another strong Italian film about the Sicilian mafia.

This film takes place over a period of 20 years, beginning with the introduction of the young boy, Saro, to his imprisoned father, discovering that he is killed soon after. The adult Saro comes under the influence of Gaetano (Tony Gambino) who sponsors him as his son, competing more successfully than his own son in the criminal world. He is set up after coming out of prison for robbing a woman of her jewellery in a gas station - which is a cover for ambitious bank robberies that take place in Northern Italy, the criminals travelling back and forth by plane. He is then initiated into the Cosa Nostra, the allegedly "honourable men"- who show no sense of honour in their cruelty and betrayal.

He flees to Northern Italy, meets the love of his life, sets up there after communicating with a judge who is a friend from childhood but whom he had attacked. He makes a full confession to the judge - and confesses it was he who was to kill him. The judge states that part of the bitter and sweet of his own life is to have the possibility of death (which does occur).

The film ends on an upbeat note, the young Mafioso changing his life - and experiencing a similar bank robbery that he perpetrated years earlier in which he gets an uncontrollable fit of laughter. Laughing at the folly of the world of the Mafiosi.

THE ROMANCE OF ASTREA AND CELADON

The Romance of Astrea and Celadon is a film that could be made only by Eric Rohmer or one of his disciples. It is based on a 17th century novel by Henry D'Urfé. In turn, it is a novel about the times in Gaul in the 5th century at the time of the collapse of the Roman Empire and the establishment of the kingdom of the Gauls - especially in the French countryside. However, Rohmer has chosen to film it in 17th century style while keeping the plot in the 5th century.

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Rohmer is a man who has made moral fables for 50 years or more. In the 1960s with such films as *My Night at Maud's* and *Claire's Knee*, he established himself as a perfectionist in artistic and morally restrained films. It was the implicit values, the delicate presentation of character and interactions, which charmed audiences as well as critics. As the decades went on, he chose to do a range of moral stories and fables including *Pauline at the Beach*, *The Fine Marriage*, as well as historical films like *The Marquise of O* and *Percival the Gaul*.

Even at the beginning of the 20th century, he made a costume drama, *The Lady and the Duke* as well as a more contemporary piece, *The Triple Agent*.

This film is beautiful to look at - it is almost a museum piece, full of tableaux of shepherds and shepherdesses in the French countryside (near the Loire river and its shadows), in woods, in castles. The dialogue is very much of its era - which also makes the film something of a museum piece.

There are echoes of the 17th century writings of Shakespeare and his lyrical and pastoral plays. Realism is not to the fore though much of the action takes place naturalistically. However, there is a tension between the realism and the artificiality of the dialogue and many of the set speeches (a feature of Rohmer films).

The film is the basic one about love, deception, the hardness of heart of the woman and the despair of the man, intervention by special characters who are able to heal the wounds and bring the couple together again. This is done with the background of Nature Religion and the Druids - but with speeches, especially about the three facets of the gods, which incorporates aspects of Christian Trinitarian Theology.

Not to the taste of contemporary audiences - more an illustration of the style of filmmaking that Rohmer specialised in and a view of a more French literary tradition.

SMALL GODS (ELEANOR'S ELEGY)

Small Gods (Eleanor's Elegy) is a first film written and directed by Dimitri Karakatsanis. It was made in Flemish language, the director having done his studies in Belgium. Some sections are in French.

Basically, this is a road movie. It opens with the road, a tunnel, a car accident. It then moves to a hospital where Eleanor is grieving the death of her child in the accident. She is taken away by two mysterious characters and goes on a journey with them throughout the countryside, encountering all kinds of unusual people including a very strong religious revivalist preacher. She begins to understand herself, feels that this is the right place to be, also tries to understand the two people she is with, especially the young woman who has been abused by her father. The context of the film the capture of Eleanor by the police and her being interrogated, her explaining what had happened to her as well as this being visualised. However, one soon realises that the interrogator is the equivalent of God. She is in a kind of purgatorial examination of her consciousness and her life. This gives the film the blend of the real as well as the surreal and gives it some religious dimensions in terms of identity, responsibility, the role of God and judgement.

DISENGAGEMENT

Disengagement is a topical film by Amos Gitai. For 15 years, Gitai has been making a number of documentaries and feature films many of which focus on the situation in Israel. He has delved into the history of Palestine and Israel in Kedma, the world of the Orthodox in Kardosh, the interaction between Palestinians and Israelis in Freedom Road.

This film is set at the time of the disengagement of the settlers on the West Bank particularly in Gaza. However, it is situated in a story where a French woman is burying her father and her step-brother, from Israel, comes to join her. 20 years earlier, she had given up her daughter who now lives in a Kibbutz. When her father leaves his possessions to her daughter, she joins her step-brother and returns to Israel at the time of the struggle, physical and religious between the settlers and the police.

Juliet Binoche is the French woman. Israeli star Liron Lievo is the step-brother. Singer Barbara Hendrix performs Marhler's Song of the Earth. Jeanne Moreau appears briefly as the lawyer who communicated the will.

The film is a reflection of the struggles in 2005. Gitai himself says that he is against this kind of Israeli settlement and hopes that go beyond slogans, ethnicity issues in order to transcend their differences and to make peace and harmony in the Middle East.

SUKIYAKI WESTERN DJANGO

At the end of this film, there is a joke: the little boy who survives the bloodbath travels, when he grows up, to Italy and is known as Django. This reference to the spaghetti westerns indicates that they have been a model for this no-holds-barred homage to, parody of, Japanese adaptation of, the spaghetti western.

However, there is another very strong influence which is seen right from the beginning. As the legend is told, audiences see that it is Quentin Tarantino speaking the legend. The film is certainly in the Tarantino, Robert Rodriguez vein. Tarantino also enjoys himself as the aging character he portrays imitating the Japanese accent trying to speak English.

In fact, the film is spoken in English with rather Tarantino-like dialogue and plenty of American slang (though rather restrained in the swearing department).

The film is highly stylized. Some sets are naturalistic, some sets are quite artificial. The colour photography also emphasises primary colours making the whole thing very vivid. In fact, colour is important because part of the screenplay refers to Shakespeare and the Wars of the Roses, specifically Henry VI and various citations from it. The two warring factions in the Western town are red and white, echoing the houses of Lancaster and York.

Into this village comes a lone gunman, dressed in black. While he seems invulnerable most of the time, he is almost killed by the warring factions. However, he certainly revives and destroys everybody in his path.

There are the stock characters - but the group of reds and whites are an assorted bunch of Japanese types from gangster films and samurai films. There is also the woman at the bar, who has experienced tragedy in her life, and her young son. There is also the old warrior woman who is admired by the old saloon owner - and they fight together to the end. There is also a two-timing sheriff - who is meant to be funny in the Japanese comic style.

The leader of the reds is a cowardly type who sees himself as Henry VI, changing his name to Henry. The leader of the whites is a smug and self-confident young warrior.

The film is very humorous at times. It is very bloody at times. It is also very loud - especially when the Gatling gun arrives on the scene.

This is the kind of film that audiences who go to special midnight screenings really relish, and join in.

12

12 is a very powerful film directed by one of the greatest of contemporary Russian directors, Nikita Mikhalkov (Burnt by the Sun).

It is a remake and expansion of Paddy Chayefsky's Twelve Angry Men (1957), directed by Sidney Lumet. (The film was remade in the late 90s by William Friedkin starring Jack Lemmon).

The original film, based on a television play, confined itself to the jury room with the 12 angry men. Henry Fonda played the juror who raised questions about the evidence received - 1 against 11. Lee J. Cobb stood out amongst other character actors as the virulent prejudiced juror.

Mikhalkov has kept this basic structure - and has often kept very close to the characters as well as some of the details of the evidence in this version. However, 50 years later, he has expanded the context considerably. This time the killing is allegedly done by a Chechnian youth, adopted by a Russian military man, who was murdered by the son according to witnesses. The film opens with scenes of death and disaster in Chechnya, continually goes back to the childhood of the boy, his growing up, relationship with his own father, mother and his being

rescued by his Russian 'Uncle' and being taken to Moscow to live with him. The film also has some very graphic war scenes especially with tracer fire between buildings which nobody can escape. The film also emphasises the prisoner - and in the cold of his cell he starts to move, to dance (very much with the rhythms and styles of Billy Elliot).

Mikhlkov takes a key role himself as the second juror, the Henry Fonda character. This is a very powerful film about law, mercy, judicial procedures, the individual characters and prejudices and background of particular jurors and how this influences their immediate decisions. It also shows the detail of discussion, re-enactment, re-examination of evidence - and the clashes between the jurors themselves. It ends very positively with the president of the jury taking on a responsibility for the boy where all the other jurors found themselves too busy. In many ways this is a profound Russian film and has strong Russian issues, especially prejudice against Chechnya. However, it speaks to a universal audience.

COLOMBO – O ENIGMA

Colombo - O Enigma is a wonderful film written by Manoel De Oliveira and has Oliveira himself and his wife as significant characters in the film. He directed it at age 98. He was also present at the Venice film festival at age 99 when the film was screened.

Oliveira began making films in the early 1930s and continued for the next 70 plus years. His body of work has been honoured throughout the world. In his later years, he made rather shorter films, very effective including a sequel to *Belle De Jour*, *Belle Toujours*.

This film is based on a book by a husband and wife team, who had investigated the background of Christopher Columbus for 50 or more years. They are portrayed in the early part of the film, the husband by De Oliveira's grandson. In the later part of the film, Oliveira and his wife portray the couple.

The film opens with interesting speculation about Columbus' identity, an examination of his signature, a look at particular emblems, which indicate the thinking behind his explorations. The film then moves to 1946 with two young men migrating to the United States, following Columbus' path. In 1957 one of them who has become a doctor, continues his interest in examining the documents about Portuguese exploration. Back in Portugal in 1960, he and his fiancée marry and then go on a honeymoon trip to Cuba, the alleged place of Columbus' Portuguese birth, and to other monuments, churches, and museums in the Algarve.

The next part of the film is set in 2007 where the elderly couple go to Columbus Circle in New York City, look at the Statue of Liberty and reflect on the meaning of this for the United States, go to Massachusetts where the Portuguese colony live in the United States. They then return to Portugal and to the Azores to examine further evidence of Columbus' life.

The possibility that Columbus was Portuguese is a speculation. However, the Portuguese De Oliveira is actually creating a film monument to Columbus and to the many Portuguese explorers who, as the film highlights, travelled all the seas of the world. Were De Oliveira not to make another film, this would be a most fitting epitaph for him.

IN THE CITY OF SYLVIE

In the City of Sylvie is what one might call an installation film - more appropriate to a museum with panels, which people can pass, by looking at its structure of day 1, day 2, day 3 there rather than in a cinema. However, fans of the film will note that it is pure cinema rather than dependent on any literary background.

The setting is three days in Strasbourg where a young man (opening with a three minute still focus on him) follows a young woman that he thinks is Sylvie. The film is a long stalking of Sylvie through the streets of Strasbourg until she discovers him and orders him away.

The film then shows him sitting and watching other people in the city. We are given practically no background to the young man so he remains something of an enigma - even a stalker. Sylvie, at least the girl he thinks is

Sylvie, is very attractive, and makes a strong stand. However, that is all that the film offers, pure cinema, a glimpse of young people, infatuations, searching and yearnings.

END

FAJR FILM FESTIVAL, TEHRAN, FEBRUARY 2007

THE INTERFAITH JURY

The jury comprised three members: Majad Shah Hosyni from Tehran, Marie Therese Kreidy from Telumiere, Lebanon, Peter Malone SIGNIS Cinema.

Several films dealt with religious themes, four of them with relationships between Muslims and Armenian Christians. The jury made three awards to Iranian made films.

PRIZE

ROBIN, directed by Parviz Sheik-Tadi.

A true interfaith film. Shot in difficult filming conditions in beautiful mountain locations with non-professionals, especially child actors, Robin draws powerfully on the spiritual tradition of Imam Hossein and of Jesus, showing the innocence and healing belief of children for a miracle.

TWO COMMENDATIONS

THE SUN SHINES ON EVERYBODY EQUALLY, directed by Abbas Rafei

A drama portraying Islam and Christianity together in Iran. A Muslim woman's love for her dying husband draws her Christian friend, who has lost her faith, on a healing pilgrimage that leads to a physical miracle as well as a profound Christian experience in a Muslim shrine.

BAREFOOT IN PARADISE, directed by Bahram Tavakoli

An austere film showing the faith and self-sacrificing facets of Muslim spirituality in a chaplain at an institute for quarantined terminally ill patients who becomes a contemporary equivalent of past saints who lived with the incurably ill.

END

THE HEAT

Iran, 2007, 100 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Mohammed Ali Sajadi.

The Heat is very much influenced by Hollywood. One of the characters refers to another as watching too many action movies. The writer and director has obviously looked at many Hollywood films, police action films and television series. This film might almost be called a replica. It is well crafted, has interesting characters, a complicated robbery plot, investigation.

The film also has some action chases as well as a car crash and an explosion – again, American-style.

The film shows the effect of globalisation – but most national cinemas look towards Hollywood, admire the style and craft, want to imitate them and make similar films. Because of this, the film could have universal interest and appeal as a police action story.

THE THIRD DAY

Iran, 2007, 90 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Mohammed Hussein Latifi.

The Third Day refers to a specific battle in the defence of western Khorramshahr in 1980. This town is on the border between Iraq and Iran. The Iraqis are invading – after a history where Iraqis and Iranians lived in the one town together. The film focuses on a brother and sister. The sister has been proposed to by an Iraqi who taught in the school where she taught – but who carried a bomb into a marketplace, killing many and injuring the girl. The brother decides to hide his sister, burying her in the garden and coming back to rescue her later that evening. In the meantime, the Iraqis go from house to house, the leader being the former teacher. He makes an effort to save the girl but in the final confrontation she shoots him. In the background are the partisans who are trying to defend the town against the strong armaments and tanks of the invading Iraqis.

The film illustrates once again how strongly the Iranians feel about the Iraq-Iran war and demonising the Iraqi characters: the leader, a guard who wants to rape the girl, a picture of Saddam Hussein.

Iranian commentators say that the film, based on fact, is an accurate presentation of the feelings of the resistance of those days. For a 21st century audience, it is reminiscent of the fighting in Baghdad and other Iraqi cities – or a small group of determined insurgents can halt the progress of an invading army and inflict a lot of damage as well as kill soldiers. In this way, the film is topical – perhaps perennially so.

EMPTY HANDS

Iran, 2007, 105 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Abolqasem Talebi.

Empty Hands is a complicated film about the aftermath of the Iraq-Iran war. Some of the intricacies of the plot will be lost on a western audience.

The film focuses on a mother and daughter, living with some tension. When the mother begins to act mysteriously, the daughter follows her. It emerges that the father-husband is being released from being a prisoner of war but has mental troubles. Eventually they care for the father and take him to a country town for recuperation.

In the meantime they have been receiving mysterious phone calls, threatening calls. It emerges then that there has been a clash between two military men and one holds the father responsible for the illness of his

son and is determined to have revenge, an attempt made on the daughter's life by the complainant's daughter.

The film is highly emotional – reminding audiences of the impact of the war and its aftermath.

THE SUN SHINES ON EVERYBODY EQUALLY

Iran, 2007, 90 minutes, Colour.

This film is very interesting for Iranian audience as well as international audience – a picture of Christianity and Islam together. (This is also a feature of the film about children in the countryside, Robin).

This is a film about a Christian woman who has lost her faith because of her sense of responsibility for a death. She leaves her husband to find herself – having nightmares in the desert where she follows a mysterious black figure who eventually emerges as herself. She is contacted by a Muslim friend and asked to participate in a mission: to abduct her terminally ill husband from hospital. The husband has been wounded in the Iraq-Iran war in lungs and larynx. His wealthy father has not given the permission for an operation. The desperate wife, with the help of her friend who is a doctor, take the husband and drive towards a shrine.

The film shows the faith of the Muslim woman, confident that in prayer a miracle will happen for her husband. The Christian woman, Armenian Christian, is much more rational. However, a number of strange things happen during the journey – touches of magic realism, people appearing to her and guiding her in her journey.

Ultimately, they come to a Muslim shrine in the woods where the Christian woman has a profound religious experience, talking to a nun who is a symbol of God – all in a dream. The Muslim continues in prayer and the husband is healed. They then continue to a major Muslim shrine.

Iranians are very strong on belief in miracles. The film also shows the traditions of spirituality in the two faiths and how they can co-exist and collaborate. This film won a commendation from the interfaith jury at the Fajr festival, 2007.

CRACKERJACK

Who would have thought that a film about lawn bowls would be the highest grossing film at the Australian box-office in 2003? While there are any number of bowls clubs both in the Australian cities and throughout the suburbs as well as in most country towns, drawing generally on the older generation, it is not the sport that immediately comes to mind for a screenplay, let alone a popular one. Television has certainly increased interest in as well as knowledge about bowls in screening the Jack High competitions over the years but a spot quiz about the rules of the game would only show up the general Australian ignorance of the game.

This is a prelude to highlighting the fact that Crackerjack was the third Australian film in ten years to focus on the sport of lawn bowls. First there was David Caesar's *Greenkeeping* (1992) with bowls in Sydney and then Sue Brooks' *Road to Nhill* (1997) with bowls in country Victoria.

Crackerjack is a Melbourne film which means that it is a touch more than sedate than if it were set in Sydney. Sydney communicates itself as a city for holidays. There is sun and surf and a beautiful harbour. Melbourne is a city for work and for study, with weather accordingly. Melbourne is not in quite a rush as Sydney seems to

be. Melbourne often opts for dignity and decorum over brashness. This has been particularly true of the many bowling clubs, with their white uniforms (*de rigueur*), their daily competitions and trophies, many of them 'dry'.

We are presented with a very traditional bowling club in Crackerjack, set pleasantly in its ways with the players going about their customary games in measured manner. The film quickly raises the questions of whether, in this economic day and age, this can last. Can the club be financially viable? Can this somewhat genteel ethos last?

The club has become the target of a takeover by a developer (the type that is quickly and easily demonised) who has had his eye on the club and who now wants to turn it into an up-to-date centre, especially by installing habit-making, lucrative poker machines. Needless to say, the veterans move into feisty mood and want to resist this takeover to the last.

They decide to become involved in a bowls competition which, if they win, could gain them the money necessary to save the club. The trouble is that they have very few players who could take the club to victory – and to the money. Despite themselves, they find they are reliant on a young member, Jack Simpson (Mick Molloy) whom they don't really know, let alone like, who has an offhand manner in dealing with them, and a mouth to match. In fact, he is a member only because he has a scam going on. It is all to do with parking cars and precious parking space. Coming into the city by car, he wanted a parking space for himself - so he pays the fees to the club. But, there is something more profitable. He can sell other spaces in the parking area to associates.

Yet, he finds that he likes bowls. He also has a 'flipper' turn of the wrist that could be a champion move

Needless to say, he goes on to play with the members and, after offending most of them with his oddball remarks, he becomes their champion. He makes friends, comes to understand the oldies, curbs his abrasive personality – somewhat – and produces a competitive game with some tension along the way. It is no secret to reveal that there is a happy ending.

The advertising tagline is, 'It's on for young and old'.

The film was directed by Paul Moloney who, prior to Crackerjack, had worked only in television. It boasts an excellent cast of veterans who are led by comedian Mick Molloy. Bill Hunter is the champion of the club, Frank Wilson the president, Monica Maughan the lady president, Lois Ramsay one of the committee members who is very conscious of the swear jar (and the film gives ample opportunity for the cast, especially Jack and his young friend, David (Samuel Johnson) to keep putting in their money).

Major reviews of the film on its release were generally positive. They seemed to raise three main questions: how funny is the screenplay? Are the characters well-written or are they one-dimensional? Can Mick Molloy act and how interesting and sympathetic is his character, Jack Simpson?

One of the common critical comments was that the characters were too one-dimensional.

How accurate a comment is this? When veteran actors like Bill Hunter, Frank Wilson and Monica Maughan bring their long and varied experience to roles that, on paper, may seem one-dimensional, they bring them alive in a multi-dimensional way. This is one of the strengths of Crackerjack. One way to prove this point would be to look at the caricature that Bill Hunter makes of his club president in Strictly Ballroom. One-dimensional yes, but entertainingly alive and different from Crackerjack.

This is how comedy works. The central characters (from the plays of Shakespeare to Neil Simon to Barry Humphries) have to be multi-dimensional. The play or film is about them. Indeed, to have too many multi-dimensional characters is a danger for audience focus and attention, taking them away from the character they should be concentrating on and responding to. Writers know this and so surround the 'round' character (E.M.Forster's term in his *Aspects of the Novel*) with 'flat' characters (Forster's term for

the one-dimensional characters). With these 'flat' characters, audiences quickly pick up what their particular trait is. (In the past they were called 'humours', often symbolic characters who represented one highlighted facet of human nature.)

If we accept that for Crackerjack and other comedies, then we know what to expect: the cantankerous boss, the shifty player, the haughty dame, the flirtatious girl, the put-upon also-ran. We can laugh with these characters or laugh at them accordingly. This is what Crackerjack does with the supporting cast.

The last remaining question is: what about Mick Molloy and Jack Simpson?

It seems that no one made great claims for Molloy's acting ability. He has been a mimic, an impersonator, a comic with some touches of the clown. These are the qualities he brings to Jack Simpson. He is the abrasive larrikin who needs to be put in touch, not only with his 'inner child'!, but also with his potential heart of gold. This is what his performance is about.

The variety of opinions from reviewers about how his character comes across, their descriptions of his character, seem to suggest that Molloy might have done a rather good job in bringing Jack Simpson to life.

These are some of the diverse descriptions: 'a wisecracking layabout', 'a bit of a lost soul', 'a shiftless slob', 'a calculating prankster', 'an opportunistic failure'. Jack Simpson is 'scruffy and unmotivated, over-educated and under-utilised'.

It sounds as if Mick Molloy was quite effective.

Crackerjack could be called a very droll comedy. It has entertaining funny one-liners. Audiences respond to the familiarity of the situations and the spoof element in the veteran traditions of bowling clubs with their raffles, meat trays as well as their uniforms and protocols. It has been remarked that it is a kind of Australian Ealing comedy with its focus on ordinary characters and humorous situations. At that level, it works very well for the popular audience.

AUSTRALIAN BISHOPS' WEBSITE

Déjà vu
The Fountain
Pursuit of Happyness *
Apocalypto
Breaking and Entering
Stranger than Fiction
Perfume
Pan's Labyrinth
Miss Potter
Tenacious D
Little Children
Freedom Writers *
Becoming Jane *
Hot Fuzz

The Singer
Shooter
Perfect Stranger
The Reaping
Paris je t'aime
Shooter
Curse of the Golden Flower
Half Nelson
The Number 23
Tideland
Deliver us from Evil
Driving Lessons
Oceans 13
Fantastic Four

AWAY FROM HER.

This Canadian film by young actress and director, Sarah Polley, is poignant in presenting how much loss there is for the spouse who has to relinquish care of the Alzheimer's sufferer and watch, almost helpless, as the partner of so many years drifts away. This is especially hard as the spouse visits the home on an almost daily basis, finds that his wife vaguely recognises him. Julie Christie is radiant as the accepting sufferer. Gordon Pinsent is her husband.

THE BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA

It is a pleasure to be able to recommend this film to audiences of all ages except, perhaps, the smallest of children. One can say that it is a lovely film. It is one of the best American films for young audiences. The Bridge to Terabithia is based on the 1976 award-winning novel by Katherine Paterson, a book that apparently is well-read in America. It has been adapted by the author's son, David. It touches on many themes that children experience and can identify with: busy families, education, school bullying, making friends, using the imagination, being creative, death and grief, peace-making and hope.

CATCH A FIRE.

This story of Patrick Chumasso, apartheid and terrorist protest in the 1980s is involving and evokes some responses of outrage. But, it finishes with the actual Patrick Chumasso appearing genially along with the actor who portrayed him so well, Derek Luke. Chumasso reflects on his time on Robben Island, the impact of Nelson Mandela, the end of apartheid and the impact of the whole movement for Truth and Reconciliation which is marked, as is Chumasso, by the spirit of forgiveness along with hope for the future.

GOODBYE BAFANA

Another welcome opportunity to look back at the history of South Africa and apartheid and to try to understand what happened. It also offers the opportunity to see Nelson Mandela during the time of his imprisonment and a glimpse of his personality and stature. James Gregory was a young policeman from the Transkei when he was appointed to Robben Island in 1968. Over a twenty year period, he got to know Mandela better and as a person, read something of the ANC freedom charter (which was officially banned) and began to appreciate his prisoner more and more. The burden of the drama rests with Joseph Fiennes who gives one of his best performances. Usually somewhat buttoned up in his roles, Fiennes shows a far

wider range than usual and takes us on James Gregory's intellectual and emotional journey from prejudice to understanding, respect and compassion.

THE LIVES OF OTHERS

This is a film about Weisler, a dedicated, rather lonely and humourless official, respected by his superiors, but someone who seems to have reached his peak as a relentless interrogator. He is put in charge of an operation to try to find something damning in the life of East Germany's most successful playwright who is living with the republic's leading actress. The whole apartment is systematically bugged with 24 hour listening, especially by Weisler. The focus of the film is a transition in Weisler who believes that people don't change. He listens in to the life of the artists opening up imagination and feelings he was unaware of. As his demanding immediate superior puts on pressure, he is faced with moral dilemmas of loyalty to a cause and human decency. Weisler's is quite a moral journey.

BLACK GOLD

(UK, 2006, d. Nick Francis, Marc Francis)

Black Gold focuses on coffee production in southern Ethiopia. It has a central character, Tadesse Meskela (www.oramiacoffeeunion.org) who has an office in Addis Ababa and goes around the world, especially to conventions and exhibitions, to promote his coffees. His role is General Manager of the Oromia Coffee Farmers' Co-operative Union. He represents 101 unions, 74,000 farmers. His promotions have brought in moneys for building local schools and other amenities. The film-makers follow Tadesse (filming for over two and a half years) and show him with the farmers, with dealers, full of energy to better the people from whom he emerged after growing up in deprivation. The film also has a lot of facts and figures, explaining how world coffee markets are controlled by four companies, Kraft, Nestle, Proctor and Gamble and Sara Lee, how the price of coffee is determined by the New York market which has repercussions around the globe, be it in Brazil, Papua New Guinea or Ethiopia. The points are put forward clearly. The images from Ethiopia are authentic. The issues are important.

GOLDEN DOOR (NUOVOMONDO)

(Italy, 2006, d. Emanuele Crialese)

The Nuovo Mondo, the New World – or the Golden Door of the film's title in English – is that of the United States one hundred years ago. Migrants from all over Europe, from Ireland, Italy, Russia and Eastern Europe, many of them refugees, many economic migrants, made their way to the new world in hopes of a better life. The initial location is Sicily at the beginning of the 20th century. Life is hard. Peasants are poor. The terrain, though beautiful, is harsh. The film has some marvellous detail of young men's preparations for the voyage, their buying clothes, the families at the wharves to farewell them. The re-creation of the boat and life on board, sometimes exciting, at other times harsh with the crowding and the nervousness of people who have no real idea of what lies ahead of them. In Ellis Island, they are herded into quarters, interrogated in a language they barely understand, they are prodded and poked for disease or anything that would disqualify them from entry. Interesting, moving, thoughtful – and still relevant today.

GROW YOUR OWN

(UK, 2007, d. Richard Laxton)

Grow Your Own is about migrants and refugees, trauma and therapy, racial bigotry, friendship, harmony and banding together to help one another. Grow Your Own refers to veggies and fruit. Where they grow is in the public land made available by law in Britain and other European countries. Within this space, for a small rental, people can have 'Allotments', a shed and some ground. In the film's fictional allotment, most of the tenants are older Brits, some of them, as writer Frank Cottrell Boyce remarks, cranky old gits! However, some refugee and migrant families (here, from the Middle East and from Zimbabwe) have taken up the offer, giving them a work opportunity and food while their cases are being processed. On the whole, it is a success – the film is positive in its outlook. Idealistic maybe (but why not?). There are some unhappy facets of the film, but it is a story with characters who illustrate in microcosm, modern British society.

(TELL NO ONE)

(France, 2006, d. Guillaume Caunet)

Tell No One is based on a best-seller by Harlan Coben. So, what is a writer whose stories generally take place in New Jersey doing with a French film? The adaptation works very well. The film has received critical acclaim and has won four French Cesars (including best actor and direction) and has also proven popular. When the wife of a doctor is murdered, the doctor is initially thought to be the killer. But he himself was attacked and has little memory of what happened. Eight years later, some bodies are discovered in the area and he comes under suspicion again. He then receives an email message and some streaming video which suggests that his wife is still alive. Interesting, entertaining and substantial.

THE BOURNE ULTIMATUM

(US, 2007, d. Paul Greengrass)

This is a holiday film for the adult audience who may want something more engrossing or demanding than the popular shows. It is the third in the Jason Bourne trilogy based on novels by Robert Ludlum. They are the best film versions of his novels so far. Ludlum's novels drew on the technological weapons developed to that time. The novels were intense. They were character studies, especially of their central heroes who were trained in the ways of expert spying.

This film is certainly a visual experience of the novels. In two hours we are rushed through the plot with some of the quickest-paced editing you are likely to experience. Matt Damon is implacable as the put-upon Bourne. David Strathairn is excellent and icy and callous as the deputy head of the CIA. The surveillance equipment and access to cameras, phones and technology – even at Waterloo station – are beyond Orwellian chilling. Jason Bourne is a hero, trained in survival techniques, who uses his wits rather than weapons. He is a representative of good, but a good that comes from evil and needs redemption.

DECEMBER BOYS

(Australia/UK, 2007, d. Rod Hardy)

This is a good, modest film, a memoir of growing up in a remote orphanage in the desert and a wonderful holiday at the sea for four of the boys. They are the December Boys, because they are the orphans who have a December birthday. And they are the lucky ones who benefit from a gift of a couple for some of the boys to go to their place for the summer holidays and celebrate Christmas.

Basically, the film is about friendship, about boys who play together, are mischievous together, but who long to be adopted and experience parental and family love. The opportunity rises during the holiday and the three youngest try their best to be good in order to be chosen. The oldest boy does not want to be adopted. A young couple who worked in a carnival cannot have children and the boys bond with them. This is a well-written script that most audiences would enjoy, a visit to the past which had its difficulties but was not traumatic. Rather, the holiday had a wonderful effect on the boys and bonded them even more closely.

EVENING

(US, 2007, d. Lajos Koltai)

Evening belongs to a genre of popular film-making that might look something like elegant soap-opera at first, but one which avoids most of the melodrama and heightened emotional interactions that is characteristic of the soaps.

Vanessa Redgrave is Ann Grant, who is bedridden and dying. Her two daughters, played by Toni Collette and Natasha Richardson (Vanessa Redgrave's own daughter) have come to be with her. One is a happy family woman, the other (Colette) is low on self-esteem, prickly, and uncertain about the direction of her life. Eileen Atkins plays the sympathetic night nurse. Vanessa Redgrave is confined to her room and, in fact, her bed except for one sequence but she is convincing as a dying woman. Clare Danes portrays Ann Grant in the 1950s, an effective portrait of the younger woman, made all the more interesting as the film moves between the two actresses and we try to connect them and the development of Ann Grant's personality and character. The film is pleasingly modulated in its pace, maybe too measured for some tastes, which means that it does not have the dynamic urgency of high drama. But, it gives an opportunity for audiences to appreciate a whole life, how a person changes, makes mistakes, has regrets, has great joys and comes to face death.

SERAPHIM FALLS

(US, 2006, d. David Van Ancken)

Seraphim Falls is a visually beautiful but thematically grim western. It opens in mid-pursuit, the farmer chasing the Union commander who ordered the burning of his property which led to the deaths of wife and children. Pierce Brosnan is Gideon, the Union officer. Liam Neeson is the former Confederate officer who is bent on revenge.

The pursuit takes them through the snow and ice of the mountain forests of Nevada (with New Mexico standing in for these locations, the waterfall actually in Oregon), down river and the waterfall, to the isolated lowlands to a town, to the site of work on railroad tracks, past a group of religious settlers and into the desert for the showdown. One saying goes, 'Revenge is sweet'. That is definitely not the message of this film. The physical endurance of Gideon, especially in the frozen mountains as well as his skills in survival make this a very tough film. The long pursuit, the deaths and the revenge motivation mean that is also harsh and relentless.

WAITRESS

(US, 2007, d. Adrienne Shelley)

This is a pleasant surprise. Yes, it is about a young woman who works at a diner and, yes, there are a lot of familiar characters and situations. However, there is a warm-heartedness, even a sweet-naturedness about it that appeals – even though it does not shirk some of the harsher aspects of life. And this is in no small measure to the winning performance of Keri Russell as the young waitress, Jenna.

For those who enjoy food films, there are many sequences of pie-making as well as visual displays of colourful and tempting pies. Much of the action takes place in the diner where the waitress works – and a lot of humour in the characters of her two waitress friends, one of whom, Dawn (director, Adrienne Shelley), lacks self-confidence, relies on help from her friends to make her look attractive, and then falls in love with the eccentric man she met on a ‘Personals’ date. The other, Becky, is played for good laughs by Cheryl Hines, wisecracking with a heart of gold. An added bonus is Andy Griffiths as Old Joe, the curmudgeonly owner of the diner, demanding with the waitresses and their work but who befriends the put-upon Jenna and serves as both friend and conscience.

3:10 TO YUMA

(US, 2007, d. James Mangold)

This is a very fine western. Many will have seen the original film, made fifty years earlier, with Glenn Ford and Van Heflin. It was based on a short story by crime writer, Elmore Leonard, and has elements of the crime thriller as well as the western. This version has amplified aspects of the plot and some of the characters. The two stars, Christian Bale and Russell Crowe, are excellent. Russell Crowe, as the ruthless gunfighter, seems natural in his role. But Christian Bale, who has shown such versatility in recent films like *Batman Begins* and *Harsh Times*, stands out as the rancher who is coming to the end of his tether.

One of the amplifications from the original which makes this film very interesting is the character of the older son, William, a fourteen year old boy who despises his father as weak and submissive and who is attracted by the often suave manner of Ben Wade. The boy is instrumental in the journey to the rail head and has to re-evaluate his father. Evans is a man of principle. Van Heflin stood out fifty years ago as the embodiment of a good man, a decent man. In fact, the word decent is often used in this version as well as conscience. Christian Bale brings a seriousness and commitment to this man of decency.

3:10 to Yuma is a cinema parable about conscience and moral choices.

TEXTS OF ARTICLES AND REVIEWS FOR SIGNIS Media, SIGNIS website, The Universe, TYPEFACE and other sites.

Peter Malone

BERLINALE 2007

2007 saw the 57th edition of the Berlinale. As always, there were many interesting films in the various sections: the Competition, Panorama, Forum as well as children's films for those under 14 as well as for those above. There were also retrospective programs, this year a range of silent films on women.

Ecumenical Jury Awards

The Ecumenical Jury gave its prize for the competition last year to the winner of the Golden Bear, *Grbavica*. The same thing happened this year with the winner being the Chinese-Mongolian film *Tula's wedding*. The Chinese also did well in the Panorama section with the Ecumenical winner being *Getting Home*. The Forum award went to *Chiruga* from Switzerland. The latter awards included a money prize given by the associations of the Protestant and Catholic churches of Germany.

China

China (and Mongolia) had quite a large representation in the competitions but also in the Forum section. Besides the winner, *Tua's Wedding*, the main competition included *Desert Dreams* and *Lost in Beijing*. *Desert Dreams* was set in the deserts of Mongolia where a lone man did battle against the elements by planting trees to save the steppes (even though the wind continually uprooted them). This the terrain made famous by *The Story of the Weeping Camel* and *the Cave of the Yellow Dog*. This time the family go to Ulan Bator for treatment for the little daughter's hearing problems, leaving the man alone – but only for a short time as a mother and son, refugees from North Korea, turn up and begin to share the isolated life. This is one of those films, shot in beautifully exotic landscapes, that requires patience and a capacity for contemplation of people and issues.

By contrast, *Lost in Beijing* is set in the capital, a modern story with some squalid situations involving a husband and wife who come in from the country and get entangled in what seems to be a surrogacy problem, the wife working for a massage centre boss to whom she becomes attached and her husband getting involved with blackmail.

Chinese authorities had difficulties with the film because of the critique of corrupt officials, the issue of abortion and some more explicit bedroom scenes than one usually finds in Chinese films.

The film is well-made, feature the modern Beijing – but is permeated by a somewhat pessimistic, sometimes sour tone.

The winner of the Ecumenical prize in Panorama was *Getting Home*, a bit of a Chinese shaggy dog story. We are introduced to a middle-aged worker and his drinking companion, only to find that the companion is dead. He had promised to take his friend's body back home should he die, so it is only right that Zhao do the same. This is an amusing and moving odyssey, a Chinese road movie where Zhao, as he keeps faithful to his promise, becomes all the more endearing as he goes through all kinds of adventures and misadventures – being robbed by bandits in a bus, being robbed in a hostel by a truck driver, meeting all kinds of people on the way, even an impoverished mother of a university student (will he go back to her for the sequel!). A humane human comedy.

World War II

As always in Berlin, there are films which take the audiences back to World War II, often the German film industry examining the conscience of the past as well as offering lessons for younger generations, especially as it is over 60 years since the end of the war. The main offering for 2007 was an Austrian film, *The Counterfeiters*, a well-told story of a Jewish conman and forger who was arrested before the outbreak of war by the Berlin chief of the forgery squad. It is based rather closely on a true story. The forger is a survivor, first of all pandering to the guards and officials by flattering them with sketches and then called up, along with other printing experts, to work on a project to produce sterling and then American dollars to flood the markets and, later, to buy munitions.

The film boasts a strong performance by television actor, and highlights the major themes with which we are familiar, the suffering and humiliation (and the horror by the time of the liberation of the camps), but shows this group getting special treatment and incentives to keep them on target with the counterfeit notes. The film moves quite briskly and keeps the interest.

In the meantime, Steven Soderbergh's *The Good German* delved into the black market, the darker sides of the dividing of Germany and of Berlin in the immediate aftermath of the Nazi surrender. It is all done in a pastiche of the film noir of the mid and late 1940s. Robert de Niro's *The Good Shepherd* also entered the world of espionage, especially during World War II and the subsequent formation of the CIA.

The other World War II film came from the Czech Republic, from veteran director Jiri Menzel who began making ironic, tongue-in-cheek comic portraits of his people in the freer moods of the mid-1960s. He returns to this vein to some effect in *I Served the King of England*, presenting the picaresque adventures of

a short young man, Dite, whose ambition is to become a millionaire and who is not above some trickery to achieve this. The episodes (even one filmed as a silent comedy) are amusing, sometimes charming, sometimes bawdy in a very genteel way as Dite rises through the ranks of the staff of the most elegant hotels. Then Hitler comes into the picture and the film turns more serious as well as critical. Dite defends a young German woman who is attacked by some Czech youths and he is smitten. She is the very model of a Hitler-infatuated, racist, supremacist ideologue and Dite sides with her.

We know how it ends right from the beginning as we see an older Dite coming out of gaol after fifteen years. After the war the communist regime caught up with him.

There is quite a lot to think about as we watch the seemingly idyllic luxury 30s, the transformation of the German occupation and the hold of Nazism. And the older Dite has the opportunity to become wiser.

Israel

Speaking of war, there were two films from Israel which would surprise a lot of audiences. They were critical of Israel's stances on Palestine and the treatment of Palestinians. Beaufort is a film about the 2000 withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanon. Beaufort is an old crusader castle (which has seen many wars over many centuries) and is in Lebanese territory. During the occupation from 1982 to 2000, it served as an impregnable fortress though the continued target of Hezbollah rockets.

The film confines its two hour running time to the castle and the preparations for leaving, the continued bombardment, defusing bombs, packing, dreams of what the soldiers will do in the future. The commander, very young, is psychologically affected by the orders to leave and the seeming surrender of the castle as well as the final orders to blow it up. Finished before July 2006, Beaufort has very strong resonances with what happened in the Israeli invasion of Lebanon last year and the confrontation with Hezbollah and the question of whether that is the right way to go and how futile it is.

The other Israeli film featured in Panorama, The Bubble. It was co-written and directed by Eytan Fox whose previous films, Yossi and Yaeger and Walking on Water also screened in Berlin.

The Bubble is something of a surprise to outside viewers. The director, producer and the cast all live in Tel Aviv and they wanted to tell a Tel Aviv story, a story about men and women in their 30s. Many Israelis consider that the citizens of Tel Aviv are not always connected with reality and live in a bubble.

The central character, Noam, played by Ohad Knoller who has featured in Fox's other films, is first seen at a checkpoint where Palestinians are profoundly humiliated by the military – something which will be shown again towards the end of the film as a number of Palestinians travel from Israel to Gaza for a family wedding. Whatever the fears about terrorists, the film implies that there must be more humane ways of treating the Palestinians.

Noam works in a music shop and shares accommodation with friends, one the owner of a restaurant and the other a woman who works in a cosmetics shop. Fox's films have gay themes and these are prominent in The Bubble. What complicates matters is that begins a liaison with a Palestinian whom he saw at the checkpoint. His friends arrange for the Palestinian to have an Israeli cover to work in Tel Aviv.

What is different is that Noam and his friends are against the occupation and stage a rave concert in support of protest against the occupation. The question for outside audiences is how prevalent these stances are amongst younger Israelis.

Much of the story is autobiographical, especially in the detail of the day-by-day life for these characters. Fox opts to portray contemporary stances on Israel-Palestinian relations, terrorism as well as gay relationships and so the film turns pessimistic as it goes on.

Age

Another theme that emerged from the films was that of women ageing. There were two striking examples.

The first was the Belgian *Irina Palm* which was set in London (and filmed in Luxembourg). Marianne Faithfull gave a performance that many thought would win the Best Actress award. However, it went to the German Nina Hoss for *Yella*. Seeing Marianne Faithfull as a 60 year old suburban, rather frumpish widow, is a shock, especially as she is so convincing. When her sick little grandson needs an expensive operation in Australia she decides she will find the money but going to work.

To her amazement, she finishes up in a sex club in Soho, making the option to service the clients after her original shock and distaste. She soon achieves a reputation and is given the name *Irina Palm*.

One of the effects of seeing this film about a sordid world is the realisation that while the ugliness and vice continue, there is some transcendence shining through the sordid. The ageing woman becomes friend with the Balkan manager of the club (Miki Manojlovic) and the friendship transforms them both. On the other side, there is the moral dilemma that the son and his wife have to face, the son angrily rejecting his mother and her money at first, the daughter-in-law appreciating what she has done. While the synopsis might sound like an illness telemovie of the week, the hard edge of the situations and characters give it more substance.

The other film also has a British icon: Julie Christie. It is actress, Sarah Polley's *Away from Her*, adapted from Alice Munro's short story, *The Bear Came Over the Mountain*. The screenplay and its maturity and insight into old age are quite striking considering that Sarah Polley was in her early and mid-twenties when she wrote and directed the film.

The story focuses on a couple in their sixties, he has been a professor, she has stayed at home. Now, her memory is beginning to fade and she accepts the oncoming of Alzheimer's disease. She decides to enter a nursing home. Julie Christie has often been described as radiant on screen. This film comes more than forty years after her Oscar-winning performance in *Darling*, after *Doctor Zhivago* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*. She is most definitely radiant here, persuasive as a woman who accepts what is happening to her and what the consequences will be.

Canadian actor Gordon Pinsent is her husband. The film is poignant in presenting how much loss there is for the spouse who has to relinquish care of the Alzheimer's sufferer and watch, almost helpless, as the partner of so many years drifts away. This is an admirable film on a difficult contemporary reality.

Religious Experience

There were two very serious films about God and religious experience. One was Italian Catholic and the other Turkish Muslim.

Takva is set in Istanbul. It focuses on a man who lives quite a solitary life, faithful in a very literal way to the injunctions of the Koran. He has worked for the same company for thirty years. We see the plain daily routines of his life. An imam decides that he is just the person to do collections from debtors for the welfare of the mosque and the religious order and trainees there. This means an enormous transformation in his life, the loss of the regularity of his routine and a challenge to his beliefs.

Decked out in a better suit and given the use of a car and driver, along with advice from the business manager, he is flattered and conscientious. But his new tasks expose him to a world he is not familiar with at all: poor families, afternoon alcoholics, wheelers and dealers who offer bribes. His immediate reaction is stern, according to the letter of the book. In the meantime, he is constantly troubled by the sexual nature of his dreams – in real life, he is socially awkward with women. What is he to do? He frequently wonders whether he is losing his mind.

The director declares that he is an atheist but is interested in the problems of what he calls 'ancient ideologies'. Can someone live according to the precepts of a 7th century religious life in the contemporary

globalised world. How can one be holy? Is compromise the answer or is a descent into madness? Tavka presents this dilemma with great force and challenge.

In Memoria di Me is set not all that far away in contemporary Venice. A young man is interviewed about himself, his life, faith and love. He enters the seminary of a Catholic religious order and begins his novitiate training. The regular life, the quiet, the prayer and meditation, the study and conferences give him the opportunity to examine the nature of his faith. It also gives him the opportunity to observe his fellow novices, assess their characters and their spiritual struggles. They also express their opinion of his shortcomings, especially his arrogance and being prone to judge. He also has intellectual discussions with the novice master and the superior. Finally, as one of the novices decides to leave, he has to face his own choice.

The film is well made, atmospherically composed and shot and moves with serious solemnity. Reviewers took this exploration of faith in an ascetical context quite seriously.

Had it been a piece of theatre, it might have been very powerful. However, as a film, and a film presented as 'realistic', even 'naturalistic', it raises all kinds of issues for Catholics and those who have experienced this kind of life in the Catholic Church during the last forty years. To that extent, it seems to bear little relationship to contemporary church life and life within religious orders. There is practically no evidence of the Second Vatican Council (except in the less rigid wearing of religious garb by priests and novices). There is practically no evidence of the kind of renewal asked for in the 1960s for orders to re-examine their 'charism' and their spirituality. In fact, we are told nothing about the order, its history, its style of spirituality, its mission (and there are no scenes of Eucharist, which seems very strange).

The journey of the young man is predominantly intellectual. While he is interiorly emotional, his demeanour and behaviour are particularly phlegmatic. He is interested in the content of his faith – as are the books he reads and the lectures he participates in. Faith is an intellectual exercise to be dealt with rationally. There is very little of faith as a personal commitment to God, to fellow human beings or to the order. The religious experience is cerebral. (There are no scenes of community recreation, practically no speaking at meals, no human connectedness in the ordinary daily routines.)

When his friend leaves the seminary, declaring that he would go to do some ministry and the tones of the African 1950s Missa Luba peal out, is there any inkling that one's spiritual life and one's life of faith has community and charity dimensions.

The 'purist' Church of *In Memoria di Me* is closer to the asceticism and rigour of *The Nun's Story* than the realities and challenges of everyday faith.

MORE DETAILED REVIEWS FOR SIGNIS WEBSITE AND FOR THE UNIVERSE (UK)

300

(US, 2007, d. Zack Snyder)

This has to be one of the most macho films ever. It also has to be one of the most bellicose ever. For the net surfer, it is worthwhile (and alarming) to read the rave reviews from the fans within a few days of its first screenings.

Of course, it has to be bellicose in some ways since it is the story of the 300 Spartans under the leadership of Leonidas to delay the advance of Xerxes and his thousands of Persian troops at the battle of Thermopylae. (However, it does have the claim at the end that the film bears no relation to any actual persons or incidents and any similarities are coincidental!!)

What makes 300 different from other stories from ancient Greece (like Oliver Stone's *Alexander*) is that it is based on a graphic novel. The author is Frank Miller who wrote *Sin City*. In fact, the visual and editing

style of the film is like that of a graphic novel. The framing is generally like the panels of a comic. The actors are photographed to look like graphic figures as are many of the action sequences. It is the same with the editing as we move from one incident to another, a panel-like edit cuts. So, it is not meant to be looked at like a re-creation of actual history.

There are lots of computer effects, especially for the Persian hordes and the overwhelming numbers, the real/mythical tactics with a charging rhinoceros, elephants, giants and monsters. This is all adrenalin pumping stuff.

The film opens with the birth of Leonidas and the warrior culture of Sparta, taking the boys from their parents, training them to fight at the earliest age, sending them out of the community to survive an initiation experience, overcoming the onslaughts of savage beasts. Leonidas becomes ruler of Sparta which operates on an immediate graphic novel kind of morality. When the admittedly obnoxious delegates from Xerxes arrive in Sparta, they are dispatched without a qualm. Before Leonidas goes to battle, he has to climb a sheer mountainside and deal with the conservative and money grabbing priests who claim the gods are against his immediate going.

When he goes with his 300, despite the ritual objections, Sparta is under the control of Theron (a dastardly Dominic West) and Leonidas' wife, Lena Headey, who is both valiant and beautiful and dedicated to the ethos of Sparta.

The battles are sometimes interesting with the phalanx formations pushing back the Persians, the shields saving them from deluges of arrows. But, the slashing and cutting goes on and on with an enormous body count (with a mound of bodies at one stage used to stop the Persian advance). Gerard Butler (last seen as The Phantom of the Opera) is buffed and built-up but retains his Scots accent. The accent of David Wenham who fights but survives and returns to Sparta to tell the tale might be described as 'broken-mythical'.

As regards the macho emphasis, that was what Sparta was like and these Spartans go into battle in their minimal uniforms and oiled chests and biceps. Judging by some reaction at the screening, 300 could become a cult classic for members of gay body builders clubs (especially if they have a hankering to be mercenaries) – there were wolf whistles when the tall, oiled and bechained and pierced Xerxes arrived.

Some of the dialogue sounds very US hawkish, the noble goodies from the West who are not to be cowed by advancing enemies from the middle east so that Greece is saved from the uncivilised and the mystical. That is uncomfortably bellicose as well.

ANGEL

(France, 2007, d. Francois Ozon)

Angel is an interesting case study. But, who is Angel?

She is the creation of novelist Elizabeth Taylor and the central character in Francois Ozon's adaptation of the novel for his first English language film. Ozon wrote in French and gave it to writer and scholar, Martin Crimp, to translate. Filming was done principally in England, near Bristol.

Ozon has come into prominence since 2000 with such films as Under the Sand, The Swimming Pool, 8 Women and Le Temps qui Reste. Commentators note that he is particularly skilled in writing roles for women, a gift from his gay sensibility. 8 Women starred a gallery of French actresses including Catherine Deneuve, Fanny Ardant, Isabelle Huppert, Emmanuelle Beart, Ludovine Sagnier, Virgine Ledoyen and the veteran Danielle Darrieux. Under the Sand and The Swimming Pool were vehicles for Charlotte Rampling who also appears in Angel.

But Angel is played by Romola Garai who made an impression on British television in the adaptation of George Elliot's Daniel Deronda. She has often played supportive women, sisters and friends, in Nicholas

Nickleby, Vanity Fair, Scoop and As You Like It, though she did have a more vigorous role in the little seen Dirty Dancing 2.

This time she is no blushing violet. She is Angel Deverill from the grocery store in Norley who has dreams above her station. She says she does not waste time in reading. She wants to be a famous writer drawing on her most fertile and sometimes fevered imagination. Write she does and she achieves her ambition.

It is said that Angel is based on the novelist Marie Corelli and her career at the beginning of the 20th century. She was a precursor of the Harlequin, Mills and Boon style of romantic novel. She was a moralist and not a feminist – which makes her largely unread or unreadable these days.

We watch Angel lord it over everyone, display an unwarranted self-confidence and arrogance, be rapt in her own narcissism yet being attractive as well as appalling.

Angel Deveril is an introverted young woman who judges all things completely subjectively. But, she is a woman of imagination who expresses her feeling and her intuitions in romantic novels. This drives her. When in her teens she sends the manuscript of her first novel to a publisher, she takes to her bed in tormented waiting. When it is accepted, she is so supremely confident that she tells the publisher (a quietly decent Sam Neill) when he raises a few difficulties, that absolutely nothing in it can be changed. He, poor man, is overwhelmed by her and remains that way for almost twenty years, despite the frequently sardonic (and accurate) comments on the books and Angel's style by his wife Hermione (Charlotte Rampling). Angel weeps with frustration in secret but, once the publisher has relented, there is no stopping her for almost ten years.

Her social life and reputation were all 'out there'. She was focused in her writing and in the ordering of her life. All was going to plan and she would continue to write for her public until she died. Nobody is allowed to give her some insight about herself, to make her realise that she was so self-absorbed and ambitious that she had very little idea of who she really was. She might well have been shocked to find that her real self was the opposite of the way she lived.

Situations challenged her and drove her back into herself but she tended to see them as attacks on her self-image. She falls in love with a handsome, out of fashion painter (Michael Fassbender), but controls him like a general, even setting up a lavish studio that does not suit him at all. When he is injured in the war and is in debt, she races off to write another novel for him. He fails her in fidelity and in ending his life. She goes into denial and creates myths about him as she does about her origins and her mother's humble state. While her secretary and companion is in love with her and absolutely devoted, she does not see any of this even though it is pointed out to her.

When she dies, she asks whether her life was worthwhile and had meaning. With the contrast between her real self and her image of who she was, she is so 'beside herself' that she cannot really answer.

Ozon has made another insightful film about women, helped by Romola Garai's fully committed performance. Audiences who enjoy the cinema of Hollywood's golden age may be reminded of the melodramas from Warner Brothers in the 1940s like Devotion, the film about the Bronte Sisters.

THE GOOD GERMAN

(US, 2006. d. Steven Soderbergh)

Patrons wandering into The Good German unprepared might be taken aback, thinking that they had come into a retrospective of Hollywood 40s films by mistake. They would see the standard box size screen, black and white photography, hear a swelling Warner Bros old time score and notice the costumes and hair styles of the period. But, that is what director Steven Soderbergh intended. The word that so many critics decided to use is 'pastiche'. The Good German is a pastiche of the style and post-war themes of such films as Casablanca, The Third Man and Notorious (two of which starred Ingrid Bergman). It even has a Casablanca ending – which is definitely not the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

So much comment has been given to the style of the film – and so high are the reputations of the films that have served as inspiration that critics spend a lot of time regretting how this one is not as good as the old classics. (Would they have recognised them as classics at the time or given them a few thumbs down?)

This means that not enough attention is given to the themes of the film. Sixty years after the end of World War II and a history of the more noble stories that emerged from the war, some of the darker stories of victory and occupation now emerge. It is interesting to note that Robert de Niro's *The Good Shepherd* appeared very recently with some explorations of and ugly stories of war espionage and the establishing of the CIA.

The Good German provides a complex plot based on the fact that men and women who have survived a war can be mistrustful and likely to lie in most of their responses simply to protect themselves. The setting of the film is Berlin just after the May German surrender until the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima on August 6th 1945. The occasion is the Potsdam conference where Truman, Churchill and Stalin met to decide the fate of post-war Germany, of divided post-war Berlin, and the Eastern European countries.

George Clooney, in a rather laidback performance, is a journalist who had spent time in Berlin before the outbreak of war. Toby Maguire, in a rather brief role, plays a frighteningly callous young GI who tells us that the war has been great for him. Maybe a nice young man back home, in Berlin he is revelling in the black market profits where, as he says, having money can enable you to be your real self. But, he is naively self-confident and no match for the intrigues of both the Americans and the Russians.

A sudden thought at this point in the film is wondering what is happening now in Iraq, who is doing the wheeling and dealing in plans and contracts for reconstruction, in black market activities. If then, why not now? A sobering distraction from the events of 1945.

The other central character is, as in each film noir of the mid-40s, the femme fatale. She is the woman of mystery who obscures the truth, tempts men only to destroy them. This time it is Cate Blanchett in yet another very different role. She is an actress who immerses herself, appearance, accent, look to play convincingly a London teacher or a reformed Sydney drug addict – or Queen Elizabeth – and always be convincing.

Here she is the wife of an SS officer who is linked with a notorious concentration camp which exploited prisoners in labour for the development of rockets and nuclear bombs. History reminds us that both Americans and Russians were desperate to get hold of these scientists to compete in the Cold War arms race.

Director Steven Soderbergh admires the classic styles and themes of the past. While his film might be a cinematic experiment, it offers war themes and deceptions to be pondered.

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

(US, 2006, d. Robert de Niro)

The Good Shepherd is not a religious film, despite the overtones of the title. Rather, it is a story about the origins of the CIA, its activities during the 1940s and 1950s up to the invasion in 1961 of the Bay of Pigs in Cuba.

Robert de Niro is the director. It is a project that he has been interested in for many years, but now it has emerged at a critical time for the American government and its policy in Iraq and the Middle East. One of the tasks of the CIA is counter-intelligence, false information disseminated in order to destabilize antagonistic governments.

Patrons need to be warned that the film runs for over two and three quarter hours. It has an unhurried pace which might make action audiences impatient. Given its topic, it also needs concentration – which means that it is a film of intelligence about intelligence.

The ensemble cast won a special award at the 2007 Berlin Film Festival. Indeed, it is quite a starry cast. The responsibility for the film's success, however, lies with Matt Damon in the leading role. Damon has proven himself a very effective screen presence in *The Rainmaker*, the *Bourne* films and *Syriana*. Here he plays Edward Wilson, a senior official in the CIA, during crucial days in April 1961, assessing the failure of the Bay of Pigs and the attempts to overthrow Fidel Castro. However, this narrative is frequently interrupted by flashbacks covering the two decades from Wilson's initiation into Yale's prestigious secret society, through his work in London and Berlin during the war to the establishment of the CIA at the end of World War II and activities during the Cold War.

Most of us are intrigued by espionage stories. They are frequently larger than life, of the James Bond variety or a Robert Ludlum intricate world conspiracy. With *The Good Shepherd*, the principal spy is basically an introverted bureaucrat, frequently seen with his hat and overcoat, a slow and stooped walker (very different from Damon's *Bourne*) who observes interrogations, listens attentively, makes life and death decisions with little outward emotion – and is accused, rightly, of lacking a sense of humour. He is one of the faceless men who are totally committed to their view of the United States and patriotism.

The recruits of the late 1930s who served in the OSS had to learn methods of counter-espionage from the British (here represented by Michael Gambon and Billy Crudup) and then learn administration in the ruins of post-war Berlin. They were tested by Russian double agents in the 1950s as well as connections with the FBI (here represented by Alec Baldwin).

There are some interesting cameos for characters in the agency, Robert de Niro himself as the founder General Sullivan, William Hurt as a chief and John Turturro as Wilson's right hand man who develops literal strong arm tactics as the years go by.

Because this is a drama rather than a documentary, there is an underlying personal story. There is Edward Wilson's trauma at the suicide of his father, his being asked to spy on his poetry professor at Yale (and his doing it), his being trapped into marriage with a senator's daughter (Angelina Jolie) because of a pregnancy while he really loved a hearing impaired girl, his not seeing his son until the boy was six, his stern parenting and his son's wanting to measure up to him.

A recurring episode concerns a taped bedroom scene where the information about the Cuban invasion is passed on. Throughout the film, the CIA staff use all kinds of means to isolate sounds, to identify the place – which leads to a somewhat melodramatic finale.

The Good Shepherd offers challenges to concern about espionage and its morality.

LETTERS FROM IWO JIMA

(US, 2006, d. Clint Eastwood)

Letters from Iwo Jima has been nominated for the Best Picture Oscar and Clint Eastwood has been nominated for Best Director. It is an extraordinary film both in conception and execution. It is, as a website commentator remarked, a film that the Japanese should have made.

Steven Spielberg had bought the rights to the American story of the raising of the American flag on the peak at Iwo Jima in February 1945, *Flags of our Fathers*. Clint Eastwood showed interest in the project and made a compelling film that was also a strong competitor for Best Film of 2006. Not only did it portray the battle for Iwo Jima, it re-created the two episodes of the flag-raising and the celebrated photograph and spent a great deal of its running time telling the story of the three young soldiers who travelled the US in a showbiz like morale boosting tour, especially for bond raising because of the near bankruptcy the war effort cost.

Interesting to note that the flag atop Iwo Jima is glimpsed only momentarily in the second film and only at a great distance.

Letters from Iwo Jima was written by Iris Yamashita using a book of actual letters by General Kuribayashi, Picture Letters from Commander in Chief, to underpin the narrative which shows the Japanese troops preparing for the American invasion, their practical abandonment by the Japanese high command after the destruction of the Japanese fleet off the Marianas, the incessant pounding of the bombardment, the mounting defeat and final attack. Apart from a prologue and epilogue set in 2004 when excavators find a chest of documents in the caves on the island, as well as some brief flashbacks to the lives of several of the central characters, the main action of the film is straight narrative of the attack and counterattack.

For western audiences, this is an invitation to look below the surface of battle and beyond the ideology of the governments responsible for sending thousands of men to fight for them. Each side speaks of the nobility of fighting for country. Each side prays to its God. The Americans are seen as quite pragmatic. The Japanese seem to have a fierce sense of duty – and believe strongly in honourable suicide in defeat.

In fact, Clint Eastwood, with his two films, is offering an inspiration for mutual understanding and for reconciliation.

Towards the end of the battle, the Japanese capture an American. The commanding officer, who had been a member of the equestrian team at the Los Angeles Olympics, talks with him and reads a quotation from the boy's mother's letter: 'Do what is right because it is right'. One of the Japanese soldiers acknowledges that he had never met an American, had been taught that they were all savages but that the mother's advice to her son is exactly the same as his mother had given him. And the officer, before he kills himself, repeats 'doing the right thing because it is right'.

The commander on Iwo Jima is presented as a civilised man, abhorring some of his men's cruel behaviour, remembering the happy times he had experienced when in the United States. The screenplay enables us to follow his strategies and tactics even as overwhelming defeat is looming.

There are moments of equal brutality by each side, the Japanese angrily bayoneting a soldier who had wielded a flamethrower at them, an American left in charge of two surrendering soldiers simply shooting them because he can't be bothered staying to guard them.

It is over sixty years since these events. In those days, the war issues were fairly clear cut compared with current wars. Clint Eastwood has done us a great service in portraying the past to help us think more deeply about the present.

NOTES ON A SCANDAL

(UK, 2006, d. Richard Eyre)

The twenty words or less review is quite easy. Fine performances. Incisive script. Emotional and moral insights into serious issues. Sometimes obtusive score. Effective photography and direction.

Some necessary expansion. We are used to a rather regal Judi Dench, whether it be Queens Elizabeth or Victoria, whether it be M or Mrs Henderson. Here she plays superbly against type (which was getting a touch harridan-pompous as Lady Catherine de Burgh and Lady Bracknell). She is Barbara Covet, an ageing, unmarried teacher at a run-down London school who describes herself as a battleaxe. She writes a diary (the 'notes' of the title). Living alone, though devoted to her cat, she is isolated but in need of affection. She talks to herself in her notes.

We are used to Cate Blanchett being different in every film. The same here. She is Sheba Hart, a hopeful art teacher, married to an older husband (a wonderfully sympathetic performance from Bill Nighy with no characteristic tics), with two children, the younger a jovial boy with Downes' Syndrome.

Barbara is always acerbic, often acidic, observes Sheba with disdain but then decides that Sheba will be her friend. Information about the film probably ensures that audiences know beforehand that Sheba begins a relationship with a fifteen year old student. This has a powerful effect on Barbara with potential for good and power for devastating evil.

The two fine actresses work so well together, especially as Barbara controls Sheba and Sheba, not realising she is being controlled, confides in Barbara as a friend and then confesses to her as a wise and understanding guide.

As might be expected, the film builds up to a highly emotional climax, admirably shown in what seems a straightforward scene where Barbara's cat is to be put down and she wants Sheba to accompany her while Sheba must go to her son's school play. The tension is palpable.

Both actresses were Oscar-nominated.

Playwright Patrick Marber (*Closer*) has adapted Zoe Heller's Booker-nominated novel (also Oscar nominated). There is one too quick plot development involving a waste paper basket that is, perhaps, too easy. And to have reporters and paparazzi camped outside Barbara's house for some weeks is not credible. Philip Glass's effective score (another Oscar nomination) is sometimes too loud and obvious.

It is the moral issues of the relationship between teacher and pupil, the pupil being under age, that are quite straightforwardly handled in terms of ethics and the consequences of such behaviour and its criminal aspects. However, it is the emotional context of the wilful woman lacking in self-confidence and the boy who is curious (with consequent seductive attitudes) that enable us to appreciate just how such situations actually occur.

Thoughtful and involving adult drama and concerns.