

FILM REVIEWS 2013

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ANNA KARENINA

UK, 2012,
Keira Knightly, Jude Law, Aaron Taylor Johnson, Kelly Macdonald, Domhnall Gleeson.
Directed by Joe Wright.

Theatricality.

Perhaps not the most obvious word to use in connection with Anna Karenina. After all, Tolstoy's novel has vast scope, life in Moscow and St Petersburg as well as in the Russian countryside, aristocratic classes, the military, the peasants. There have been several film versions of Anna Karenina, plenty of interpretation and background and images of Greta Garbo, Vivien Leigh, Jacqueline Bissett, Sophie Marceau.

But, director Joe Wright, with a screenplay by playwright Tom Stoppard, has decided to keep his treatment indoors, in fact, within a complex theatre, characters moving in and out of rooms, wings, the audience supplying the links and recognising locations. The film does go outside for the scenes of the harvest and Levin working with the peasants, a contrast to the artificial world of the aristocrats.

The audience has to accept this instantly, with the curtain literally rising. If not, no hope for this version.

Costumes and décor are more than elegant, so is the 19th century like orchestrated score. Visually, it is something of a feast.

That means, when we accept the style, we concentrate on the performances and the issues. Kiera Knightly is a younger Anna, not realising how much she is imprisoned in a formal, arranged marriage, visiting Dolly (Kelly Macdonald) to ask her to forgive her comically eye-roving husband, Stephen (Matthew McFadyen? giving a funny and striking performance). But, Anna's eye strays. She is attracted to a young officer, Count Vronsky, flattered by his attentions and gradually becoming aware of her feelings. She is more attracted to Vronsky than most of the audience will be. Aaron Taylor Johnson is a bit vapid, infatuated, then tormented, but not the kind of man that we imagine Anna would be attracted to. It is Jude Law as the intensely serious and upright Karenin who gives the impressive performance, a man of principles and law, taking a harsh stance but then becoming far more human and kind than we imagined he could be.

There are some excellent supporting performances, bringing society to life. Tolstoy contrasted the world of ordinary people with those who lived in artifice. This is reinforced by Levin (Domhnall Gleeson) who is part of society but whose life and beliefs are with the common people. He is the moral focus of the film and, as with Shakespeare's plays, after the tragedy (and Anna's fate is a tragedy) comes the restoration of order.

If we accept the theatricality and allow for the interpretation of Vronsky, there is much to enjoy and think about in this version of the classic.

COMPLIANCE

US, 2012.

Ann Dowd, Dreama Walker, Pat Healy, Bill Camp.
Directed by Craig Zobel.

This is not the film to hurry off to if you are after light entertainment. It is a film that rouses strong emotions about some very difficult issues. It is certainly a film that would repay reflection and discussion.

It is also one of those films where the reviewer should not reveal too much of the plot. The audience needs to go with the developments in the plot and the various stages of their response to characters and themes.

The opening credits tell us that it is based on actual events. They also show a number of symbols where authority imposes restrictions on our behaviour and we generally comply – automatically. As the film develops, it questions how people respond to authority and its requirements, even to some disastrous decision-making and consequences.

We are told fairly early in the film that an employee is under suspicion at the local Chickwich diner and that the police are investigating. It is a very busy day at the diner. There have been some problems with a freezer not properly shut, not enough replacement food items for the ruined material. Sandra, the manager (Ann Dowd credible in her performance, as are other members of the cast, especially Dreama Walker as the accused and Pat Healy on the phone), is an ordinary middle-aged woman (though hoping for a proposal) with an ordinary staff of

genders, ages and race, trying to manage being swamped with customers and the call from the police about the problem.

We see what Sandra does and how she handles the situation, eager to please, complying with advice, finding that for every issue she raises, the police have an answer which she accepts. The film asks what we would do in similar circumstances. Probably, we are thinking that we would have handled something particular quite differently, or that we would have noticed aspects of the police enquiry, or asked more questions.

As the film unfolds, perhaps to our expectations, perhaps not, the test of our faith in others is further questioned. Are we submissive when authority has been put on a pedestal? Unquestioning – even credulous, even gullible?

The situation at times becomes horrendous as victims suffer, as we see that trust in good faith is not enough, that we are ‘groomed’ to be obedient or, as the title suggests, ‘compliant’. And hindsight is not enough.

A pity more can't be said in a review. It would be very interesting to know how audiences respond.

DJANGO UNCHAINED

US, 2012,

Jamie Foxx, Christoph Waltz, Leonardo di Caprio, Kerry Washington, Samuel L. Jackson.
Directed by Quentin Tarantino.

It's twenty years since *Reservoir Dogs* and Quentin Tarantino's making an instant impact on critics and the public. He won the Cannes Palme D'Or² two years later with *Pulp Fiction* and an Oscar for Best Original Screenplay. ‘Tarantinoesque’ became a frequently used word in describing not only his films but those which imitated his sardonic style as well as his blood-spurting sequences. With a career that produces a film every two or three years or so (*Jackie Brown*, the *Kill Bill* series), he is still a stylish director, a clever writer (a moderate actor, here with his faux Australian accent) and someone who knows and pays homage to a wide range of genre movies as well as an eclectic taste for his musical scores.

All of this is particularly true of *Django Unchained* (with acknowledgement of the 1966 Italian *Django*, with Franco Nero, who guest appears here). It is a Western, it is a bounty hunter tale, it is a film of Southern racism in the years prior to the Civil War, it is a condemnation of slavery, it has some Mandingo sequences. And all as a tribute to Spaghetti Westerns, allusions to the films of Sergio Leone, though this time the man has a name, Django, and he is black. There is even some Ennio Morricone music and songs.

For those a touch wary of Tarantino and blood, the major part of the film does have some shootings and beatings but not as graphically seen as before. But... there is an apocalyptic shootout towards the end, large body count and blood. And, but... that was not the ending we thought it might be, there is another shootout and a concluding, really apocalyptic conflagration.

As storytelling goes, there is plenty of plot, mainly about a German bounty hunter who frees

a slave, Django, and together they go hunting murderers and robbers – dead or alive. There are some serious and some funny sequences, especially the mocking of the Ku Klux Klan (led by Don Johnson with Jonah Hill in tow) as they go on a raid and have a loopy argument about how well the holes have been cut in their hoods. The two bounty hunters get involved in some cliff-hanging crises which seem impossible to get out of – but they do.

Most of the action takes place on a Mississippi plantation, presided over by Monsieur Caddie, who indulges in Mandingo fights and is advised, even supervised, by his obsequious black slave, Stephen.

Time to talk about the cast. Jamie Foxx showed his effectiveness in his Oscar-winning role as Ray Charles in *Ray*. Here he is a fine, strong presence, a bewildered slave who has lost his wife, who is taken on as a valet (dressed in sky blue), then a partner (dressed like a Western's hero), a free man, who has learned to read, to be shrewd, determined to find his wife. Christoph Waltz is the dentist become bounty hunter. His career was made by Tarantino in his Cannes-winning, Oscar-winning role as the SS officer in *Inglourious Basterds*. Waltz has more than acknowledged his debt in a very arresting performance. He has lots of wry remarks, is pedantic about his vocabulary and generates a lot of humour even in dangerous situations. He is very good.

Leonardo di Caprio is Monsieur Caddie, a presumptuous brat plantation owner. Interesting to see how well he does a villain. Samuel L. Jackson is the slave adviser, currying favour with his master – and often over-the-top in his performance. Kerry Washington is Django's wife. In the supporting cast there are lots of character actors whom Tarantino obviously admires. Even John Jarratt is there (Australian accent and all) – Tarantino must admire Wolf Creek.

Very clever film-making for Tarantino admirers – but it may not make many converts.

FLIGHT

US, 2012.

Denzel Washington, Don Cheadle, Kelly Reilly, Bruce Greenwood, John Goodman, Melissa Leo.

Directed by Robert Zemeckis.

For many decades, despite some roles as villains, Denzel Washington has been an American icon of decency and values (although he did win an Oscar in 2001 for his corrupt cop in *Training Day*). In *Flight* he is a much more ambiguous character – and has received another Oscar nomination.

For the first twenty minutes, it looks as though *Flight* is going to be a disaster movie, an ill-fated flight from Orlando to Atlanta, filmed with vivid intensity (quite alarming actually). Comparisons might be made with Peter Weir's *Fearless* and its powerful crash scenes.

But, it is not a disaster film. It is a character study of the pilot, Whip Whittaker, played by Washington, who exercises extraordinary instincts and insights to get the plane down as safely as possible. It is also a moral study since we have seen Whip and his self-indulgent lifestyle, the women, the drink, the drugs, the divorce and alienation from his family, the arrogant self-confidence (quite justified in his piloting) but carrying over into his relating to

people. We know that he was drunk during the flight, much to the disapproval of his rather straitlaced co-pilot.

Whip is a media hero for what he has achieved but he keeps out of the limelight. His gauche friend (John Goodman) and his friend and union rep (Bruce Greenwood) are supportive, the former with drugs, the latter with legal aid for the impending inquiry and the revelation that he was drinking on the plane. Don Cheadle is the hotshot, shrewd lawyer brought in to smooth things along.

In the meantime we have been introduced to an alcoholic and addict, Nicole (Kelly Reilly with an American accent), who has collapsed after injecting high-powered heroin and is in the same hospital as Whip. What could have been just another girlfriend role (and in many ways it is) becomes much stronger as Nicole tries to deal with her demons with a job and AA meetings and friends.

But, Whip is erratic, throwing out the alcohol in the house and then stocking up again. The officials find him completely unreliable. Whip is trying to save his life and his job, visiting his co-pilot who is a devout Christian, visiting his family with his son pushing him out of the house, and visiting one of the cabin crew, a good friend, whom he asks to lie for him.

Because of Denzel Washington's screen image and the increasingly disreputable character he is playing, the audience finds itself torn between the truth and wanting him to be able to get a life. Eventually, he has to appear before the enquiry (presided over by the always effective Melissa Leo).

As the film proceeds, especially from the AA sequence where Nicole feels supported but Whip leaves as a man is testifying about the lies and deceits in his life, it becomes more moralizing. By the end, it is highly moralizing, which may be a bit too didactic for audiences who want their messages conveyed more subtly.

GANGSTER SQUAD

US, 2013

Josh Brolin, Sean Penn, Ryan Gosling, Emma Stone, Nick Nolte, Michael Pena, Giovanni Ribisi.

Directed by Ruben Fleischer.

At the end of this film, police officer John O' Mara reminds the audience that the Mob has never had a hold in Los Angeles and that he and like-minded and like-actioned policed contributed to this.

Films about American gangsters continue to be popular. This one is set in Los Angeles 1949 and overlaps in time with the classic LA Confidential. Both show the career of Mickey Cohen who dreamed of being something like the Little Caesar of LA.

And the gangster squad? They are a special and secret group of Los Angeles police who are recruited by the city's chief (Nick Nolte, burly and husky as ever) to wage guerilla warfare against Cohen, his gang and his drug and prostitution establishments to put him out of business. They are to destroy the business so that no other mob will take it over.

The centre of the squad is returned war veteran, John O' Mara. He is played by Josh Brolin whose star has been in the ascendant since 2007 and *No Country for Old Men* (W, Men in Black 3). He is square-jawed (something of a ringer for Dick Tracy), tough, more brawn than brains but presented as the heroic American cop full of righteousness. He recruits, with the help of his pregnant wife who wants a strong team to support (and protect) her husband, are a motley lot: a determined black cop (Anthony Mackie), a veteran sharpshooter (Robert Patrick) and his partner (Michael Pena who appeared in *End of Watch*), an intelligence officer (Giovanni Ribisi). They are joined by O' Mara's friend, Jerry (Ryan Gosling), who is in couldn't-care-less, drinking mode since returning from the war, starts a liaison with Cohen's mistress, Grace (Emma Stone), but, disgusted at the shooting of his shoe-shine friend, joins the squad.

But, it is Sean Penn as Mickey Cohen who is mesmerising. For more than twenty years, Penn has been chameleon-like in immersing himself in his roles, creating a wide range of characters (in recent years, *Milk*, *This Must be the Place*, quite diverse roles). At the opening, he is vicious, ruthlessly cruel in torturing and killing both rivals and incompetent aides. As the film progresses, he shows no redeeming features. He is vicious.

The film has several set pieces as the squad attack Cohen, a raid on a casino which is rash and ill-planned, bugging his house, chasing a heroin haul from Burbank airport into the desert, a raid on a plusher casino and burning the cash.

The film also shows the bonding in the squad, their vulnerability, their determination to arrest Cohen which leads to a final shootout (guns galore and high body count) and a fist fight between John and Cohen.

The film is not for the squeamish, especially in the cruel Cohen sequences. It is a reminder, as are so many of the police films, that criminals have no scruples, that somebody must confront them while maintaining their own human decency. Not an easy thing at all.

THE GUILT TRIP

US, 2012,
Barbra Streisand, Seth Rogen.
Directed by Anne Fletcher.

If you were told that there was a road film where mother, Barbra Streisand, traveled across the United States with her son, Seth Rogen, and you started to imagine what it might be like, you would probably be quite right and *The Guilt Trip* is more or less what might be expected.

Not that it is not entertaining even if it is predictable. It is the two stars playing off each other that makes it enjoyable.

For Barbra Streisand fans, it is a welcome return to the screen with only some cameos in the *Meet the Fockers* series in the last fifteen years. And, no, she doesn't sing. But she does do what she was also very good at: comedy. Years ago, with such films as *What's Up Doc* and *The Main Event* (even her portrayal of Fanny Brice in *Funny Girl*), some critics said that she was not so much a comedienne but that she was a funny clown. So, here she is at the age of

70 clowning around as a somewhat possessive Jewish mother bouncing off Seth Rogen in his comic sad-sack screen persona.

He is a chemist, Andrew, who has invented a natural cleaner from coconut oil, palm oil and soy, but he is a dead loss when trying to do a pitch to executives to distribute his brand 'Scioclean'. She is Joyce, a longtime widow who likes shopping at The Gap and chatting with friends (Miriam Margolyes and Kathy Najimy in momentary appearances).

Off mother and son go across the US, she on the lookout for bargains, chattering away, driving Andrew mad. She has told him where his name comes from and he has a bright idea to take her to meet an old beau from before the time she was married. He is also delivering his pitches – and losing his audiences.

They squabble, they make up. She seeks out one of Andrew's old girlfriends. They go to a Texan steakhouse where she wins the prize of devouring a 50 ounce steak and trimmings within an hour. She falls in love with the slot machines at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas. Andrew takes her advice and personalises his pitch with positive results. The San Francisco episode is what you may have guessed, but there is a nice touch at the end.

Probably forgettable, but pleasant while it is there. In the final credits, the writer, Dan Fogelman, dedicates his film to his mother – Joyce!

THE IMPOSSIBLE

Spain, 2012,
Naomi Watts, Ewan Mc Gregor, Tom Holland, Geraldine Chaplin.
Directed by Juan Antonio Bayona.

Not a promising title for a powerful film.

This is a Spanish film, Spanish director, Spanish story – which has been transferred to the story of a British family working in Japan and going for a holiday together to a resort in Thailand. It is December 2004 and audiences may quickly realise that this was the month of the tsunami which swept Indian Ocean coasts of countries in South East Asia. And this is what the film is about, survival of the family after being overwhelmed by the vast waves.

This means that the film is tough going for the characters as they try to cope with physical injuries and trauma as well as psychological desperation. This also means that the film is tough going for audiences to watch, not entertainment in the relaxing sense at all, but, of course, a picture of courage and hope.

Mother, Father and three sons fly from Japan (with some nervousness during the trip and some sibling rivalry) but find the new resort cheers them up as they celebrate Christmas, enjoying gifts, the sunshine and swimming. Then it is Boxing Day, all calm, placid until flocks of birds fly in from the sky. Then the gigantic wave and men, women and children being overwhelmed and swept away.

Needless to say, the special effects for the tsunami, the destructive water, the savagery of nature and the subsequent desolation, are impressive. (There were extraordinary effects for

the tsunami in Clint Eastwood's 2010 film, Hereafter.)

The main part of the film is about survival and search for survivors. The first part concentrates on the mother and the older son who find each other quite quickly. After being isolated with them, we become almost as desperate as they are. Naomi Watts gives a powerful performance as the mother, spending most of the time in intense physical pain while concerned about her son. If there were awards for portraying suffering and pain in film, Naomi Watts would be one of the first nominees. Tom Holland is persuasive as the son who has to move from self-preoccupation to concern for his mother and, at her urging, when they eventually get to a hospital, care of locals, trying to do something for others.

Then we see the father, Ewan Mc Gregor, who has survived at the resort with his two sons. They have not been injured so much as others. This part of the film is that of search, the desperation, the near coincidences until the title of the film, something that might have seemed impossible, is achieved.

This is a focus on a Western family rather than on the Thai people, although the Thais are presented as concerned and doing hard and almost impossible work in the hospitals. This is a reminder of how desperate things are in any attempt to cope with injury and death in natural disasters but also in towns and the countryside during war.

LAST DANCE

Australia, 2012,
Julia Blake, Firas Dirani, Alan Hopgood.
Directed by David Pullbrook.

This is a Melbourne story about terrorism. There is murder in a mall. One of the terrorists escapes and finds himself in a suburban street. He goes into the house which is owned by a Jewish widow whom we have seen in a baker's shop, doing her ordinary shopping, chatting to her neighbors, phoning her niece.

However, the film becomes a two-hander, the widow and the terrorist. While he threatens her, he is wounded. She takes care of him. He becomes less suspicious of her, he is less cold-blooded than she originally thought. He allows himself to become dependent on her.

The film serves as a contemporary urban fable for dialogue between Jews and Arabs. He is less threatening. She is more sympathetic and understanding. She covers up from police and neighbors that he has been in the house. She arranges a ticket so that he can leave Melbourne.

However, the ending is melodramatic, the action of the police, the action of the neighbor, and the audience left with mixed feelings about what they have seen and how they ought to think about terrorism and the action of the widow. New paragraph

The strength of the film is in the performances, Julia Blake, always reliable and dignified, as the widow, acts as the terrorist, with Alan Hopgood period as the neighbor.

LIFE OF PI

US, 2012,
Shamar Saraj, Irfan Kahn, Rafe Spall, Gerard Depardieu.
Directed by Ang Lee

Perhaps, if you have not read Yann Martel's Booker Prizewinning novel, you may be wondering why Pi?

In fact, Pi does explain it to a visiting novelist to his home in Montreal quite early in the film, with some entertaining flashback to Paris and, especially, to his childhood in Pondicherry where his parents manage a zoo. His uncle liked to swim and especially admired the Piscine Mollitor in Paris. His father was also impressed and gave his younger son the name Piscine Mollitor Patel. If you are anglicising the name rather than trying to use a French pronunciation, you will hear what cheeky young boys will make of it. Pi, after some torment by laughter, takes a day to explain why his name is Pi and goes from subject to subject class, finishing with Maths, where he explains Pi and its 3.14... status.

Having cleared that up, we find the film is about much more. Pi is an enquiring lad, eager to get close to the Bengal Tiger his father has brought into the zoo, pondering his Hindu heritage and the many gods, visiting a Catholic church and asking the priest to explain Jesus' motives and God's for the crucifixion, developing an admiration of Jesus. Later he enquires about Islam, prays and is introduced to Allah. The screenplay balances these searchings nicely and introduces quite a bit of God language, meaning in life, especially in times of distress and disaster, an acceptance that there is a provident God.

The trailers highlight Pi's time adrift in the Pacific after his parents decide to move to Canada, with the animals. A storm strikes. The ship sinks and Pi falls overboard with some of the animals.

By this stage, after the fine performance of as the young Pi, we accept Shamar Saraj as the teenage Pi. We also accept his company for the over 200 days on the lifeboat and the raft. On the one hand, the film shows the magic of ocean life, phosphorescent life forms, dolphins and a stampede of flying fish. On the other, it is realistic about the hardships, especially with the tiger, who was registered in his owner's name instead of his own, and is called Richard Parker (which sounds polite and quaint with the Indian accent). It is no easy survival, even though there are some stocks in the lifeboat. Three other animals die. Richard Parker is aggressive but, as Pi tames him, they reach an agreed co-existence and a friendship grows – which is rueful for Pi when eventually they land on a tropical island full of meerkats, sustenance by day and destruction by night.

The film is wonderfully shot (and shines in the 3D version), beautiful to look at, both India and Pondicherry as well as the Pacific Ocean, both turbulent and calm. There is a lot of charm (even despite a momentary cameo by Gerard Depardieu as a gross French cook), humane characters, a great deal of decency, and the tantalizing wondering if the story is true, if the alternative is credible – or if it is a parable that is asking that we think and imagine and come to a realization of providence.

LINCOLN

US, 2012.

Daniel Day Lewis, Sally Field, Tommy Lee Jones, David Strathairn.
Directed by Steven Spielberg.

An impressive film.

While this film runs for over two and a half hours, it limits itself to the month of January, 1865 (with a very brief prologue indicating the intensity of the war in close-up one-on-one combat in muddy fields and an epilogue with the surrender of General Robert E. Lee and the assassination of President Lincoln). The focus is human rights and politics. With the act for the abolition for slavery passed by the Senate, the campaign for the vote in the House of Representatives was hard and, at times, bitterly fought. Some audiences may find this political drama uninteresting, even boring, but for those with an interest in history, it is often fascinating and illuminating.

Then there is the performance of Daniel Day Lewis, an actor who, for thirty years has made comparatively few films, who immerses himself in his roles (and won two Oscars) so that the audience accepts his character completely. This is Lincoln. In fact, it is a portrait of Lincoln just months before his untimely assassination. He looks rugged, Day Lewis affecting his stoop, while still standing tall, his awkward gait, his craggy and ageing face as well as his 19th century elegant language, his storytelling and humour, and his political nous and risk-taking while holding to principle yet conceding the realities of compromise.

The actor has a solid screenplay to work on, written by playwright Tony Kushner. It is a literate, often literary, screenplay. It is a pleasure to listen to much of the dialogue and the interchanges between 19th century politicians (who did not shy from invective while taking their stances). And, of course, early in the film, the Gettysburg address is spoken and, at the end, other speeches by Lincoln.

The film is impressive in its re-creation of the period, the costumes, the décor of Washington DC, Congress and the White House.

The film has quite a vast cast populated by many American character actors. Tommy Lee Jones stands out as Thaddeus Stevens, the irascible Republican who declares that all people are equal before the law, his grounds for the abolition of slavery irrespective of other arguments about racial equality. Sally Field is powerfully strong as Mary Todd Lincoln, supportive of her husband but afflicted with physical and mental suffering after the death of her son, William. David Strathairn, always convincing, is Secretary Seward.

The film shows the background of the long war and the huge number of killed and wounded. It shows the representations from the South for peace which raised a dilemma for voters whether it was opportune to vote for the abolition of slavery at a time when peace proposals were in the offing. Lincoln shrewdly tells the delegates to stay away from Washington so that he can truthfully tell the House of Representatives that there were no peace delegates in the capital.

There is great attention to detail in the characterisations of many of the politicians. The device of having three lobbyists working to persuade waverers and those whose terms of office were about to finish to vote for abolition works well in terms of personalizing (and

visualising) the different ways of persuasion.

But, this is a Steven Spielberg film. It is forty years since he began directing films – it is forty years since *Duel* and 37 years since *Jaws*, almost twenty years since *Schindler's List* (let alone *ET*, *Indiana Jones*, *Jurassic Park* or *Saving Private Ryan*). He has had an extraordinary career. While being one of America's great entertainers, he has also contributed with stylish craft and finesse to his country's and the world's understanding of 19th and 20th century history. John Williams has, as usual, composed the score but it is rather unobtrusive, a background to the performances and the words.

This reviewer would be happy to watch it again.

PARENTAL GUIDANCE

US, 2012,

Billy Crystal, Bette Midler, Marisa Tomei, Tom Everett Scott, Bailee Madison.

Directed by Andy Fickman.

Parental Guidance is a strong recommendation taking valium. First of all, for the audience before it starts so that they can keep calm (and less irritated) as they watch. But, second, and most of all, for the cast in this often frantic, hyper-extroverted (American style), over-volumed picture of family life.

We had Clint Eastwood in *Trouble with the Curve* as an old codger who was deemed out of date in a computer-controlled world. But, he trusted tried and true experience over all the new-fangled stuff. Well, now Billy Crystal is a grandfather who is an on air baseball commentator who is fired because he has not kept up with social communications and does not have an app to his name. Like Eastwood in his film, Crystal has been something of a neglectful father and alienated his daughter.

The daughter, Alice (Marisa Tomei) is married to a high-concept inventor, Phil, (Tom Everett Scott). They are busy, busy, busy. Their house is fully automated (including personalized greetings as people enter and leave the house. And their regime is beyond New Age and politically correct as regards what they cannot eat, how they must study, no negative commands, no violent responses (use your words) – all rather strait-jacketed emotionally, not really communicating with their caring, over-caring, coddling parents. Which means that they are pretty obnoxious, willful, self-centred and imperious in their treatment of everyone. The five year old must be the most spoilt, completely unaware of others, doing what he likes no matter what, eager to accept a cash payoff, child we have seen on the screen.

The point is that Alice does not like her father and is edgy with her mother, (Bette Midler). Desperate, they ask Art and to mind their children for a week.

At high pitch, most things go wrong. The film is a catalog of disasters as the grandparents try or try to try to follow house rules. Needless to say, everything is going to be all right at the end, reconciliations all round, reminiscing over the past and expressing regrets. The children eat some cake. The daughter has a date. The middle boy stammers but learns to do commentary like Art. The screenplay indicates that that bratty five year old behaves better. Not sure about that.

It is always good to see Billy Crystal. And it is very good to see Bette Midler again. She hasn't lost anything of her verve and ability to wisecrack.

There are quite a number of toilet jokes through the film – and one right at the end, which credit avoiders will miss, that is quite vulgar but funny, courtesy of Billy Crystal.

RISE OF THE GUARDIANS

US, 2012,

Voices of Chris Pine, Alec Baldwin, Jude Law, Isla Fisher, Hugh Jackman, Dakota Goyo.
Directed by Peter Ramsay.

The Guardians are a motley lot. They come from a series of children's books by William Joyce. They are the traditional creatures that children have believed in and who see themselves as protectors of the children. They are North (a Russian-accented Santa Claus voiced by an unrecognisable Alec Baldwin), a rather Tinkerbell-looking Tooth Fairy (with her mini-entourage, voiced by Isla Fisher) and, of all things, The Easter Bunny, who looks like a larger Bugs Bunny with kangaroo overtones (voiced by a very strongly Australian-accented Hugh Jackman, along with some 'mates' and 'crikeys'). There is also the Sandman who does not speak but lets his thoughts out in golden sand designs. So, there you are. Children who like this kind of thing will be delighted – and the parents can enjoy the accents.

But, this is also the story of Jack Frost (voiced by Chris Pine), who emerges from under the water under the guidance of the moon, forgetting his previous life. The Guardians are advised that Jack is to be added to their list. Jack is a nice kid and wary of the Guardians, but eventually he finds his mission and joins them.

The bonus of the film (to scare the littlies and entertain the adults) is the Boogymon, Pitch Black. Jude Law has quite a time voicing this villain who is trying to instill fear into every child (and almost succeeds, except for a genial boy who keeps the faith). It all builds up to a confrontation between the good guardians and the bad Pitch who has to confront his own fears and nightmares.

It's a whole mythology, a deep down yearning for some kind of guardians who will guide and protect us all through life – but, once we stop believing in Santa and the Easter Bunny...?

SAVE YOUR LEGS

Australia, 2012,

Stephen Curry, Brendan Cowell, Pallavi Sharda, David Lyons, Damon Gameau
Directed by Boyd Hicklin.

Not too many films about cricket, though the Indians made the very successful Lagaan. While cricket fans can contemplate during a five day test, most people are happier with one day matches or the speed of 20/20. So, you have to make a film about the people who play rather than showing too many details of a match. For those wondering, there are quite a number of cricket play scenes in this film but many of them are comic, the rest are in matches with

Indian teams.

Actually, the film has its origins on an actual tour of India by members of a local Melbourne club (the kind that finishes eighth on the table). It was not exactly a magical mystery tour but it had its Indian moments, exotic as well as debilitating. The film-makers originally produced a documentary. Now we have the movie.

Melbourne looks rather good at the beginning of the film. The cricket team are devotees who give their Saturdays to matches. As expected, they are a motley lot, led with great earnestness by Ted Brown (Stephen Curry who had played jockey Damian Oliver in *The Cup*). Colin (Darren Gilshenan), the secretary is a compulsive on statistics. Red (Brendan Cowell) the captain is about to become a father but is prone to getting drunk and/or high. Stav (Damon Gameau) thinks he is God's gift to the world, but is the best player. Prince (David Lyons) reads Gandhi and meditates. Shadow (Eddie Baroo) is a very big bloke but not bad at the game. Then there is the youngster, Mark (Brenton Thwaites) brought in to persuade the Indian backers that they should support the tour.

Writer-director, Boyd Hicklin, participated in the original tour.

The Indian sequences take place in Kolkotta, Benares and Mumbai, so there is plenty of scenery and local colour, which does give special touches to the film.

The comedy-drama is easy-going (well the tensions that arise in the group are not easy going but the overall treatment is). This is the kind of small Aussie film that is pleasantly amusing rather than a standout. The jokes are generally on the blokes themselves, on cricket loyalties and on some Indian pretensions. (Will they have to change the ending to be pro-India for Indian release or will the Indians be good sports and indulge their passion for cricket and go to see the films in their millions?)

THE SILVER LININGS PLAYBOOK

US, 2012,

Bradley Cooper, Jennifer Lawrence, Robert de Niro, Jacki Weaver, Julia Styles.

Directed by David O. Russell.

This film touched a nerve with audiences and critics alike, many award nominations.

Writer-director David O. Russell has a son who is bipolar and was interested in the novel by Matthew Quick on which he based this film. It is a very American film, very extraverted characters in whatever situations they find themselves in. Whether the character is experiencing depression or just living ordinarily, uproar is not all that far away.

Bradley Cooper gives a powerful and convincing performance as Pat, a Philadelphia teacher whose rage has broken out on discovering his wife in an affair with another teacher. He is sent to an institution in Baltimore and is having therapy sessions with Dr Patel. When he comes home after eight months, off his medication, still obsessed with his wife, still deluded about the quality of his marriage and referring everything to his possible mending the marriage even though he has a restraining order to keep away from her.

His erratic behaviour includes a manic scene on hearing the song that was a bit part of the wedding, middle of the night tantrums when he can't find his wedding video.

His parents deal with Pat differently. Dolores, his mother (Jackie Weaver in a performance that unexpectedly got her an Oscar nomination) is kind and practical. Pat senior, his father, (Robert de Niro at his best with an Oscar-nominated performance), himself prone to anger, sees Pat as key to his betting plans and winning money to establish a restaurant.

The other central character is a young policeman's widow, Tiffany (Jennifer Lawrence) herself on medication with a disturbed past. When Pat and Tiffany meet there is no foregone conclusion that they will end up with each other. Pat bargains for Tiffany to deliver a letter to his wife. She bargains that he become a dance partner as she is training for a competition.

Plenty of ups, plenty of downs – for both of them. And tangling with Pat senior.

Dr Patel always urges Pat to have a strategy for dealing with life. The silver linings prospect is Pat's strategy.

Despite the differences, their bluntness and their lack of social skills, Pat and Tiffany do get to the dance floor – and their (moderate) success is a key for silver linings for the whole family.

Cooper and Lawrence, film and director all received Oscar nominations. For audiences interested in bipolar conditions, depression and its manifestations, the characters and performances offer much to reflect on.

THIS IS 40

US, 2012,
Paul Rudd, Leslie Mann, Maude Apatow, Iris Apatow, Albert Brooks, John Lithgow.
Directed by Judd Apatow.

This is 40 – well, not exactly.

Unless you are a husband and wife who have their 40th birthday in the same week, are comfortably middle class despite business difficulties, who have a 13 year old strong-minded daughter and an 8 year old cheeky daughter, who fight and make-up and who have very difficult relationships with their fathers. But that is Pete and Debbie (Paul Rudd and Leslie Mann who appeared in a sub-plot in Apatow's Knocked Up and now have their own movie), with their daughters, Sadie and Charlotte (Apatow's own daughters – Leslie Mann is Apatow's actual wife).

For audiences between, say, thirty and forty five, who share the comparative comfort of the American dream, and its comparatively comfortable problems and issues, there might be quite some empathy with the characters and the film will offer some kind of mirror – however, distorted.

For audiences around the twenty mark, they may well feel closer (in age and in experience and feelings) to Sadie and her teenage/parental issues as they remember their lives from the

perspective of having got through the problems, sometimes with the help of their parents.

For audiences over fifty, Pete and Debbie might seem like characters from the past (or like their own approaching-middle-age children) and will give far more attention to the two fathers and their problems. They are played by two top actors, Albert Brooks as Pete's father, and John Lithgow as Debbie's father.

Albert Brooks gives another variation on his hang-dog-looking, bothered character. Actually, he has three very young triplets through in vitro and is trying to deal with being a father at his age while conscious of his health and exercising his 'Poor Me' turn as he continually borrows money from Pete.

John Lithgow is the aloof, top surgeon, who also has a family, much older, as he had parted from Debbie's mother when Debbie was a little girl. She hardly sees her father who is very serious-minded (and does not get jokes).

There are some entertaining cameo roles with some familiar faces: Megan Fox is the attractive shop manager, Jason Segal a body (and soul and spirit) builder, Chris O'Dowd is Pete's partner at his record label company and, stealing her scenes, as she did in *Bridesmaids*, Melissa McCarthy as the mother of a boy at Sadie's school who gets stuck into Debbie and then bursts out into a verbal tirade when the school principal calls her in to discuss with Pete and Debbie. This is so effective that it is shown again during the final credits, with Paul Rudd and Leslie Mann trying to control their laughter.

So, there are various episodes: Pete trying to revive the career of Graham Parker with new record sales and performances, Debbie worried about who might be stealing from the shop. Lots of domestic scenes, some (apt) wariness about the younger generation worshipping the new technology (and dependent on watching all the episodes of *Lost*). A loving weekend away followed by outbursts and recriminations. And, the party for Pete's birthday which is a fairly complete disaster – except that it does mellow Debbie's attitude to Pete's father and does help Debbie to understand her father and welcome his presence with her children.

This reviewer has been using the phrase 'The Judd Apatow Syndrome' to characterize films he has written, directed or produced. They begin with people behaving badly, even reprehensibly, but, as characters are revealed and tested, a rather traditional stance on morality emerges and the film ends on an upbeat note. The same here.

WRECK-IT RALPH

US, 2012,

Voices of John C. Reilly, Jane Lynch, Jake Mc Brayer, Sarah Silverman.
Directed by Rich Moore.

2012 saw an abundance of animated films, many of them in 3D. This is one of them, and nominated for many awards.

This is a video game film, but one for those who enjoyed the simpler (by modern standards) and kinder (also by modern standards) than those which raise a lot of moralising ire and

issues of censorship. The players in this film are younger children who enjoy the competitiveness and the atmosphere but who operate at a PG level.

So, who is Wreck-it Ralph? He is the villain in a game who wants to be liked, to be nicer. He contrasts with Fix-it Felix who, without much effort at all, is good and can fix anything instantly. The other characters in the game like Felix and don't like Ralph.

When a new game arrives, with a feisty commander, Ralph has an opportunity to get out of his own game – and, without wishing it, wreck the others. Characters become discombobulated. Players don't know what is happening.

In the meantime, Ralph's adventures (and disasters) lead to hostile activity from a malevolent General Hologram, but put Ralph in contact with a cheeky (mischievous sugar-candied little girl) Vanellope von Schweetz. More adventures until Ralph and Felix are able to get things back, well, not quite to normal, but to a happy ending.

The animation is a combination of Disney (which produced) and games – and looks effective in 3D. It seems something like a variation on Toy Story: what do videogame characters actually do when no one is looking or playing? And what do they sound like? Well, John C. Reilly brings his sometimes lugubrious tones to Ralph. Jack Mc Brayer is a nice Felix. Jane Lynch is definitely in vocal command as the Commander. Sarah Sugarman tones down her aggressive and quirky humour (a little, anyway) as Vanellope.

Those who were youngsters in the 90s (and their parents) would be one of the main target audiences.

ZERO DARK THIRTY

US, 2012,
Jessica Chastain, Jason Clarke, Joel Edgerton.
Directed by Kathryn Bigelow.

Amazing that such a detailed film on the search for Osama Bin Laden (and finding him) could be in theatres within a year and a half of the actual events. The film has been praised (with awards, nominations and critical acclaim) for its picture of US intelligence and the work of the CIA (both effective and not). The film has been damned as a gung ho movie in favour of American foreign policy after 9/11. It has been criticised by US senators and intelligence personnel as providing a false image of the use of criticisms.

But... it is a feature film, a dramatisation, rather than a documentary. Clearly, there is always the danger that literal-inclined audiences will take each scene as presenting the truth, rather than representing aspects of the truth in a theatrical way.

One of the main impressions gained by this reviewer is how the search for Bin Laden was poorly handled for almost a decade. At one stage, Maya (Jessica Chastain) points out that the approach to finding him was based on pre-9/11 suppositions that he would be hiding in the caves of Afghanistan (which may be the impression that most people did, in fact, have) rather than in Pakistan suburbia.

The torture is certainly a significant issue and is presented graphically. To deny the extent of water-boarding may be accurate but in the light of the Abu Grab revelations, there was torture and humiliation of prisoners. As to how much information was gained by torture, that is a further discussion.

In the film, the torture sequences introduce us to Maya, deemed something of a 'killer' at the end of her training. At first she is repelled by the torture she watches. Then we see her get used to it, her further toughening in her work, much of which takes place in Pakistan.

But, it is Maya and her staff, her shrewdness in following through leads and hunches which does eventually lead to the identification of the whereabouts of Bin Laden and his family. Not that she gets a great deal of support from her bosses and from Washington officials – the mean don't really think that women can be as effective as Maya (and underestimate her persistence, even when she posts the day by day delays on her boss's door).

The culmination of the film is in the picture of the preparation for the raid, the helicopters' night flight across the Afghan mountains into Pakistan, the details of the landing, the raid, the search, finding the family, identifying Bin Laden and his death).

This is a long film but, whatever one's political opinions, one's views on the CIA, one's belief in America or not, it is a gripping film. It was written by journalist Mark Boal, who wrote the screenplays for In the Valley of Elah and the Oscar-winning, The Hurt Locker. Kathryn Bigelow won an Oscar for The Hurt Locker. She proves she can direct powerful action and war films with Zero Down Thirty.

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ADIEUX A LA REINE, Les/ FAREWELL MY QUEEN

France, 2012,
Lea Seydoux, Diane Kruger, Virginie Ledoyen.
Directed by Benoit Jacquot.

There has been a long cinematic fascination with the French Revolution, fostered through the decades with film versions of *A Tale of Two Cities*. Fascination too with Marie Antoinette. In 1938, there was a lavish period drama with Norma Shearer. Joely Richardson portrayed her in the melodrama, *The Affair of the Necklace*. In 2006, a kind of sumptuous pop-portrait with Kirsten Dunst. Now the French have Marie Antoinette make a comeback in *Farewell, My Queen*. It is both lavish and sumptuous and has Diane Kruger as the ill-fated queen. However, the film is not principally about the queen. It is about her reader, Sidonie, played by Lea Seydoux, who is loyal to the queen, but finds herself in the middle of the court intrigues and the rumblings of the Revolution. She is ambitious, diligent and discreet, but not against being part of the sexual goings on in Versailles. The person who is involved is the new favourite of the queen, the glamorous countess Gabrielle, played by Virginie Ledoyen, certainly not a favourite with Sidonie, and hated by the populace.

In fact, the film takes place over the fateful July 1789 days which lead to the storming of the Bastille, the rising up against Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette and their plans to flee Paris. The film is interesting in showing the different reactions of royalty and courtiers alike faced with the revolt and the uncertainties of what they should do – and of what is going to happen to them. A list has been made of those who are to be guillotined. Plans have to be made for escape. Audiences know that Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI do not escape, but the climax of the film is a journey made by Sidonie, her loyal farewell to the queen.

This is not a revolutionary action show. Rather, it is an enclosed drama of a decadent court collapsing and soon to be destroyed.

AMOUR

Austria/France, 2012,
Jean- Louis Trintignant, Emmanuelle Riva, Isabelle Huppert.
Directed by Michael Haneke.

A powerful film, one of the best, if not the best of 2012. It won the Golden Palm at Cannes, 2012, and a BAFTA, Golden Globe and Oscar for best foreign language film.

In the letter to the Corinthians, St Paul describes love as patient and kind, not jealous, conceited or proud, not selfish, irritable or ill-mannered, it does not keep a record of wrongs, love never gives up. This is the kind of love/amour that we see in this film. And it is most admirable, a love that has lasted for decades, has changed from initial romance to mature companionship and parenting, to the demands of old age, illness and impending death.

Writer-director, Michael Haneke, an Austrian film-maker whose films are often made in France and in French, as is this film. He has won several awards from Ecumenical Juries at film festivals, Code Inconnu, Cache, The White Ribbon. The latter won the SIGNIS (World Catholic Association for Communication) prize for a European film in 2009. Amour won for 2012.

The acting is extraordinary – and that sounds like an understatement. Jean- Louis Trintignant, a veteran French star, best known around the world for A Man and a Woman, was 81 when he made this film. Emmanuelle Riva, who is known for Hiroshima, Mon Amour (1959) was 84. The performances are so naturalistic, realistic, that we feel we are watching real people in actual situations rather than watching acting.

Basically, this is a story of age, of illness and caregiving. We see the gradual stages of decline, stroke and its consequences. We see the helplessness of the wife, her attempts to communicate, the pain and sadness of her suffering. We see the constant and meticulous attention of her husband, day after day, his weariness but his persevering until it becomes too unbearable for her and for him.

Apart from attendance at a concert at the opening of the film, the action is confined to the apartment of the couple. There are some visitors, especially their daughter, played by Isabelle Huppert, who lives abroad and does not seem to understand age or what is really happening to her parents and how that has to play out day by day.

The wife was a piano teacher which leads to several musical interludes which allow some moments for the audience to sit back before they respond again to the plight of the couple.

Perhaps the action may seem remote for younger audiences, but for most, it will be a moving experience, some appreciating better what caregiving constantly requires, others knowing that this future is possible for all of us.

BEAUTIFUL CREATURES

US, 2013,

Alden Ehrenreich, Alice Englert, Jeremy Irons, Emma Thompson, Viola Davis, Eileen Atkins, Emmy Rossum.

Directed by Richard La Gravenese.

More young love and anguish in the midst of mysteries beyond this world. The post-Twilight era is upon us. This film is based on the first of four novels, Beautiful Creatures, Darkness, Chaos, Redemption, by Kami Garcia, which have proven popular.

In many ways, it is a load of old cobblers – or a load of new cobblers.

We suspend disbelief to accept that there is a mysterious family from the Carolinas, some of whom are powerful Casters (a dignified word for ‘witch’). The girls have the choice at age sixteen to accept their nature (good or evil) and find their place for life as Casters. Lena (Alice Englert – who is the daughter of Jane Campion) turns up in town, goes to school, is responsible for some eerie events (glass blowing out of the classroom windows). She is being

protected by her uncle, Macon Ravenswood (Jeremy Irons sporting a Southern accent), so that her choice will be for the good rather than the evil planned by her madly vindictive mother, Saraphine (Emma Thompson). There is also an evil cousin, Ridley (Emmy Rossum). When they all assemble for dinner, it is not a genteel affair!

The other focus of the film is a young lad, brought up by his grandmother, Ethan (a very cheerful, often grinning, Alden Ehrenreich). Needless to say, he is smitten by Lena and does his best to help her, but he is no match for the dark arts. (He is abducted and is mute and bound at that mad meal.)

So, a mixture of Carolina normality with the kind of problems we saw in the Twilight series. But Alice Englert is more sympathetic than Kristen Stewart and Alden Ehrenreich more energetic than Robert Pattinson. And the supporting cast is much more interesting, especially Emma Thompson, with Saraphine taking the form of a local fire-and-brimstone Christian lady. Her first scene where she appears, denouncing the condemned in Church and her transformation to her real self is a high point of the film. But, so are her other appearances. She proves that a performance that is over the top can be hugely entertaining.

Box office returns will determine whether we move on to the next episodes in the novels.

CLOUD ATLAS

US/Germany, 2012

Tom Hanks, Halle Berry, Hugh Grant, Jim Broadbent, Jim Sturgess, Ben Whishaw.

Directed by Lana Wachowski, Tom Tykwer, Andy Wachowski.

First, a warning. As the Warner Bros logo comes up, be aware that you are going to have to focus and concentrate for the next 172 minutes. After introducing us to its six story strands, with dates and places, the film becomes easier to follow as the stories interconnect.

But where to begin a review? A brief synopsis would take more space than an ordinary review! This is a film which blends different movie genres, world history from the 19th century into the far future, a shift from Earth to a far planet, and raises so many questions through its storytelling. There are the perennial themes of love, freedom, identity, boundaries and prejudices, conspiracy, revolution, civilisation and the primitive, good and evil, malice and self-sacrifice.

It is not surprising that many audiences have responded well to this quite epic and spectacular version of the Booker Prize-nominated book (2004) by David Mitchell. It is also not surprising that the film has not done so well at the box-office, many finding it too hard, and many dismissing it as pretentious. This is not hard to understand. But, this review will be on the side of Cloud Atlas. The stories can stand on their own, but they are intercut throughout the film, often using similar incidents or visual references from one story to the other.

It is fascinating to watch the different stories and the evocation of their period and the use of the familiar movie conventions that have been used to portray these eras. One story is set in 1849 in the Pacific islands and on board a ship going back to America. It shows the capitalist west's attempts to exploit the natives, even with the help of the missionaries. But, it is also a story of malice, a greedy doctor, treating an ill American on board the ship home. A key

character is an islander who has been flogged by his people but has stowed away on the ship. This story looks like one of those historical dramas.

For the 1936 story, set in Edinburgh and Cambridge, there is an enclosed atmosphere reminiscent of the dramas of those days, with a focus on an ambitious young man, a homosexual, who ingratiates himself with a renowned composer and shares his creativity but is denounced by the composer.

There is a 1973 story that looks like one of those conspiracy movies of the time, like *The China Syndrome*, where a reporter is investigating an energy company that has nuclear plant plans in the context of the fuel crisis of the period. There are chases on the streets of San Francisco as a hired killer pursues the reporter.

When we get to 2012, there is a lighter touch. A thuggish London writer (Ray Winstone-screen-character-type) is drastic in getting rid of an arrogant critic. But, his books become successful and his publisher capitalises on the notoriety – but it backfires when the thug's family want plenty of royalties and the publisher's brother interns him in a home for the elderly. There are some comic consequences.

And into the future, the 22nd century, New Seoul, a city which brings to mind the visuals of the underground city in the *Matrix* series – which is not surprising because the Wachowskis are the directors. This is a dictatorship with a cyborg generation primed to serve the humans. But, revolution is in the air.

And, then, on a galaxy far, far away, survivors of a cataclysm (*The Fall*), eke out their existence, plagued by a band of gaudily painted but deadly warriors.

Yes, the synopsis needs quite some space.

One of the features of *Cloud Atlas*, which contributes to the themes, even of reincarnation and *déjà vu*, is that the main actors take up to half a dozen different roles. It is only at the final credits that we realise that some of the minor characters were played by the main cast, unrecognisable, sometimes crossing race and gender barriers. This is fascinating in itself, but it also raises questions about good and evil, continuity and discontinuity in the behaviour of people throughout history.

Tom Hanks is the principal actor and shows quite vast diversity in his performances: the fearful warrior in the future, the wheedling doctor in the past, a scientist in 1973, the mercenary hotel keeper in the 1930s, several others but an outstanding impersonation with the thug Brit author in 2012. That is the kind of film *Cloud Atlas* is.

The rest of the cast obviously relish the invitation to be so different in the one film. Hugh Grant has been off-screen for some time, but is cleverly diverse in his roles, from the nuclear executive in 1973 to the mean brother of the 2012 publisher. So is Jim Broadbent who is the 1930s composer as well as the hapless publisher of the present (and the 19th century ship's captain). Halle Berry has some good opportunities, better than many films she has been in since winning her Oscar in 2001. But, very striking is Hugo Weaving, who has a lot of roles, ranging from the 1973 assassin to the Nurse Ratched manager of the home for the elderly and an especially sinister devil character who torments and tests Tom Hanks in the future. Jim Sturgess, Ben Whishaw, Susan Sarandon and Keith David also have very interesting

characters.

So, what is it all about? History, for one. The continuity, the discontinuity, the transitions, even in the 20th century, what is similar, what is different, the wide range of manifestations of good and evil. There is a great deal about freedom, anti-slavery, anti-sexual orientation bigotry, anti-fascist military control, anti-superstition... One character remarks that boundaries are conventions to be crossed. There is a great deal about love, relationships and how necessary they are for any kind of survival.

Obviously, this is a tour-de-force for the two American directors, and Tom Tykwer from Germany. It is visually spectacular with an enormous range of special effects for the different eras (especially for New Seoul). In terms of making actors different in their roles, even disguising them, hair and make-up are admirable.

One of the main difficulties in responding to Cloud Atlas is that it is basically storytelling rather than overt reflection and philosophising. Sometimes we feel we should be 'thinking through' what the story means as we watch it, but that takes away from the senses' and emotional experiences we have. Is it necessary to tease out the intellectual meanings afterwards, or is it better simply to remember the stories, the characters and how we responded as we looked and listened? Something of both?

DES VENTS CONTRAIRES/ AGAINST THE WIND

France, 2011.

Benoit Mangimal, Isabelle Carre, Audrey Tautou.

Directed by Jalid Lespert.

The English title does not do justice to this very good film. Adverse winds would be much truer and better.

Every so often a French film comes along, seemingly like many another about family and relationships, love and tensions, that stands out from the rest. This is the case with Des Vents Adversaires.

Benoit Mangimal is very good as a writer, who loves his wife and their two children, but has writer's block. His busy wife is a doctor, working more than full-time at a children's hospital. They quarrel and she hurries to work. She never returns. Paul searches for her, is reprimanded by his editor for leaving his children alone. Time passes. He is suspected of murder, but there is no evidence. Since Audrey Tautou plays the wife, she has to make an impression very quickly for audiences to appreciate her and the situation. (She does appear in some flashbacks.)

Paul and the children move to Brittany, to St Malo, for Paul to work for his brother at his driving school. They eventually settle in, though Paul lives with his sadness and regrets. Both children are very good in their roles as well.

There are some complications. Paul gives too much attention to a very young driving client which doesn't help him with the police who are involved in another complication: a man released from gaol abducts his son from school and they go to the beach with Paul and his

children to play. The man's wife calls in the police. Paul wants to help, shelters the man and goes to persuade his wife not to set the lawyer on to her husband. Another tragedy follows and Paul is enmeshed with the police investigation with inevitable references to the disappearance of his wife.

The police and their methods and manners are presented very unsympathetically.

Despite a clash with his brother and the bad memories of their father, there is a resolution to the mystery, some very moving scenes of grief with the children – and some final hopefulness.

Very interesting, moving and satisfying.

ELLES

France, 2012,

Juliette Binoche, Anais Demoustier, Julia Kulig.

Directed by Malgorzata Szumowska

Elles has a Polish perspective on its themes, from writer-director, Malgorzata Szumowska, as well as a French perspective with the story set in Paris. It also has a strongly female point of view with director, star and themes.

Juliette Binoche plays a reporter for Elle Magazine, engaged in research on an article about young French students who work as call girls to supplement their income. (This was a theme in John Duigan's 2012 Australian film, *Careless Love*.) The two young women, one French, one Polish, become very frank in their discussions with the journalist, Anne, and their stories are visualized quite explicitly for the audience.

There is more, however, than the elaborating of the two stories, the revealing of the characters of the two young women who become much more involved in their work, sensual gratification as well as the possibilities of a more comfortable, even luxurious life. We are focused on Anne, a day in her life as she is finishing her feature article.

Her life at home is quite ordinary, a teenage son with resentment problems, critical of the coldness in his parents' marriage, a younger boy preoccupied with video games. The couple are expecting his boss and wife to dinner that day. Anne cleans, cooks, is concerned about her son. But, all through the day, there are flashbacks to the meetings with the two young women, her growing involvement with them, something of an obsession, but also letting her imagination work, compensating the arid sexuality of her own marriage.

Towards the end, the film indulges in some fantasy at the dinner table. But, then, the next morning, everything is back to normal – but we are not sure how real this is or whether it is a challenge to what the French call bourgeois life.

With films and topics like this, there is the question of how real is the treatment, how prurient. And, depending on the experience of the audiences, whether this is a world we have seen in other films or whether there is something new with insights. Perhaps it is best to say that the world of the call girl students has been treated in other films but the strength of this one is Juliette Binoche's complex portrait of Anne and the effect of her interviews on her

own life.

FRANKENWEENIE

US, 2012.

Voices of: Martin Landau, Martin Short, Catherine O'Hara², Winona Ryder.

Directed by Tim Burton.

A long time ago, Tim Burton made a short animated film about a resuscitated dog. Now he has been able to make it into a full-length feature.

It doesn't take a mastermind to realise that this is a film in the Frankenstein tradition, tradition because it is not exactly about a monster, just a nice dog called Sparky. Vincent () is Sparky's master and friend. He is a young, rather introverted boy whose supportive parents wish he would be more sporty and outdoors-going. Vincent has proudly shown his parents the science-fiction film he has made with Sparky as the star. Vincent also loves science and has his laboratory. So, what makes more sense when Sparky is killed in a car accident and is solemnly buried than to exhume him and see if the Frankenstein experiment works. Of course, it does.

When Vincent tells his friend Edgar what he has done and to keep it a secret, Edgar promptly tells some of the kids at school who, like Vincent, want to win a prize at the science fair. And what do they do? Take some of their pets, including a turtle and do likewise. One takes the turtle who becomes a Godzilla-like giant monster. There is a risen rat. And an obnoxious cat assumes bat-monster characteristics.

The science teacher warns the school and parents not to underestimate children's knowledge as he is fired from the school – he is voiced by Martin Landau who was Tim Burton's Bela Lugosi in *Ed Wood*, and won an Oscar for it.

Mayhem follows in the town. Vincent and his companion, Shelley, take refuge in a castle-like building from the rampaging crowd, just as in the original.

When order is restored, the bad monsters have to go, but Sparky lives another day – or more.

Burton has been able to indulge himself with the story, with sharp animation and black and white photography. A bit frightening for very young audiences, but older children might identify and enjoy it.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

UK, 2012,

Ralph Fiennes, Jeremy Irvine, Robbie Coltrane, Helena Bonham Carter, Jason Flemyng, Ben Irvine.

Directed by Mike Newell.

Which novel is Dicken's most popular? Judging by film versions, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations* top the list. Here is yet another version of *Great Expectations*, coming not long after a BBC mini-series with Ray Winstone and Gillian

Anderson.

This is quite a lavish re-creation of the novel, especially in the London sequences. It opens, quite briskly, in the marshes with Pip hurrying to his mother's grave and being startled (as we are) by the sudden appearance of the convict, Magwitch. Those who have read the book and/or seen film and TV versions will know what will happen, although this film makes much more explicit than others, the intricate linking of all the characters by the end.

Ben Irvine plays the young Pip and the role is then taken over by his older brother, Jeremy Irvine (who starred in *War Horse*). Pip's sister is a Dickensian harriidan Sally Hawkins), but his brother-in-law, Joe Gargery is a most kind and sympathetic character, played in a pleasingly low-key way by Jason Flemyng (who is often an on-screen villain). The atmosphere is built-up with the Christmas dinner, the missing pie and brandy which Pip has stolen for Magwitch, followed by the re-arrest of the convicts. Then the mood changes as Pip is summoned by Miss Havisham to play with Estella (and to have his heart broken by her as Miss Havisham, in her revenge for being jilted, trains Estella to play havoc with men's hearts). Helena Bonham Carter has yet another opportunity to play a character who has more than traces of madness.

While Jeremy Irvine is central as Pip, perhaps a bit too reserved when we think of John Mills in David Lean's classic 1940s version, full of energy and enterprise, his relationship with Estella is important but not so central. It is the seeming peripheral characters who shine in this version and have a lot to do. An initially unrecognisable Ralph Fiennes is a most persuasive Magwitch with some fine scenes on his return from New South Wales to England. Robbie Coltrane as Jaggers, who does, in fact, have all the information about how the characters are far more linked than we might have guessed, has an important role. Holliday Grainger, on the other hand, as the adult Estella, is so haughty and cold that it is sometimes hard to believe that Pip has had this undying love for her.

It is the great expectations for Pip that is the central theme, of course. He makes assumptions, as might the audience who do not know the plot, about who his patron is, which leads to some disillusionment when he learns the truth. This film shows him becoming more snobbish, more extravagant as he strains to become the gentleman his benefactor has asked him to be. A lot of pride, a substantial fall. But, Pip does then rise to all the occasions, lessons learned.

With so many versions of the novel, audiences will have decided on their favourite performances and judged the others accordingly. For first-timers, it is a helpful introduction to Dickens and his world (London, when Pip arrives, looking particularly Dickensian). For those familiar, it is another opportunity to enjoy a two hours or more visual immersion in Dickens' world.

I GIVE IT A YEAR

UK, 2013,
Rose Byrne, Rafe Spall, Simon Baker, Anna Faris, Stephen Merchant, Minnie Driver.
Directed by Dan Mazar.

The title comes from a rather dogmatic statement made by the sister of the bride at the

wedding receptions. She is a dragon-po-faced Minnie Driver who, inexplicably (or the explanation shown makes little sense) has remained married to her genial but laid-back doctor husband for many years. But, their story is only a sub-plot.

The main story is that of Natalie and Josh, Rose Byrne and Rafe Spall, who have been smitten with each other and, as it turns out, have really fallen in love with love rather than each other. Which means that this portrait of a marriage in decline over a year is a falling out of being in love.

Actually, Minnie Driver might have read it right. She is a determined advertising PR executive who generally knows what she wants and gets it. He, on the other hand, has published a novel and is in process of writing another but has no sense of urgency and is content often to laze about the house, and is a master of bad taste. So, from romantic to irritated, to clashes, to roving eye, to counselor (a very funny Olivia Colman), to a new proposal: to be divorced.

The 'other' parties are Anna Faris as former girlfriend, Zoe, and Simon Baker as Guy, the owner of a bleach company who has a contract with Natalie.

The film is really a collection of episodes, some funny, some misfiring. It is the work of Dan Mazar who has been working with Sacha Baron Cohen in all his incarnations, especially Ali G, Borat and Bruno. So that gives us some idea of the blend of hilarity and bad taste – and there is quite a bit of the latter, especially with the character played by Stephen Merchant who says whatever comes into his head without any process, is jaw-droppingly politically incorrect and obviously so. (Natalie does say that one benefit of the divorce is that she will never have to see him again.)

The cast act well with the courage of their convictions. A clever publicity writer has created the ad tag, 'The love child of Four Weddings and a Funeral and Bridesmaids'. It is more Four Weddings than Bridesmaids though with a lot of 'naughty' humour that revels in and is mightily pleased with its naughtiness.

THE IMPOSTER

UK, 2012,
Directed by Bart Leyton.

There was a 2010 feature film called *The Chameleon*, the story of a young Frenchman, who posed as the son of an American mother, the son having been abducted three years earlier. The family accepted him, until the FBI investigated him and discovered the truth. The Frenchman was notorious for assuming the identities of other young men. His name was Frederic Bourdin.

The Chameleon told the story, leaving it to the audience to try to understand something of his mentality and motivation as well as wondering how the family could have accepted him as the boy, lost for three years who seemingly had turned up in Spain. Some of the names and locations were altered for the drama.

With *The Imposter*, we have a documentary re-telling the story (and keeping up quite some

suspense as to what will happen, even the suggestion that the family may have killed the boy who disappeared) but also exploring what the main protagonists were thinking and feeling. It makes for an absorbing cinema experience, both fascinating and stimulating. The boy's name was Nicholas Barclay, who disappeared from his Texas home when he was thirteen.

The film-makers rely on interviews with the imposter himself, but also with the boy's mother and sister (the sister went to Spain and brought the boy home after the US Embassy gave him a passport) and other members of the family. There are interviews with a woman official who became suspicious as well as a private investigator.

However, there are no screenplay credits in the film, nor in the credits listed in the Internet Movie Database. Since the interviews are acted (most convincingly), where did their texts come from? Transcripts? Reconstructed interviews? Which makes the film something of a docudrama rather than a straight documentary. There are some sequences, especially of Frederic dancing at the end, which seem to be actual footage.

The film explores two major questions:

- What motivated Frederic, what kept him going during the experience in the United States, how could he successfully deceive the family?
- _ - How could the family believe him? Did they believe what they wanted to believe?

Looking at the actor portraying Frederic and listening to him makes fascinating viewing. He puts up a plausible scenario about his French/Algerian origins, his desire for security, his 'American dream', how he felt sustaining the fiction, his elaboration of a story of abduction, torture by military, sexual abuse along with other boys, his being forbidden to speak English (hence his accent). He then describes what having a family meant, the love and freedom he experienced. Which is all put into abeyance when we discover he has taken on many identities before this one.

Cary Gibson, Nicholas Barclay's sister, puts a very plausible case for accepting Frederic as Nicholas, as does Nicholas' mother. Once again, the actors portraying them do a convincing job, enabling us to believe that they believed and are genuinely shocked when the truth is revealed (let alone the accusations of murdering Nicholas).

In a way this is a 'True Crime' story, reconstructing some scenes, presenting the interviews and points of view, tantalising the audience with what seems one of the more far-fetched stories they are likely to come across.

Whatever the truth of the matter, The Imposter certainly gets us in.

KON-TIKI

Norway, 2012,

Pål Sverre Valheim Hagen, Anders Baasmo Christiansen, Gustaf Skarsgård

Directed by Joachim Ronning, Espen Sandburg.

Older audiences may remember the stories of Thor Heyerdahl's epic journey on a balsa raft across the Pacific from Peru to French Polynesia to give proof of his theory, derived from

Polynesian legends, that ancestors sailed from South America and settled the islands. Theories to that time favoured migration from Asia. Heyerdahl's expedition took place in 1947, April to August. The film of his voyage won the Oscar for Best Documentary.

So, now the background to the voyage, the voyage itself and the consequences are dramatized over sixty years later.

This is an old-fashioned kind of film, of heroics against the odds, of an indomitable leader who had a vision which no hardships could block. It is a Norwegian production but filmed in English in Scandinavia, Bulgaria, Malta, Thailand and the Maldives. It looks good, with plenty of photography at sea, fish, whales, sharks, phosphorescent creatures.

We are introduced to Heyerdahl as a young boy prepared to take risks, falling through the ice and rescued but refusing to promise his father never to take risks again. Shift to French Polynesia, where Thor and his wife Liv, are living amongst the locals doing ethnographic studies. It is here that Thor discovers the raft voyage of ancestor Tiki 1500 years earlier.

Shift to New York, 1947, where Thor is unsuccessfully trying to persuade editors and publishers to back him. Huge Pepsi Cola neon signs are seen twice seeming to indicate that Pepsi did sponsor the voyage, but it is only product placement sponsoring this film.

Heyerdahl comes from Viking countries. He is tall and blond but not a heavy or hefty build. But, he is determined, assembles some friends in Peru and builds the raft, made only of the materials Tiki would have used. However, they take some food supplies, a radio and a camera. The point to be made was that this kind of raft could have gone with the tides to Polynesia.

The main part of the film is the voyage itself, storms, menace from a whale, the pursuit by sharks, being becalmed, the logs absorbing water and beginning to rot. There are also the inevitable tensions amongst the men, especially when the engineer harpoons the whale and the danger of capsizing, and when one sailor takes a shark aboard the stabs it, the blood drawing other sharks. Audience attention is grabbed particularly at these crisis moments. Otherwise, interest will depend on interest in sailing, in the sea, in Heyerdahl's single-minded determination. In the background is the tension between Thor and his wife, his not returning home to his family, his driven life, always on more quests (which he did until his death in 2002).

This film serves as a tribute to Heyerdahl and his crew (who had adventurous lives afterwards as we are informed at the end).

THE LAST STAND

US, 2013,
Arnold Schwarzenegger, Forest Whitaker, Eduardo Noriega, Johnny Knoxville, Luis Guzman,
Directed by Jee-woon Kim.

Well, critics and bloggers alike are declaring, 'He's back', so why not confirm to the trend!

Yes, Arnold Schwarzenegger, after eight years as governor of California, has gone back to his day job. He has brought his screen talents back (acting not really being one of them), his iconic screen presence, his accent and intonations, his persona as a terminator of bad events and people. It's all here, with a vengeance, so to speak.

The leader of this enterprise is director Kim who has had a strong career in Korea as a director of sometimes bizarre films, with a propensity for violence. He is the director of the pastiche of spaghetti westerns and Korean horror, *The Good, the Bad and the Weird*. And, of course, he brings something of each of these to this, his first American film.

The basic plot is standard. We are in a small border town with Mexico town of Somerton. It is the sheriff's day off. Some truckies are at the diner. The town is quiet, but the sheriff is suspicious. He has every reason to be. Meanwhile in Las Vegas, the FBI are about to transport the deadliest drug boss since Paolo Escobar to federal prison when he is whisked away and is heading for Mexico through Somerton in the fastest of cars.

Will the small group of law enforcement in Somerton stop him? Is the Pope catholic!

Guns galore, so lots (and lots) of shooting as Arnie and co confront the drug lord and his henchmen, to the amazement of the FBI boss who arrives when it is all over.

The thing is with the former governor is that when he was a film star, he delivered a lot of his lines in dead-pan throwaway and that is what we expect from him. In the midst of mayhem, a corny moment and a laugh. (This time here are quite a few at the expense of his age!).

We know what to expect and it is given to us Korean weird style. If that is not enticing, then don't go. If it is, then you can expect some adrenalin rushes.

Forest Whitaker is the FBI chief. Eduardo Noriega is the charmingly sinister drug boss. Rodrigo Santoro is the Iraq War veteran who is in on the act as is Johnny Knoxville, taking time off from Jackass films and TV (though keeping the spirit in his character and mock heroics).

Yes, he's back and there are more of these movies in the offing.

MOVIE 43

US, 2012, 90 minutes, Colour.

Greg Kinnear, Denis Quaid, Hugh Jackman, Kate Winslet, Emma Stone, Kieran Culkin, Anna Faris, Uma Thurman, Stephen Merchant, Halle Berry, Josh Duhamel, Elizabeth Banks, Chloe Grace Moretz, Richard Gere, Kate Bosworth.

Directed by Peter Farrelly (and others)

Movie 43 is an odd film, generally rejected by critics. Perhaps it should have been called Movie 00, the response of many of the audiences.

The film begins with a potentially good idea. Denis Quaid is a writer who comes to make his pitch to a producer, played by Greg Kinnear. The producer seems to be the kind, patient type and begins to listen to the rather frantic pitch made by the writer. At this point, the first of the

stories is visualized.

While this story has its vulgar tone, it is funny. It is played somewhat seriously by Hugh Jackman and Kate Winslet, giving it a stronger impact. Kate Winslet portrays a rather haughty personality dressing for a dinner date, which turns out to be Hugh Hackman. However, he breezes in with a pair of testicles on his neck. He is oblivious of this. Kate Winslet is concerned that she is seeing things and is trying to test out whether it is real or not. Because she plays it so intensely and seriously, the joke is acceptable and the short film works quite well – if you enjoy that kind of thing.

The second story works well enough as tongue-in-cheek presentation of home schooling. Naomi Watts and Liev Schreiber portray parents entertaining dinner guests, explaining how they educate their older adolescent son, Kevin, at home. However, the idea of education is take all the clichés of bullying, harsh treatment and humiliation that school gives rise to and impose them on their son. This is all visualized and is amusing because it is played straight and briefly.

As the film goes on, the writer becomes even more frantic, pulling a gun on the producer to force him to go to the boss to get a contract signed. At this stage the producer becomes frantic and joins in the rather crude jokes and tenor of the whole film.

It is surprising that Peter Farrelly, director of tongue-in-cheek films with more than their share of low humour and vulgarity (*There's Something about Mary*, *Shallow Hal*), was able to gather so many writers who were willing to tell dirty jokes stories or scatological stories and then to find a range of directors to film them.

Farrelly himself directs the framework as well as several of the stories.

In filming stories like this, the danger is that many of them become ludicrous, exaggerating, of course. They also become somewhat disgusting, sometimes few holds barred. As intended, some of the stories defy belief, especially the scatological story of Anna Faris and Chris Pratt and their sexual relationship. This is also true of a sequence with Halle Berry and Stephen Merchant and an increasingly bizarre series of bets and dares.

Elizabeth Banks directs a story with Chloe Grace Moretz visiting some friends and experiencing her first period, with some embarrassment for her and the awkward reaction of a young friend, his older brother and their father. There is also a story of advertising using a blow-up sex doll. It is mainly a board meeting which becomes more absurd as it proceeds, with Richard Gere, quite serious, presiding and Kate Bosworth trying to give female and feminist objections.

There are some credits and, suddenly, there follows yet another story, a couple and the tensions between them especially because of the man's pet cats, Beezul, a cartoon cat. The couple are played by Josh Duhamel and Elizabeth Banks. The film again ends with absurdity in the relationship between Josh Duhamel and the cat.

It is difficult to gauge who exactly is the target audience for this film. Because it is generally low brow comedy, audiences with some taste will probably find it far too much. Perhaps it is a big risky to say that audiences without any taste will enjoy it. Perhaps what the film makers wanted was a suspension of good taste or patronage by those who delight in naughty shocks.

THE ORANGES

US, 2011,

Hugh Laurie, Catherine Keener, Oliver Platt, Allison Janney, Alia Shawkat, Leighton Meister.

Directed by Julian Farino.

The Oranges? No, not pieces of fruit. Rather, the citizens of Orange, New Jersey. This is a film of suburban New Jersey. It is a slice of life where things seemed to be going well enough, but weren't.

Two couples live across the street from each other. Each has adult children. The two husbands have been best friends, even jogging every morning together, one buying the inventions the other thinks up, taking everything for granted. They are played by Hugh Laurie as David and Oliver Platt as Terry, the inventor.

David and Paige (Catherine Keener) seem to have had a long and happy marriage. They have two children, one still at home preparing to work in making furniture, the other going to China on business (Alia Shawkatt as Vanessa and Adam Brody as Toby). Over the road, Carol (Alison Janney) is a controller and tends to ignore Terry. They have a daughter, Nina (Leighton Meister), working in California.

Where can the film go and where can this ideal suburban life go wrong?

Nina comes home and responds to David's interest in her. A marriage collapses, friendships break, children react against their parents. Nina's return is a catalyst for drastic upheaval.

The cast is particularly strong and make the set-up believable. And, probably, we know people like this, people who have had experiences like this and who had to battle their way through, often with great hurt on innocent parties. The Oranges is an interesting, perhaps useful, mirror of suburban crises.

OZ THE GREAT AND POWERFUL

US, 2013,

James Franco, Rachel Weisz, Mila Kunis, Michelle Williams, Zach Braff, Bill Cobb.

Directed by Sam Raimi.

If you have never read any of Frank L. Baum's Oz novels and have only seen The Wizard of Oz, you may have wondered who the wizard actually was and how he finished up with his tricks in the Emerald City. Here is your answer.

Sam Raimi, after his Spiderman films (which starred James Franco in two of them), has opted for a lavish fantasy. His writers have also suggested a parallel with Oscar (the wizard) and his experience with that of Dorothy. Oscar is a carnival showman-conman in Kansas in 1905 – and the sequences are filmed in black and white and box-size screen like the 1939 film. Frank (Zach Braff) is Oscar's put-upon assistant. Annie (Michelle Williams) is in love with Oscar but has received another proposal. He is prepared to let her go. Both Frank and Annie will

reappear in Oz.

When Oscar cannot help a crippled girl to walk, the crowds pursue him and he escapes in a hot-air balloon and, like Dorothy, he is whirled away in a powerful storm – and lands in Oz. We are not quite familiar with this Oz. It is beautiful and colourful (and there are Munchkins). There is the Emerald City and the yellow brick road. But the characters there are different.

Oz is ruled by an evil but beautiful (it is Rachel Weisz) witch, Evanora. She has a nice sister, Theodora (Mila Kunis) who is instantly attracted to Oscar. The word is that Glinda, the daughter of the former ruler, had murdered her father. We guess at once that it was really Evanora who did it. A flying monkey, Finley, also turns up and becomes Oscar's assistant, lugging around his bag of tricks. Finley is voiced by Zach Braff and is the equivalent of Frank. The crippled girl appears again in the form of a china doll that Oscar rescues and repairs and who joins in the fight against Evanora.

They tell Oscar that there is a prophecy that he will turn up and save the people of Oz. However, he is more interested in himself, gold and getting out of there in his balloon.

But, matters do not go well. Evanora takes over her sister who has perceived Oscar as abandoning her. By a sinister transformation, Theodora turns into the Wicked Witch of the West, bent on revenge on Oscar. But, we do remember who Glinda, the good witch is – and she is played by Michelle Williams.

The rest of the film tells how Glinda sees good in Oscar, how they join good forces to combat Evanora (without any deaths). Which means that Oscar has to delve into that bag of tricks. He becomes the Wizard and defeats the enemies, especially through that device we remember from The Wizard of Oz, his projecting his image and voice on a big screen, while he is hidden behind the curtains. Everything is in place for the arrival of Dorothy and her story.

It was all filmed in very effective 3D. The sets are wonderful. The action is most entertaining. James Franco seems to be enjoying himself as Oscar. Rachel Weisz is a convincing villain and Michelle Williams a very nice heroine. There is something strange about Mila Kunis both as the good Theodora and very strange, and unconvincing, as the Wicked Witch.

Hard to know whether the planning of the film intended it for younger audiences or not, or for older audiences. There is a lot to admire and enjoy, but overall, it is not quite...

PLAYING FOR KEEPS

US, 2012,

Gerard Butler, Jessica Biehl, Noah Lomax, Judy Greer, Catherine Zeta-Jones?, Uma Thurman, Dennis Quaid.

Directed by Gabriele Muccini.

The first moments, and the title, might lead us to believe that this is a film about soccer. There is soccer, but this is more of a story about family, and the relationship between a father and his young son.

Those early moments show the successful career of Scots player, George Dreyer. George is played by Gerard Butler (allowed to use his own accent). But, after his career ends, he faces the problems of what he is to do with his life. The media hype the celebrity of the footballers, their excessively high salaries, their relationships with women and their lavishly spending wives and girlfriends. What do former football stars do?

According to *Playing for Keeps*, they go back to find their children who are living with their ex-wife and her about-to-be next husband. Well, here, George goes to the US and to his American ex-wife, Stacie (Jessica Biehl in a very sympathetic performance) to get to know his son, Lewis (Noah Lomax, who played the son in *Safe Haven*). George seems to have lost most of his money and is doing an audition tape for a sportscasters's job.

When he goes to watch his son play soccer (with the coach usually talking on his mobile phone), we know where the film is going. And it does that: coaching his son, trying to get close to him despite some failures, forming some bonds before it is too late.

But, there are two surprises (well, perhaps not, middle class American suburbia being what it is). First, there is the bumptiously ambitious father who immediately offers cash so that his son can get a better position and his daughter sing the national anthem before matches. He is played by Dennis Quaid as a conniving, grinningly ruthless businessman, who is not above inviting George home to a party to impress his business associates. The other surprise (or not) is the response of the mothers to George. Some are desperate housewives who go after George. There is the 'poor little me' divorcee who weeps and comes on strongly (Judy Greer). There is the businessman's glamorous wife who turns out to be as manipulative as her husband (Uma Thurman). Most strongly of all is Catherine Zeta-Jones[?] as a vampish neighbour who has the power and influence to help George become the sportscaster.

But, it is time for George to make adult decisions instead of the immature footballer reactions that he is used to.

Of course, he makes the right decisions ultimately, perhaps not quite in the way we were expecting. They depend on his bonding with his son and what that should mean as well as listening to the sensible advice of his ex-wife and, despite her happy memories before he walked out on her and their son, her explanation to him that his timing is always wrong and that he explodes.

The film is by Italian director, Gabriele Muccino, who made *The Last Kiss* in both Italian and English versions and who directed Will Smith in both *The Pursuit of Happyness* and *Seven Pounds*.

PREMIUM RUSH

US, 2012, 90 minutes, Colour
Joseph Gordon- Levitt, Michael Shannon.
Directed by David Koepp.

Premium Rush is an action movie for adrenalin junkies. It takes place over an afternoon in New York City, the audience seeing the initial action, going back in time and moving forward for the explanation.

Joseph Gordon- Levitt appears as a courier, a young man who enjoys the exhilaration of riding his bike through the crowded city streets, through the traffic, delivering messages which are 'premium rush'. He gets a high as he rides. And he is very competitive with other couriers. He also has relationship with one of the female couriers.

The film uses an interesting cinematic device to illustrate his choices for avoiding traffic, by visualising the possibilities he could take and indicating, by animation, the potential dangers and disasters for him. The film also uses the map of the city lighting it up to indicate places and the time needed to arrive.

He has to deliver a package given to him by the roommate of his girlfriend. However, he is challenged by an alleged security guard to hand over the package. He refuses and a chase and pursuit ensue.

The security guard is in fact a police officer. He is played with his customary frighteningly intense manner by Michael Shannon. In soon emerges that there are far more complications, the policeman and his work, his being indebted to Chinese gamblers. If he can get the package, it will be possible to pay off his debts.

However, he underestimates the skills of the courier. When his girlfriend becomes involved and other courier rivals, there are dangerous races through the city. There is also an underlying theme of migrants, paying for a child to come into the United States.

The film was written and directed by David Koepp, (Secret Window, Stir of Echoes). It is principally for action fans, bike riders, but other audiences might give it a miss.

SAFE HAVEN

US, 2013,

Josh Duhamel, Julianne Hough, David Lyons, Noah

Directed by Lasse Halstrom.

Just mention the name of novelist, Nicholas Sparks, and critics will move into dismissal mode, sentimentality US style. On the other hand, readers of his novels smile and their eyes light up, another nice blend of romance and drama. And, on the box-office evidence, Sparks has every right to be pleased at how popular his books and their film versions are. This is the eighth film since 1999 and Message in a Bottle. Amongst others, we have had The Notebook (probably the most popular and the best), Nights in Rodanthe, Dear John (which was also directed by the present director, Lasse Halstrom).

Safe Haven has all the needed ingredients. There is a young woman in peril from an abusive husband. There is a nice man, a widower, with two likeable children. There is a safe haven and love for both (and the children). So, plenty of romance, followed by plenty of melodrama. And, at the end, there is a twist that, maybe, even romantics were not expecting. But, it does mean that the last few minutes are more moving than we might have expected and we watch the final credits through tears.

Julianne Hough is attractive as the young woman who flees from Boston to the quiet town on

the Carolina coast where she wants to begin a new life. Josh Duhamel is tall and handsome as the widower. His daughter is a young girl with plenty of verve. People are nice in the town, and it builds up to a 4th of July celebration and parade, and fireworks.

Australian David Lyons has a high old sinister time as he pursues his wife, becoming more demented as the film goes on.

It all looks nice, and is designed for that ultimately feel-good experience that Nicholas Sparks offers to his fans.

THE SWEENEY

UK, 2012,

Ray Winstone, Ben Drew, Hayley Atwill, Damien Lewis, Steven Mackintosh.

Directed by Nick Love.

Popular in the 1970s, the TV series, *The Sweeney*, had the advantage of John Thaw (later to be inspector Morse) and Denis Waterman (to appear in *Minder*). It had quite a following. Most probably not for this 21st century re-make.

There are some robbery sequences, some chases, some shootouts – plus some baseball bat bashings, and some interrogations which are little short of torture. Well, perhaps that is to be expected from tough police dramas. But, there is a certain Death Wish-vigilante approach to the policing of the Flying Squad which, while it does get the baddies, is particularly brutish.

Ray Winstone is a natural pick for the new Regan. He has pushed his way around London and gangster worlds for decades. He does his same performance again. Singer Ben Drew appears in the Denis Waterman role, the young reformed thief who is loyal to Regan as his mentor. There are various members of the squad, including Hayley Atwell, married to internal affairs officer, played by Steven Mackintosh, who is out to bring down *The Sweeney*, but involved in an affair with Regan. Damien Lewis also appears as the police boss.

There are crims and complications, even to our thinking at first that Regan himself might be on the take as he passes some gold ingots recovered in a raid to his informant. But, no, he has a sense of duty and pursues it relentlessly (with minimum scruple), even to being suspended but still going after the robbers (who, perhaps inevitably, are from Eastern Europe).

Nothing really new, nothing really renewed from the 1970s.

WARM BODIES

US, 2013,

Nicholas Hoult, Teresa Palmer, Dave Franco, John Malkovich.

Directed by Jonathan Levine.

The title is better and deeper than might have first been supposed. So is the film.

This has to be the nicest zombie film you are likely to see and Nicholas Hoult as R (he can't

remember his alive name) is the decentest young corpse, even decentest young man you are to see in what is not quite a horror film, more of a hopeful monster film. Which means that as the film opens and we see the devastated city and the trudging corpses, as these zombies are referred to, we see it is a 'Post- Apocalyptic' film. By the end, it is a 'Post Post-Apocalyptic' [?](#) film.

R offers a mournful voiceover about his lot, living dead who cannot remember his past, driven by a flesh-fuelled hunger which means that the Corpses are a menace to the surviving humans. R wanders, communicates oddly with his friend M, and joins a rampage in a clinic where the crowd of corpses attack the humans and R kills a young man, Perry (Dave Franco). In devouring his brain, he is able to relive the memories (which is done in flashback). At the clinic was Julie, but R did not kill her. Rather, he takes her to his plane hideout to keep her safe. Teresa Palmer is a strong heroine as Julie.

We are in Beauty and the Beast mythology here. Afraid, she comes to appreciate what R is doing for her and there is an initial fire of love in each of them. Which is important for R because it means that he speak more coherently, play records for Julie, feel for her and not menace her. When she returns home to the safety of the city and to her father, a gung-ho zombie hunter in the form of that sinister-voiced and deadly presence, John Malkovich.

R calls out to Julie who comes out on to her balcony – and there you are with the other mythology (but R doesn't feel that he needs to take on the name, Romeo).

The film works, despite the odds (and Director Jonathan Levine did make a film called The Wackness!) because it has a lot of heart (and by the end so do a lot of the Corpses). And Nicholas Hoult and Teresa Palmer are able to sustain this makebelieve story, better than the Twilight films. And there is comparatively little gore.

The theme of the film is heart and hope – and there is a particularly hopeful image at the end where the vast separating wall comes down. An allegory for some of the divisions and walls in society today.

REVIEWS – BERLINALE 2013

BEFORE MIDNIGHT
CAMILLE CLAUDEL 1915
CROODS, The
DARK BLOOD
ELLE S'EN VA/ ON HER WAY
EPISODE IN THE LIFE OF AN IRON-PICKER, An
FRANCES HA
GLORIA
GOLD
GRANDMASTER, The
HARMONY LESSONS
IN THE NAME OF
LONG AND HAPPY LIFE, A

LOOK OF LOVE, The
LOVELACE
MALADIES
NECESSARY DEATH OF CHARLEY COUNTRYMAN, The
NIGHT TRAIN TO LISBON
NOBODY'S DAUGHTER HAEMON
NUN, The/ LA RELIGIEUSE
PARADIES
PARDE/CLOSED CURTAINS
PRINCE AVALANCHE
PROMISED LAND
SIDE EFFECTS
VIC AND FLO MEET A BEAR

BEFORE MIDNIGHT

US, 2013, 108 minutes, Colour.
Ethan Hawke, Julie Delpy.
Directed by Richard Linklater.
Out of Competition.

The 'Before' in the title of this film alerts film buffs that this is the third in a series, Before Sunset, 1995, Before Sunrise, 2004, and now Before Midnight. Audiences first met Jesse and Celine, he American and she French, in 1995 during a train trip over night on the continent. They talked and talked, a 23 year old man and a younger woman - all kinds of topics. It was a fresh and engaging film (or very irritating to many who tire of talk on screen).

Jesse had written a book based on their meeting, has married, had a son. In 2004, Celine set out to find Jesse because of the book and her being part of it. They met again, they talked, discussed their relationship, his marriage. They married.

It is now 2013. Jesse is very conscious that he is 41, pondering it, feeling it. He has now written three books and is something of a celebrity. Jesse and Celine have twin daughters. At the opening of the film, Jesse farewells his son back to the U.S. and his mother, yet wanting to be a stronger part of his son's teenage years.

And, of course, this time, they talk and talk, although the screenplay, a collaboration between the stars and director Richard Linklater, provides some attractive settings for the talk. The first is during the car ride back to the holiday house they are staying in for the summer, hosted by a noted author, played by veteran cinematographer, Walter Lassally. We learn a lot during this long single-take drive about the previous eight years. Julie Delpy and Ethan Hawke are quite adept by now at bringing their characters to life. He is much more laid-back, male preoccupations. She is more tense, both very rational and very emotional. She is conscious of her need for a worthwhile job, wary of going to Chicago for Jesse's sake, as well as experiencing the pressures of being a mother and of twins.

At the holiday house, there are some more conversations, Jesse discussing novels with the famous author, Celine helping in the kitchen and talking with the wife of one of the guests.

There is a long entertaining sequence at the table. Once again a wide range of topics, especially about love, marriage, commitment, identity as well as some frank sex talk. The whole scene is well-written, lively and well-edited and paced.

There are two other major strong conversation sequences, one a walk through the town, the other in a tourist hotel where they have been given a holiday night. These are the two very personal discussions between Jesse and Celine, taking up all the issues so far with quite some passion, even to the point where they could break up. They analyse each other's character, can be hard-hitting on faults and irritations (especially Celine). While there is some reconciliation, the arguments they engage in probably throw quite a bit of light on the tensions in marriages.

Bittersweet is definitely a word for Richard Linklater's conclusion to his trilogy.

CAMILLE CLAUDEL 1915

France, 2013, 97 minutes, Colour.
Juliette Binoche, Jean- Luc Vincent.
Directed by Bruno Dumont.
Competition.

An austere film, a bleak film, a sad film.

In her earlier life, Camille Claudel had been a talented sculptor and had been the mistress of sculptor, Auguste Rodin (brought to life in Bruno Nuytten's 1988 film, *Camille Claudel*, with Isabelle Adjani as Camille and Gerard Depardieu as Rodin). This film, by stark contrast, takes place over three or four days in 1915 in a mental institution near Avignon where Camille had been placed by her family and where she was to live until 1943, dying at the age of 79.

Juliette Binoche gives a tour-de-force performance as the 51 year old Camille. She is a woman of some exterior calm but rage within. She has become paranoid, fearing that she was being poisoned and having permission to cook her own food. While she has moments of kindness towards fellow-inmates, she has a haughty and superior attitude towards most people.

If writer-director, Bruno Dumont, wanted to intern us with Camille for the length of the film, he has succeeded. He has also used amateurs for his cast and has also worked with some people from institutions to portray the inmates. This works very well. The feel of the institution and the behaviour of both men and women makes a powerful impact, especially Mme Lukas, eccentric and inarticulate, but with a deep laugh and an attachment to Camille. There is an entertaining sequence with rehearsals of a short play about Don Juan which makes Camille laugh and then, desperately cry.

Camille is seen cooking, going to her room, being bathed, praying in the chapel, but often just sitting, angry, bored, resenting the people who took her studio and implements from her, and suspecting Rodin being behind her misfortune. The first hour of the film takes us through two days only.

Two bright spots. One is a walk in bright sunlight (not much light otherwise) with a group to the top of a mountain. The other is a visit from her brother, the celebrated writer, Paul Claudel. But, before he sees his sister, there is a substantial section on his conversion experience, his deep Christianity and faith, his devotion. There are scenes with him by himself, quoting and writing excerpts on faith. He walks with a chaplain explaining his religious thinking and fervour.

One should say, it is very French, rather philosophical, some theology, a rather cerebral expression of belief and action. His reflections appeal more to the mind than the heart. And this is true in his short time with his sister. He sums her up as arrogant with a persecution fixation. He agrees with his mother and sister that she should be in the institution whereas her doctor says she is ready to live by herself.

After a long close-up on Juliette Binoche's face, we are given the information that she remained where she was for almost thirty years more.

Bruno Dumont has made some strong, even hard, films (L' Humanite, Flandres) but he has made an insightful, sad portrait of Camille Claudel and had the courage, in these secular times, to include such explicit language of faith and Christianity.

THE CROODS

US, 2013, 90 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: Nicolas Cage, Emma Stone, Catherine Keener, Ryan Reynolds, Cloris Leachman.

Directed by Kirk De Micco, Chris Sanders.

Out of Competition.

What an entertaining film!

Anyone with half a funnybone should find the film amusing – and, with a complete funnybone, hilarious.

In one sense, it is a variation on the Ice Ages stories. However, it stands on its own as a story of cavemen and cavewomen and the survival of a family called The Croods. After the introduction to the family and their rules for safety, hiding in a dark cave until they venture out for food, relying on and ruled by fear, there is a marvelously active sequence where they all try to find and take an egg for breakfast. It is extraordinarily fast-paced, engaging and funny. Once we are on our way, it keeps getting better.

The voiceover narrative comes from Eep (Emma Stone). She is a rebellious red-headed teenager who is curious (something the rules forbid) and willing to take risks (also forbidden). In fact, Grug, the archetypal caveman, relying on brawns but no brain, repeats his favourite word again and again, No! He is voiced by Nicolas Cage, full of bluster, one of Cage's best performances. Mother is Catherine Keener and Cloris Leachman revels in her role as Gran, Grug's obstreperous mother-in-law. There is a largish dumb son, Thunk, and a baby with a ferocious mouth and teeth, Sandy.

With cave people, there is lots of cave behaviour, plenty of slapstick that would make the Three Stooges envious. Woe betide all those prehistoric animals and birds that get in the way!

Come to think of it, woe betide the family when they get in the animals' and birds' way.

One night Eep sees a light and ventures out only to find an agreeable boy, Guy and his comically sweet pet, Belt. Guy has fire. Family crisis. Worse when Guy warns them that the end of the world as they know it is about to happen.

What follows is an entertaining journey to avoid all the cataclysms (and there are plenty), the family gradually accepting Guy's ideas and leadership, leaving Grug frustrated and angry. But, no unexpected spoiling here, the family survives the crisis, Eep is in love, and Grug is not only heroic, he produces a few ideas!

The screenplay is very witty, amusing comparisons between the stone age and the present – and two wonderful jokes about stone age methods of taking pictures. And it has plenty of ideas about nature, survival – and the meaning of life.

To be seen again!

DARK BLOOD

US, 1993/2012, 86 minutes, Colour.

River Phoenix, Judy Davis, Jonathan Pryce, Karen Black.

Directed by George Sluizer

Out of Competition.

Movie buffs have been waiting for 20 years to see this film. And it is the film by Dutch director, George Sluizer (both versions of *The Vanishing*), where River Phoenix died two weeks before the end of filming. It became of the property of producers and bankers until the director himself decided to try to rescue the footage and with financial contributions, especially from the Dutch government, he has produced a version of his film.

Fortunately, he filmed the scene at the end, otherwise the film could not have been rescued. It would seem that all of Jonathan Pryce's scenes were filmed and most of those of Judy Davis. There are several scenes missing that involve River Phoenix, although there are some visuals with the director himself speaking the voiceover lines. Otherwise, there are several freeze-frames with the director describing the unfilmed action. So now *Dark Blood* exists as a film.

It is not a particularly outstanding film. River Phoenix, getting older, gives a rather sullen performance. *Dark blood*, he explains, is the stream of depression in the bloodstream. He is part Hopi Indian, living alone, with a strange cave house built because he believes the world will end soon. It is full of Hopi art and traditions. Since it is River Phoenix's last performance, this is all of cinema history interest.

And the location is New Mexico, the desert, the mesas, the canyons. It opens with some Hopi ruins with Harry and Buffy, married film stars with two children in Los Angeles, prone to needling each other and arguing, are passing by. Their car breaks down and they stay in a dilapidated motel, managed by Karen

Black, who fills in some background: the deserted town is near Los Alamos. Crowds of tourists used to come for the atomic bomb tests. Once they stopped, the town died. And there is the danger of contamination which is a key element later in the film.

Unable to take advice, Harry sets out again to confirm his acceptance of a role in a new film. The car breaks down - again. In the middle of nowhere. Stranded, seemingly hopelessly, they argue. But Buffy sees a light and walks to the isolated home of Boy (Phoenix).

What follows is discord. Harry's car is taken for fixing but he wants to leave at once, trying to persuade Boy to drive him. Boy delays, shows his attraction and desire for Buffy, takes Harry hunting and loses him for a while. As Harry gets more agitated and jealous, he begins to walk to the town but has to be rescued by Boy. Later the couple escape and have to be rescued again because they have taken refuge in a contaminated building ruin. The film shows the arrogance of people like Harry, arrogance and presumptuousness. While Buffy, under the skin, is an ordinary woman. Boy is a complex mixture. Judy Davis is in good form as is Jonathan Pryce.

A cinema oddity and renewed relic.

ELLE S'EN VA/ ON HER WAY

France, 2013, 116 minutes, Colour.
Catherine Deneuve, Nemo Schiffman, Mylene Demongeot, Camille,
Directed by Emmanuelle Bercot.
Competition.

We are on familiar French ground with this bittersweet domestic comedy – exceedingly familiar ground. It is one of those quite well-made stories of past mistakes, botched relationships, mutual hurts and possibilities for reconciliation. If that is an attractive recipe, then this one is much of a muchness with all the other similar films.

The main attraction is Catherine Deneuve as Bettie, almost 70, but still a picture of glamour, despite some heaviness in her figure – one can say this in a review because characters actually refer to it, no, poke some fun at it. And she is grandma.

She now runs a restaurant which has fallen on hard times. She is a widow. She belongs to that generation where fidelity didn't seem a requirement for marriage. She has just been ignored and abandoned by an old lover. She lives with her mother who is urging her to go for a calendar shoot with all the Miss Regions of France of 1969 where she was Miss Brittany. She goes off for a drive – and there are consequences when her estranged daughter asks her to pick up her son and take him to stay with his other grandfather.

He is a spoiled brat and is demanding with his unfamiliar grandmother. Despite this they very quickly bond and he decides that she should go to the calendar celebrations. She does, enjoys herself but faints and can't drive the boy further. The grandfather turns up although he is in the middle of municipal elections. And he is surly. However, they travel to his house, clashes and criticisms. Bettie's mother turns up and then her daughter. And what happens? They all join in in one of those French meals seen in every other film. Despite the loss in the election, reconciliations are effected – and, very quickly, a new future for Bettie.

French film-makers keep turning out, churning out, this kind of movie.

AN EPISODE IN THE LIFE OF AN IRON PICKER

Bosnia, 2013, 75 minutes, Colour.
Senada Alimanovic, Nazif Mujic.
Directed by Danis Tanovic.
Competition.

Danis Tanovic has made fine films like the Oscar-winning *No Man's Land*, his take on war in the Balkans and his version of Kieslowski's screenplay, *Hell*.

This is a brief, almost documentary-like tale of a Bosnian iron-picker, a collector of scrap metal. It suggests a cross between the realism of Ken Loach and his social concern and Mike Leigh and his intense films about families.

It is one of those attention-to-specific-detail films, mother cooking, small daughters watching TV and squabbling, father sawing and chopping firewood, the demolition of a car for scrap, driving it to sales. We are immersed in the lives of very ordinary and poor people.

The poverty is seen most drastically when the wife has had a miscarriage and is turned away from hospital because the family has no insurance. Authorities' are letter-of-law and hard-hearted. Eventually, getting some help with the false document, the wife has the needed surgery. The husband scours snow-covered tips for more metal. Their power is cut off. The lives of the poor.

A grim slice of life with a little happiness to finish.

FRANCES HA

US, 2013, 86 minutes, Black and white.
Greta Gerwig, Mickey Sumner.
Directed by Noah Baumbach
Panorama.

Greta Gerwig, who co-wrote the screenplay with Noah Baumbach, (*The Squid and the Whale*). Greenberg), is Frances Halliday. It is at the end, when Frances finally puts her name in the slot for her new apartment, it is too small and she bends it: Frances Ha.

This is a brief and generally lively portrait of a young woman who has not found her place in life. At college, she makes a best friend, her other half, Sophie. They talk intimately, share everything. But it cannot last, and Sophie moves apartment, becomes engaged and moves to Tokyo. Meanwhile, Frances bumbles about, wanting to join a dance company, making faux pas galore, rushing off to a futile weekend in Paris. Basically, she is a nice person but just needs the right encouragement to settle down.

Greta Gerwig (*Greenberg*, *Damsels in Distress*, *To Rome with Love*) makes the character of Frances her own.

GLORIA

Chile, 2013, 105 minutes, Colour.
Pauline Garcia, Sergio Hernandez.
Directed by Sebastian Lelio.
Competition.

Chilean actress, Pauline Garcia, gives one of those striking performances, at times exuberant, at times doleful, that catches the eye and attention of jury members at international festivals.

She is Gloria.

By the finale, when the familiar song is belted out in all its energy and we read the lyrics of the song, we realise that this was, in all probability, the starting-off point for writer-director, Sebastien, to shape this portrait of Gloria.

We first see her at the dance, aloof, then merging herself amongst the middle-aged, and older, dancers. She catches the eye of an old acquaintance. Yes, Gloria is on the lookout for someone, for love, for companionship. Long-divorced, she is in contact with her son, her baby grandson and her daughter who is about to marry a Swede.

Gloria works in an office, has a nice apartment, with an irritating furless cat intruding, takes care of herself, sings happily while driving, dresses well, is comfortable. Then she meets Rodolfo, himself divorced with two daughters he supports as well as his ex-wife. He owns a theme park and Gloria enjoys a bungee jump. Gloria and Rodolfo click.

Or do they? Or is it just Gloria? The crisis occurs when she takes Rodolfo to her son's birthday dinner, arranged by the wife of her ex-husband. Everyone is there, a time of memories, joyful, rueful and Rodolfo feels excluded. Gloria is deeply hurt by his behavior. After shunning him, she tries again. She shows her mistrust of him with the paint ball gun which is a feature of his theme park.

Gloria could have given in, taken refuge in drink, pot, self-pity. But... Then her song, Gloria, comes on, full of vitality. That will be the next chapter of her life.

GOLD

Germany, 2013, 112 minutes, Colour.
Nina Hoss, Marko Mandic.
Directed by Thomas Arslan.
Competition.

Years ago, there was a 1950s Cinemascope western, *The Way to the Gold*. Not everybody got to the gold. A lesson there about motives, greed, dangers, treasury, and for what?

This is a lavishly-made German production, filmed on location in British Columbia, taking advantage of spectacular scenery and dangerous terrain. It is set in the summer of 1898, two years after discoveries of gold in the Klondike. This is a journey saga, a long trek, 1500 km to Dawson.

A motley group of Germans from the United States answer an advertisement for a guided journey to the gold. As they travel (and it also seems a long journey for the audience), they have some of the expected mishaps, a destroyed wagon wheel, a fall from a horse and an injury. But, the further they go, the more alien the landscapes, although passing Indians show them the way for cash, the atmosphere affects them all. It is a slowly diminishing group that dares to go on from the relative security of the town of Hazleton.

Apart from the experience of the journey, it is the characters that are of the most interest. At the centre is a very dignified German woman, popular actress, Nina Hoss,. There is an arrogant leader, tall hat, coat and cravat, seemingly invincible but doomed to disaster. A New York journalist who wants to photograph and record the journey for his paper accompanies the group, and there is a father of four wanting a better life for his family, a married couple who have sold their restaurant and who are the expedition cooks, and a trader and packer with a past.

In retrospect, the plot and the characters are familiar but, with the locations and the drama, the film is often quite striking.

The film handles language questions very well, English for English-speaking characters and responses to them, German for the Germans speaking among themselves. This gives an authentic feel to the film.

THE GRANDMASTER

China, 2012, 130 minutes, Colour.

Tony Leung, Zhang Zhi Yi, Zhang Jin.

Directed by Wong Kar Wai.

Opening Film.

A very ambitious film, a long time in pre-production, something of a labour of love for director, Wong Kar Wai. He made some action and historical films in the past but moved for a decade into more romantic, melodramatic films like *In the Mood for Love*. Now he is back in action.

Or, rather, he is back in action, but he is also back in romance, and in reflection, even contemplation, as he takes his audience into the traditions of martial arts.

This happens almost immediately, with striking music and chords, a painter's palette and then an introduction to one grandmaster, Ip Man, in Foshan, 1936, and a wonderfully choreographed arts battle as Ip Man takes on a gang of thugs, all filmed in the rain. Martial Arts fans will know that Ip Man was something of a legend, especially in Hong Kong and was the guide for Bruce Lee (who is quoted at the end). But, this film offers a portrait of Ip Man (with the considerable presence of Tony Leung, star of several of Wong Kar Wai's films). For those who want more information, there are two Ip Man films with Donnie Yen.

We are also introduced to another grandmaster who is about to retire, who is looking for a successor and who wants to preserve his techniques secret as a legacy for his family. Ip Man is successful, beating another contender Ma San (Chen) who is narcissistic and later accepts a post with the puppet-government serving the Japanese Occupation.

The other central character in the film is Gong Er, the daughter of the retiring master, who has learned the arts and is able to best Ip Man in contest.

However, Foshan is put under martial law. Ip Man loses his wealth as well as his wife and two daughters. He wanders the country during the war and finds himself in Hong Kong in the late 1940s.

Gong Er trains as a doctor but to preserve her father's legacy, she foregoes marriage and sets up a clinic. She too moves to Hong Kong. As does Ma San who has confronted her father, betraying him.

Chronologically, the film meanders somewhat in time, focusing on one character, losing the others and then returning. There is a dramatic ending which brings all three together for a final contest.

While the film is not great storytelling, it is most impressive as a spectacle, powerful cinematography, vistas, close-ups, angles...

But it is with the Martial Arts that the film excels. There is dramatic choreography and superb editing. Indications are given of the range of moves, of the different traditions from different parts of China, and the control and concentration in the true exercise of the arts rather than just bouts of violence.

An unusual Chinese mixture.

HARMONY LESSONS

Georgia, 2013, 110 minutes. Colour.
Timur Aldarbekov, Aslan Anabayev.
Directed by Emir Balgazin.
Competition.

Stalin came from Georgia. Looking at this very grim film with a sadistic streak and although it is the 21st century, it is not difficult to see in the bullying, school rackets and power struggles, victimisation and police torture that the Soviet days were not all that long ago.

Sensitive audiences probably need a warning that, after the humorous sheep chase at the beginning, we are shown a teenager and his grandmother slaughtering, bloodletting, skinning, eviscerating and chopping up the sheep. This does have some relevance to the plot but some audiences might find the close-ups too much.

This is the story of Arsan, a country boy at high school. Some scenes at home, especially his somewhat obsessively washing and daily clothes changing, are included. Arsan is also a loner, quite introspective.

On the one hand, school seems normal enough, especially science and biology classes and laboratory experiments. Students also seem ordinary enough, except for the principled girl who insists on the head scarf instead of a uniform because of her Muslim beliefs.

There is a long early sequence where the boys undergo a rather personal and bizarre sexual

examination at the school, especially a remedy for erections. Here we meet joker, Bolat, who becomes more sinister as the film progresses.

On the other hand, there is an organized protection rackets running in the school with students making complaints and approaches to Bolat, rather like a junior Don Corleone. But the senior students are also controlling the rackets. The staff seem to know but do nothing until too late.

A boy from the city becomes friendly with Arsan but is bashed by Bolat and by the seniors. His goal is to go to the city, to be content in Happyton, wonderful for him but just a glorified games arcade.

Then there is a death, a murder. We do not see it but guess what happened. Evidence makes his friend and Arsan suspects. Incredibly, they are arrested, put in a cell, subjected to really brutal torture.

The rest is up to the audience, trying to get into the mind of Arsan who has great concern for the school victims of the bullies but who broods about the bullies.

One hopes this story, especially the treatment of the boys and the torture, is particular to Georgia rather than universal.

IN THE NAME OF.../ W IMIE...

Poland, 2013, 96 minutes, Colour.
Andrzej Chyra, Lukasz Simlat.
Directed by Malgoska Szumowska.
Competition.

The title itself introduces religious and Catholic themes of faith. It is the story of a priest, vocation, commitment, ministry, struggles, crisis, decisions.

This time the priest, Adam, is homosexual in orientation. The notes for the 2013 Berlinale catalog refers to this 'still taboo' topic. The writers of these notes must have been living in a movie cocoon world, not reading papers, listening to radio or watching television reports, or aware of open discussions (and within the Church) on this topic for years.

In fact, the Antonia Bird/ Jimmy McGovern? film, Priest, screened in the Berlinale Panorama section eighteen years earlier, in 1995. Not new. Not taboo.

The celibacy discussion needs to continue, of course. Significantly, the final scene here is set in a seminary, seminarians in cassocks, walking and talking in the grounds. One seminarian (in the present, or a flashback to Adam's seminary days), stares away from the group... towards another seminarian? The question is whether the priesthood is a graced call and can be lived with struggle and urges sublimated and needs profound discernment information years, before commitment. Priesthood is not an escape from facing any problems of sexuality.

Adam (a persuasive performance from Andrzej Chyra) is an interesting priest from the beginning of the film. In a heartfelt sermon he tells his congregation that he was 21, not practising his faith, when he had a deep experience of his dead father's presence and that he

discovered a 'spot' in his soul for God. Rugged, a constant jogger (he says running is prayer), he works with a group of disturbed youth, labouring with them, refereeing sport, swimming, meals, with the assistance of his friend, Michael, whose bored wife comes on to Adam. He is Adam. She is Eve, the temptress.

The director, female, Malgoska Szumowska, includes a great deal of potentially homoerotic scenes of the young men, shirtless at work, at soccer, swimming etc. This prepares the audience for some homoerotic activity by the young men as well as a focus on a neighbour, a young man, Lukasz, who is devoted to Adam and defends him.

The priest struggles, lonely nights, masturbation, drinking. A desperate Skype call to his sister in Toronto, pouring out his desolation, his sexual needs, even someone to hug, is a very moving scene.

The homosexual orientation of Adam is suggested, It is only in the last forty minutes that it is made clear. Adam is reported by Michael to the bishop (a very old fashioned scene and episcopal manner). Adam has been transferred several times but the bishop says he does not want to sweep any dirt under the carpet. However, he does transfer Adam. Past incidents and the suicide of a young man, seeming to tell against him, had nothing actually to do with Adam, as the audience knows. However, it does bring matters to a head. He is good at priestly ministry but that is not enough.

Celibacy and the struggle have been a constant problem for priests, heterosexual or homosexual, since the beginning of the exodus of clergy and religious in the late 1960s.

As noted, the film, Priest raised questions and debates in 1995. It would seem that the issue still needs some exploration, especially in countries of Central Europe.

A LONG AND HAPPY LIFE

Russia, 2013, 77 minutes, Colour.
Alexander Yatsenko.
Directed by Boris Khlebnikov.
Competition.

For serfs working on the land in the time of the Tsars, life was very hard. Despite the happy faces in cinema propaganda of the 1920s and 1930s, life for Soviet Union citizens working on the land, was hard. Now, in the Putin era, the ironic implications of the title of this film, A Long and Happy Life, we have to ask whether life on the land is better or is it worse.

Sasha seems an enterprising young man, has a number of people working under him for the betterment of a country area. But, the government wants the land back and is paying off the owners, like Sasha. He resists but the powers that be make it clear that this is the future. His workers don't agree and put up opposing views which makes Sasha backtrack. Officials don't take this kindly. His girlfriend who works in the office wants to get out and move into town. She is dismayed at the backtrack.

This is a short film, 74 minutes, so we spend some time in seeing Sasha' new enterprise – which does not work either. In the end, the authorities come for him. He resists. They don't –

and officialdom will have to deal with some violence and mayhem.

Not a cheery film. Gloom for the workers is still a reality in Russia.

THE LOOK OF LOVE

UK, 2013,

Steve Gogan, Anna Friel, Imogen Poots, Tamsin Edgerton.

Directed by Michael Winterbottom.

Panorama

Yes, the Burt Bacharach- Hal David song is sung several times, but that is the closest we get to real looks of love. Perhaps, that is a bit unfair to London sex entrepreneur, Paul Raymond, of the landmark Soho sign, Raymond Revue Bar. He does show love for his daughter, Debbie (Imogen Poots), but still allows her to indulge in his philosophy of life and aids her in her cocaine addiction.

Why a film about Geoffrey Quinn, a Liverpool boy who arrived in London from Liverpool with five shillings in his pocket and who became Paul Raymond and who was named the richest man in England in 1992. He died in 2008. Is it the sex? Is it the money? Is it both?

This film, directed by the talented Michael Winterbottom, is the film equivalent of one of those feature articles in the glossy weekend magazine of a prominent newspaper. Read it on a long Saturday or Sunday because it is there and, then, on to next week's touch-of-scandal special feature.

Paul Raymond. A less charitable person would call him a 'sleazebag'. His ogling sex drive combined with shrewd business sense and reading what the public (well, a sector of the public), wanted, meant that he moved into Burlesque with immobile nudity in the later 1950s, to girlie shows and theatrical extravaganzas in the 1960s, to publishing Men only in the 1970s, declaring that it was not pornography but, on the evidence of photo-shops and pictures here, he was either self-deceiving, had his tongue in his cheek, or was simply lying.

The film traces his personal life, a hail-fellow-well-met type but dead set against losing money. His wife, Jean, Anna Friel, was his choreographer. Then two children, a country mansion. But Paul Raymond had a roving eye and a hands-on (that sounds vulgar, but it is accurate!), approach to the girls in his clubs. He ditches Jean and takes up with glamorous stripper, Amber (Tamsin Edgerton), who becomes the guest columnist, Fiona Richmond, of Men Only. After some years, she can't put up with him and leaves.

Meanwhile his daughter wants to follow in her father's footsteps. She wants to be a singer, then London producer, but lacks real talent. So, over the decades, Paul Raymond builds up his empire, favours the press in his interviews, loses some court cases, is accused of running prostitution in his clubs. When Debbie impulsively marries Jonathan and his hostile son, Howard, turns up from America with his mother for the wedding, Paul takes the opportunity for a lascivious cover and photo-story for Men Only. It is that kind of film.

When Raymond died, he left his vast billions to Debbie's two daughters and, as the end, credits say, a smaller inheritance to Howard of 78,000,000 pounds. Nothing to his oldest son whom he knew little about and who does visit him during the film.

The main humanity in the film comes from Steve Coogan's performance and personable char, as Paul Raymond and that is in his relationship with his daughter and his grief at her overdose death.

Historically speaking and pop-culturally in speaking, he was part of London for half a century. But he would rank low in the list of those who really contributed to London.

LOVELACE

US, 2013, 93 minutes, Colour.

Amanda Seyfried, Peter Sarsgaard, Sharon Stone, Chris Noth, Hank Azariah.

Directed by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman.

Panorama.

Much more to this film than might have been first thought. And it is a film that needs to be seen right until the end.

For those who remember the seventies, there will be a curiosity to learn something about Linda Lovelace, the star of the multi-million dollar box-office porn movie, Deep Throat. For those who don't remember it, the film will offer some insight into the public image and the private reality of the young Florida woman who was persuaded to perform in the film.

Amanda Seyfried is a long way from Cosette and Mamma Mia's daughter as Linda Lovelace. She gives a very good performance. Peter Sarsgaard is also very convincing as her charming then brutish husband. The film-makers have persuaded quite a number of Hollywood character actors to play supporting roles, the surprising one being an unrecognisable Sharon Stone as Linda's mother. James Franco is Hugh Hefner. Hank Azariah is the director, Gerard Damiano. Chris Noth has a significant role as an organized crime producer of Deep Throat.

By halfway through the film when Linda takes a bow at Hugh Hefner's private screening of the film, we have an impression of a rather naïve young woman, susceptible to her mother's strict Catholic injunctions about a wife obeying her husband, a woman who is cautiously fun-loving at first, but then under the sway of her irresponsible husband who persuades her to be in the film and makes his pitch to the company which is trying to bring some 'art' into the pornography industry.

There is a lot of smooth and double talk about art and the movies, about what audiences want and about sex. Linda seems swept up in the talk, doing what Chuck wants and enjoying the popularity.

And then there is the other half of the film.

Linda is taking a polygraph test since her publishers want to know whether what she has written in Ordeal is fact or fiction. Now we see the flashbacks. Her mother is not quite the dragon lady of the first half, though not prone to express emotions. Chuck is definitely the exploitative monster. He dominates his wife, even raising money by prostituting her. He pressures her into making the film. He is particularly violent and abusive after the Hefner party. This is the picture of the naïve young woman who cannot get out of the clutches of her

husband.

Perhaps the truth is a mixture of both.

Lovelace is certainly no endorser of pornography. It shows the business side of the industry and its successes commercially, but, as the ageing star (Debi Mazar) tells Linda, as you grow older you need to have developed other skills, otherwise...

The book is published. Linda is married and has a son. The epilogue reminds us that Linda Marchiani (her married name) campaigned against pornography and domestic violence for 20 years before her untimely death at 53 as a result of injuries that she suffered in a car accident. She regretfully notes at one stage that she spent 17 days on the film but that this was what she was remembered for.

MALADIES

US, 2013, 90 minutes, Colour.

James Franco, Catherine Keener, Fallon Goodson, David Strathairn, Alan Cumming.

Directed by Carter.

Panorama.

A film of eccentricity, disturbance, mental illness, mental creativity, maladies. When David Strathairn asks for a six-letter word for his crossword puzzle, 'affliction', James Franco says, 'malady'.

This film was written and directed by Carter, who also provided art-work and appears briefly as one of the police at the end of the film.

'Thoughtful' is another word that pervades the film. 'Thoughtful' in terms of 'sensitivity', a word that also recurs. But, it is also a 'full of thoughts'. This film certainly is full of thoughts, existential thoughts, with the chapter headings and questions about thoughts, feelings, meanings and personal identity. There is also a voiceover with comments but which asks a lot of questions, one of the voices that James (James Franco), hears and answers. Togetherness and isolation are also important. The film introduces Delmar, (a finally sensitive David Strathairn), and James, the former soap-opera star, (plenty of glimpses of the soap-opera), now fired and living with this thoughtfulness and trying to write. He lives on beachfront New York with his fey sister Patricia, (Fallon Goodson), and artist Catherine (Catherine Keener always strong and dependable). They form a little community, united in friendship and in art, with the next-door neighbor, Delmar.

James Franco has become a versatile screen presence and is at the core of this portrait of maladies. He reveals the dilemmas of madness, even to wanting to learn and write in Braille after meeting a nice blind lady reading on a park bench. But, ultimately, it is too much for him and dying in his imagination, he then dies in reality.

Catherine is much tougher, her hobby is dressing as a man as she goes out. In the diner she is attacked by a very prim man (Alan Cumming) who voices the bigotry of not understanding.

At the beginning of the film, Catherine and Patricia are watching extensive footage of Jim

Jones and the mass suicide at Jonestown. The setting is late 1978 and audiences are invited to reflect on what this event meant, in terms of the person and personality of Jones, his persuasiveness, hundreds of people leaving San Francisco, and dying at his command. The challenge for the audience is to connect the implications of this event with the characters in the film and their behavior.

LA RELIGIEUSE/ THE NUN

France, 2013, 114 minutes, Colour.

Pauline Etienne, Isabelle Huppert, Louise Bourgoïn, Martina Gedeck, Françoise Lebrun.

Directed by Guillaume Nicloux.

Competition.

In recent years there have been far fewer films about nuns. Priests, yes. Nuns, no. Since the Second Vatican Council, the traditional-looking nun and her convent life have changed considerably, especially in English-speaking countries.

The Nun is a French film with a Belgian leading actress, Pauline. And it is based on a novel by Enlightenment author, François Diderot. The setting is the 18th century, 1765, a quarter of a century before the French Revolution, a very different time and ethos, even in religious life.

The director, Guillaume Nicloux, has noted that he has removed the strong anti-clerical attitudes of the author, again a feature of the French Revolution. Diderot is anticlerical in attitude and severely critical of nuns and community life. However, in the film, a bishop with a sense of justice and a sympathetic priest come out of the film very well.

But it is a story about convent life. Suzanne has written her story and had it smuggled out of the convent to a lawyer who is to help her obtain an annulment from her vows for her to be free to leave the convent. A teenager, she had talked about serving God to help her two sisters marry. But, when she is actually placed in a convent and compelled to stay by her parents, a deep sense of dread envelops her.

Throughout the film she lives in two convents under three superiors. The first is a kindly, elderly woman, Françoise Lebrun. She wants to help Suzanne to stay and live as a nun. The other sisters, unlike those in Loudun 100 years earlier and seen in hysteric states in Ken Russell's *The Devils*, seem to accept their vocation or their fate. Suzanne is persuaded to stay, to make commitments. But, at the ceremony for her profession of vows, she refuses. When the superior dies, the victim of a mentally disturbed sister, they care for, the new superior takes over. She is younger, attractive-looking, but a deadly authoritarian and wilful woman (Louise Bourgoïn). She makes life a hell for Suzanne, solitude, confinement, starvation, no washing or sanitation, no confession, no communion, finally forbidding her to pray. It is mentioned that she came from the Paris convent at Port Royale, the convent in the previous century where Mère Angélique ruled with rigid Jansenist intolerance and Blaise Pascal was a resident.

Suzanne steals paper and ink and writes her story – which leads to a strip search and further humiliations and to the nuns despising her. Charity is singularly absent.

This is the time when the bishop appears, briefed by the lawyer who has received Suzanne's story. Justice prevails, the superior is rebuked and stood down. Suzanne is transferred.

All seems sweetness and light in the new convent. However, there are immediate signals that this time the superior has sexual problems, has cast off a jealous nun in Suzanne's favor, devoting herself and her time to Suzanne, then making sexual advances. Suzanne is dismayed, reports the superior and her behavior, but the drama and melodrama is eased and Suzanne is helped by the lawyer to escape. She does find freedom. She is able to face life. The tyrannical superior is played by Louise and the third superior is played by Isabelle Huppert.

Decades ago Monica Baldwin wrote a memoir, *I Leap Over the Wall*, a story of a convent life and the difficulties in getting out. With greater discernment and fairer processes is for dispensations from vows now, this 18th century tale seems old-fashioned, a tale from the severe past. That said, the actresses, the attention to period detail, costumes and décor well re-created mean that the film is very well made and worth some attention.

THE NECESSARY DEATH OF CHARLEY COUNTRYMAN.

US, 2013,

Shia La Beouf, Evan Rachel Wood, Mads Mikkelsen, Til Schweiger, Rupert Grint, Melissa Leo. Narrated by John Hurt.

Directed by Fredrik Bond.

Competition.

For Shia La Beouf fans, this is no Transformers movie. Rather, it is an arthouse portrait of an aimless young man who gets caught up in a fantasy world on the occasion of the death of his mother (Melissa Leo) who urges him to venture out to Bucharest to see what happens to him. Bucharest? Everybody presumes she meant Budapest, but off he goes to Romania in a story that will not do Romanian tourism much good. So, this is Bucharest!

Actually, the film starts at the end with a bloodied Charley Countryman hanging upside down, bloodied, and about to be shot by the newly discovered love of his life, Gabi (Evan Rachel Wood) at the behest of her loathsome criminal husband, Nigel (Mads Mikkelsen) and his also loathsome club owner friend (Til Schweiger). John Hurt begins to intone a narrative, 'Ladies and Gentlemen...' and continues with his distinctive voice, higher vocabulary and existential reflections, especially about death and love.

We are not into any ordinary film here, though when you take away the fantasy elements, the plot is rather familiar. Young man encounters a friendly passenger on the plane who dies and asks the young man to give a gift to his daughter. It has to be said the Romanian airport authorities and the police have not been trained in sympathy, let alone empathy. Charley finds the girl, becomes infatuated, finds she plays cello in an orchestra, that Nigel is her no-good husband. In the meantime, he goes to a fairly squalid hostel where he meets some naively stupid young Brits (including post Harry Potter, Rupert Grint) who take him to a club where he gets into more trouble. In fact, it is trouble, trouble, trouble – and some beatings, and some double messages from Gabi, until we are back to the beginning and John Hurt is telling us, ladies and gentlemen, about death and love's capacity for reviving us. (And, as she appears to Charley and commends him on his adventure and his coming alive, she admits she meant Budapest, always gets them mixed up.)

That is the tone of the film. Nigel, towards the end, reminds Charley that he is in Limbo. Not

theologically apt, he probably meant Purgatory.

If this all sounds interesting, it may be worth an existential try. If not, Bucharest is not the place for you.

NIGHT TRAIN TO LISBON

Germany, 2013, 116 minutes, Colour.

Jeremy Irons, Martina Geddeck, Jack Huston, Melanie Laurent, Tom Courtenay, August Diehl, Bruno Ganz, Lena Olin, Charlotte Rampling, Christopher Lee.

Directed by Bille August.

Out of Competition.

Based on a novel by Pascale..., this film has two time levels. While it starts on a bridge and in a classroom in Bern, after the trip on the night train, most of the action takes place in Portugal, in the present and in the early 1970s during the dictatorship of Salazar and the revolution against his regime.

The present. Teacher Jeremy Irons saves a woman from jumping off the Bern bridge. When she runs from his classroom, she leaves her coat and, in a pocket, a book by a Portuguese doctor/philosopher which intrigues him. The bookseller tells him the girl had a ticket for Lisbon. Impulsively, something he never does, he boards the train. After settling into a hotel in Lisbon, he begins his search for the author and learns about the 1970s resistance. He finds the author's repressed sister, Adriana (Charlotte Rampling) who had collected her brother's notes and published them, then learns that Amadeu, the brother has been dead for decades. His search takes him to a priest who taught him and buried him (Christopher Lee). After being knocked down by a cyclist, he needs new glasses. The friendly optometrist, Mariana (Martina Gedeck) takes him to her uncle in a retirement home, Joao (Tom Courtenay), a close friend and ally of Amadeu (Jack Huston). Eventually, he finds Jorge, Amadeu's closest friend (Bruno Ganz) and gradually puts the pieces together.

The past. Schoolfriends, Amadeu and Jorge, the former's conservative judge father and Adriana. We see Amadeu making a daring speech at school at Jorge's insistence. This is all shown in flashbacks to meetings, arrests and torture, daring escapes. We also meet Estafania (Melanie Laurent) who keeps addresses and phone numbers in her accurate memory and is a threat to the regime.

The trouble with this kind of production is that it is like the European Union. What emerges is a kind of (sometimes lumpy) Europudding, something like other Bille August films, *The House of the Spirits* and his *Les Misérables* (1998). A German production with a Danish director. Cast from Germany, England, France, Sweden, Portugal and sometimes a hotchpotch of accents, the British affecting a kind of broken English accent. Characters who speak clearly when they are young like Jorge (August Diehl) then becoming heavy accented (Bruno Ganz) or Melanie Laurent becoming Lena Olin.

Still, the plot is interesting. Lisbon looks beautiful and the film does offer the opportunity to learn something about the mid-20th century history of Portuguese politics.

NOBODY'S DAUGHTER HAEWON

Korea, 2013, 90 minutes. Colour.
Directed by Hong Sangsoo.
Competition.

Hong Sangsoo is something of a fashionable director, especially in film festivals in Europe.

His plots tend to be variations on a theme: precarious relationships and eccentric characters, somewhat sexist in *Woman is the Future of Man* (could there be a more sexist title!), more balanced in *Hahaha*.

We are introduced to a highly-strung young woman who is to meet her mother who is moving to Canada. She falls asleep, which makes us wonder how much is her life asleep and dreaming or real. She meets a tourist who asks her directions and realizes that it is Jane Birkin. They have a gushy encounter. Then Haewon wakes up. The rest of the film involves a lot of talking with friends and a fair amount of drinking. A professor turns up to a gathering and it emerges that Haewon has had a relationship with him. When Haewon is out with other friends, the professor rings to arrange to casually meet her and lament his marriage and to try to rekindle the relationship, etc.

Haewon has her giddy moments as well as her serious ones. It is a light portrait of this young woman.

PARADIES

Austria, 2013, 90 minutes, Colour.
Melanie Lenz, Joseph Lorenz.
Directed by Ulrich Seidl.
Competition.

Austrian writer-director, Ulrich Seidl, is noted for hard, even harsh, dramas that don't draw back on sexuality and violence (*Imports/Exports*).

This film, subtitled *Hoffnung/Hope*, is the third in a trilogy, *Paradise: Faith*, *Paradise: Love*, *Paradise: Hope*. Actually, hope is not particularly in evidence.

Melanie is 13 and lives with her devout mother who enrolls her in a special camp for overweight children. The regimen is very disciplined with lots of exercise (which, by the end of the film does not seem to have made much appreciable difference despite so many scenes of activity). What we see of the others is that they are agreeable enough. Melanie shares a room with three other girls. They chat, they gossip, they giggle, they smoke on the sly, they play spin the bottle.

There are three people on the staff. A vigorous young woman dietician, the tough male trainer and the doctor.

It is the doctor who becomes a focus, especially for Melanie where he makes jokes, plays with her at interviews. She falls for him – and he has been grooming her. He places her and himself in some compromising situations. When Melanie and another girl go out on the town

for a night, drinking, going to a club, dancing, more drinking and being molested by a customer, she has to be rescued by the doctor.

At the end, Melanie does not seem to have learned any lessons. Hope? That she will get over this episode – and that she will lose some weight.

Though serious, the film seems thin and slight.

PARDE/ CLOSED CURTAIN

Iran, 2013, 106 minutes, Colour.
Kamboziya Partovi, Jafar Panahi.
Directed by Jafar Panahi and Kamboziya Partovi.
Competition

Jafar Panahi was a celebrity, one of Iran's leading directors since the 1990s, winner of many festival awards. In recent years, he has become a cause célèbre, forbidden by the Iranian government from making films and restricted to house arrest.

Since then he has made two films which have received overseas distribution. The first was *This is not a Film*, 2011, and was about Panahi himself and how he managed staying within his apartment. The present film is far more ambitious. It is again about making a film, a much more imaginative project than the first, but still about Panahi himself and his situation. However, he is seen to come and go, visiting his comfortable villa by the Caspian Sea. It makes us unsure of his situation with the government and how strict is the nature of his confinement.

The first part of the film is inventive. A man with a dog, a very cute and alert dog, arrives at a villa, settles in, closes all the curtains for privacy, plays with the dog and begins to write. Then there are sounds of police and knocking. A mysterious sister and her brother break in. The writer is bewildered. (The house, by the way, has several posters of Panahi these films.)

Later Panahi himself arrives, acting normally, with a visit from his neighbour, his neighbour's wife bringing a very good meal, labourers in to repair a window. Then the two aspects mix. Panahi is seen briefly filming the writer. There is a fantasy drowning of the girl. And a fantasy of Panahi walking into the sea and then retreating back. The writer and the director seem to be alter egos. Is the girl a muse, perhaps? or just a feminine side of Panahi?

And so, it is over to us, the magic of film, creativity, possible destruction, a certain playfulness and our continued interest in Panahi himself and his fate.

PRINCE AVALANCHE

US, 2013, 94 minutes, Colour.
Paul Rudd, Emile Hirsch.
Directed by David Gordon Green.
Competition

Do you know or have you ever met one of those road workers who put in the posts along the side of the road and paint the yellow lines down the middle? Here is your chance.

It is the aftermath of huge forest fires in Texas in 1987. The next year, along the road, forests and charred tree-trunks, two workers, Alvin and Lance, work all day and camp by themselves at night. If they were heroes of the comics that they like, then combined they would be Prince Alvin and Lance, Prince Avalanche.

The film is an American adaptation of an Icelandic film, *Either Way*, and is basically a two-hander, the interactions between Alvin and Lance. An amiable truckie who enjoys stopping to chat and have a drink and a woman who has lost her home in the fires and spends time, rummaging in the ashes and rubble trying to find her pilot's license and log book are really the only two other people in the film.

Alvin's girlfriend is Lance's sister and Alvin has hired Lance so that he can get some sense and discipline in his untidy life. Alvin is not having too much success as Lance can be quite dumb and is, of course, sex-preoccupied. On the other hand, Alvin is a straight arrow, more introverted, more than a touch obsessive. He works hard, is trying to learn German by tape, finds it difficult to talk (he says he is not a fun guy), and is constantly critical of Lance. When asked by Lance if he were a girl in a beauty pageant, what would be his talent, he answers, the three-jump. When Lance's sister breaks it all off, Alvin is distraught, becomes dysfunctional (with some help from the truckie's alcohol). He fights with Lance, but does come to his senses and apologizes.

Written and directed by David Gordon Green, (*Undertow* and the crass *Your Highness*), the film is humorous, witty with some astute observations. Emile Hirsch is a convincingly awkward as Lance, though he has, ultimately, a good heart. Paul Rudd, shorter hair and with a mustache, rather unrecognizable, offers a very different performance from his recent films and is very good indeed.

PROMISED LAND

US, 2013, 106 minutes, Colour.

Matt Damon, Frances McDormand², John Krasinsky, Rosemarie de Witt, Hal Holbrook.

Directed by Gus Van Sant.

Competition

Perhaps the title should be *Promised Money*. This is an environmental message film, written by Matt Damon and John Krasinsky, who also a star in the film. Matt Damon originally intended to direct. Its seriousness (with comic and humane touches) is obviously project dear to the writers. They asked Gus Van Sant, who had worked with Damon for *Good Will Hunting* and *Gerry* to take on the role of direction.

This is an anti-corporation film. The corporation here is Global Crosspower who are searching for natural gas by fracking. They are giving handouts, and agents visit farms and properties to persuade owners to sell the rights to their land for their hand out and for future profits. The agents are generally welcomed. Some, like the veteran science teacher, played by Hal Holbrook, explain the reasons against. Others are opposed because they value the handing down of properties within families.

Matt Damon is Steve Butler, a man of principles and a persuasive agent with a good pitch. Frances Mc Dormand is Sue, older, a veteran sales expert, with the teenage son at home. We see them do the deals and with charming rapport. They mingle with the locals, especially at the bar, joking with them, drinking, singing.

Suddenly, an environmental activist, John Krasinsky turns up, subverting their processes, talking to everyone, giving a vivid lesson about pollution to school children, with a demonstration, printing and distributing posters and brochures against the corporation. Steve and Sue argue with him. They set up a local fair to promote their cause but it is ruined by rain.

There is a twist at the end which audiences might see coming, reinforcing audience prejudices against the corporation, with their dirty tricks and tactics. This leaves the locals high and dry.

But it does mean that Steve has to rethink his approach, his principles, his future.

The film has something of the same message as Erin Brockovich but Steve Butler is not a campaigner against the corporations. However, with his final speech, we seem to be in the Frank Capra tradition of the ordinary, even little, man and his standing up to authoritarianism, with an optimism about the inherent good in old-fashioned values, old-fashioned American values.

SIDE EFFECTS

US, 2012, 106 minutes, Colour.

Jude Law, Rooney Mara, Catherine Zeta- Jones, Channing Tatum, Ann Dowd.

Directed by Steven Soderbergh.

Competition.

Allegedly, Steven Soderbergh's last film for the screen. He has been a most versatile director in terms of genres and variety of content. This one is an entertainment. It is a psychological crime thriller with some interesting developing twists.

But there is also a campaigning or crusading emphasis, with memories of his plague thriller of 2011, Contagion. The side-effects here (which play a crucial role in the murder), are those of drugs. The early part of the film bombards the audience with so many drug names, specialized artificial names, marketing and promotion of benefits, with little said of side-effects, that we are bamboozled at hearing about them, about frequent prescriptions and the American capacity of pill-popping.

Rooney Mara (Oscar nomination for The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo), is given a very strong role here. It should enhance her career. She has to go through a wide range of emotions and carries it all off convincingly. She is Emily, married to Martin, Channing Tatum (something of a regular in Soderbergh's recent films), who was released from four years jail for insider trading. He is charming. She is depressed and has been having treatment from Doctor Siebert (a controlled Catherine Zeta- Jones), but, after a crash, is in the care of Dr. Jon Banks, Jude Law giving of reliable performance. He treats Emily but finds himself caught up in her case,

subject to slander, hounded by the media and losing marriage, job and reputation.

He is determined to clear his name from blame for his prescriptions and Emily's behavior. Step by step, he does, becoming something of a detective along the way, its all culminating in justice being eventually done.

This review has been careful not to reveal the core plot developments. Much more enjoyable and intriguing if you don't know what is going to happen.

VIC AND FLO MEET A BEAR

Canada, 2013, 90 minutes.

Pierette Robitaille, Romane Bohringer, Marc Andre Grondin.

Directed by Denis Conte

Competition.

Who would be the audience for this film? It is not a cheerful film. It is rather nihilistic in outlook, though there is a glimpse of Victoria and Florence, Vic and Flo walking into eternity at the end.

At the opening, a young boy scout is playing the trumpet rather badly. Vic says so. At the end, as she and Flo lie dying, the boy returns, playing better and Vic commends him.

In between we see a story of woman coming out of prison, with a few prison flashbacks, wanting to live with her uncle. He has had a stroke and is immobile. He is being cared for by a sympathetic young man, but Vic wants to take over. The boy's doctor father is none too pleased.

The important thing for Vic is to meet up again with Flo, her lover before she went to prison. The couple re-unite and are seen in a variety of happenstance situations. However, Flo's leg is injured, which hampers matters.

There is a very sympathetic parole officer who is kind and understanding to the two women. There is a council employee who is testing the purity of the local water. She has a black friend who plays the guitar. She is a malicious woman, finally causing all the mischief, calling herself a brute. She's right.

When the two women go for a walk, they are caught in bear traps and that is the end of them.

The two women are not particularly ingratiating characters, well into middle age, with hard lives behind them and, perhaps, some possibilities for a future – which will never come.

If that sounds interesting, it is probably more interesting than what appears, sometimes confusedly, sometimes alienatingly, on the screen.

REVIEWS MARCH 2013

21 AND OVER
BLINDER
BROKEN CITY
GI JOE: RETALIATION
GODDESS
GOOD DAY TO DIE HARD
HANSEL AND GRETEL
HARA-KIRI: DEATH OF A SAMURAI
HOST, The
HYDE PARK ON HUDSON
INCREDIBLE BURT WONDERSTONE, The
IN THE FOG
JACK THE GIANT SLAYER
MAMA
PAPERBOY, The
PERFORMANCE/ A LATE QUARTET
RETURN TO NIM'S ISLAND
UNDERGROUND: THE JULIAN ASSANGE STORY

21 AND OVER

US, 2013, 93 minutes, Colour.
Miles Teller, Skylar Astin, Justin Chon, Sarah Wright.
Directed by Josh and Scott Moore.

Having seen the trailer, I had fairly low expectations – and these were fulfilled. Although, to be fair, after all the extravagant crassness, it does veer towards something of a moral tone and hopes for better behaviour.

They say these days that 75 is the new 65 etc. Does that mean that 21 is the new 11? Well, this film does seem to indicate this. Two friends arrive at a college to celebrate the 21st birthday of their old friend, a Chinese American who is about to have an interview for his studies of medicine (supervised by his father who loathes the two friends).

Well, you guessed it. They take him out and not only does he get ultra-drunk, he behaves in an idiotic, lewd and stupidly crass ways. One of the friends has some sense, the other is an American Yahoo, preoccupied by drink, drink, drink and sex and any other mad behaviour. Actually, Miles Teller is quite a skillful actor and certainly portrays his 'character' accurately. He knows what he is doing in creating this yahoo. (I suppose he has had plenty of practice – he is appearing in a number of similarly themed films including the 2012 film Project, which didn't seem to have any redeeming features.) Poor Justin Chon, he has to spend most of the film being an idiot – humiliating for him.

For someone from Mars visiting this planet, thinking that this was normal human behaviour, they would be extremely puzzled as they watched it. Is this what it is to be human? They

mightn't last until the last ten minutes when some more sense gets into the screenplay.

Does it mean that today's 11 year old boys are going to be like this in ten year's time?

BLINDER

Australia, 2013,
Oliver Ackland, Jack Thompson, Rose Mc Ivor.
Directed by Richard Gray.

Richard Gray's previous film, *Summer Coda*, told a story of a woman returning home from the US to a town in north west Victoria, near Swan Hill. It looked beautiful and captured the atmosphere of the area with a humane story.

This time Gray still stays west of Melbourne but on the Bellarine Peninsula. A man returns from the US again and has to deal with the past. BUT, this is a film about Australian Rules which ought to be of interest to all followers of the code but is certainly for fans west of Geelong. However, given the fierce loyalties to the AFL, the VFL and local clubs and some narrowly parochial attitudes, it might not draw in the audiences. Distribution in Melbourne itself was in only three cinemas and with minimum advertising. I just checked, after a week it has disappeared. What a pity.

For football fans, the film has about five substantial sequences of matches, finals and grand-finals, centering on the Tigers' Club at Torquay. There are practice sessions, club meetings, pep talks. And the main pep is given vigorously by coach, Jack Thompson, going back to his role in *The Club*.

But, the main thing is a human story. There is a party sequence at the opening which is crucial to the plot but it comes too early for us to work out who's who and what actually happens. It does get sorted out eventually, but keeps us wondering whether we missed something.

Tom (Oliver Ackland) is the Torquay star but is poor in discipline and team spirit (still a worry for football and cricket!). Caught up in a scandal (that's the part that is not clear until quite late), he goes to the US for ten years as a coach. When he receives news that the coach has died, he decides to come home for the funeral and to meet the key characters from the past. Into that framework, we have a great number of flashbacks which tell more of Tom's story, including those matches, than might have been expected and presents him in a better light). While the scandal proves to be significant for those involved, it is not nearly as strong as many of the scandalous stories of sports celebrities that we are treated to in media news, articles and radio and TV reports.

It is a matter of immaturity, rash behaviour, publicity, consequences for lives and reputations. The latter part of the film is quite interesting in showing how the main characters deal with it ten years later.

The film is quite watchable, has a good cast, with Jack Thompson leading the way in ra-ra challenges to his players, and the newcomer coaches at the end are unable to match his fire and expertise.

And the title? The film tells us that it is an episode of drunkenness as well as a top game and performance. Both are featured.

BROKEN CITY

US, 2013.

Mark Wahlberg, Russell Crowe, Jeffrey Wright, Catherine Zeta- Jones, Barry Pepper, Kyle Chandler.

Directed by Allen Hughes.

Broken City is a film about urban corruption. This makes the film quite irrelevant, with so much political corruption in so many countries as well as in the administration of significant world cities.

Mark Wahlberg plays, Billy, a police officer who, at the beginning of the film, is standing over a victim who has been shot. A court case follows and he is acquitted, especially because of a lack of evidence. However, he is in good standing with the chief of police (Jeffrey Wright), but he is also being selected for jobs by the mayor (Russell Crowe), who has a hold over him in connection with the evidence of the killing.

The scene having been set, seven years pass. Billy now runs a private detective agency, with an efficient secretary whose main tasks seem to be collecting payment from outstanding indebted clients. Billy has a quiet home life, with a partner, an actress starring in an independent film, and has given up alcohol for five years. What could go wrong?

The answer, of course, is more corruption. When he is employed by the mayor to follow his wife (Catherine Zeta- Jones), he shows his skills in several engaging sequences, but he also uncovers a conspiracy which leads to murder. There is a buildup to the final confrontation between Billy and the mayor. Who has a hold over whom?

Russell Crowe gives a solid performance as the mayor, confident in his power and in his abilities, charming on the surface but continually ruthless. Mark Wahlberg does a variation on his theme of the lower-middle class man with a mission, ambiguous in his background, but with an inherent integrity. Catherine Zeta- Jones is integral to the plot but has comparatively few scenes.

The main part of the action takes place over only a few days, the final days in the campaign for the election of the mayor, the mayor during his utmost to please the public for re-election, even getting the city's budget into the black, a substantial surplus, gained from selling a housing estate in the city. His opponent (Barry Pepper), makes accusations against the mayor, debates him in public, and has to deal with the murder of his campaign manager.

In many ways, the material is familiar, but has an interest because of intrigues, conspiracies, and dramatic confrontations. The film was directed by Allen Hughes, one of the Hughes brothers who directed such films as Dead Presidents and the Jack the Ripper thriller, From Hell.

GI JOE: RETALIATION

US, 2013, 97 minutes, Colour.

Dwayne Johnson, Channing Tatum, Bruce Willis, Jonathan Pryce, D.J. Cotrona, Ray Stevenson, Adrienne Palicki.

Directed by Jon M. Chu.

While the first GI Joe film, despite the explosions, shootouts and mayhem, was something of a guilty pleasure, this one is not so pleasurable and may make you feel guilty!

And, there are only a few of the cast from the original, mainly Channing Tatum. When it was rumoured that he was going to be killed off and fans protested, the company added some extra scenes – and then he is killed off.

The star of this show is Dwayne Johnson who has made quite a movie career after his wrestling life. He is a reliable screen presence, looks tough (his code name is Roadblock) but he can do family and nice (after all, he was in Tooth Fairy with Julie Andrews).

While we see the GI Joes in action in Korea, we see them as the victims of a conspiracy and attacked in Pakistan and being blamed for the death of the Pakistani president. What has happened is that an arch-villain has the technology to disguise himself as the President of the United States and so take over, call a summit for a nuclear-free world and then threaten all the world powers with his own more immediate and devastating weapons (with a destruction of central London to prove it).

But, most of the film is getting the GI Joes back together to take out the false president. Much of a muchness with other such adventures, except a lot more CGI – and explosions. Gung-ho would only be a mild description of the action.

Oh, and they recruit the founder of the GI Joes, Joe himself, something of a cameo for Bruce Willis in Die Hard mode. And they have distinguished British actor, Jonathan Pryce as the good president and the bad president.

It's more or less like The Expendables but with some James Bond megalomaniac type of villains who want to conquer the world.

GODDESS

Australia, 2013.

Laura Michelle Kelly, Ronan Keating, Magda Szubanski, Hugo Johnstone Burt, Dustin Clare, Pia Miranda.

Directed by Mark Lamprell.

Goddess is a 21st century Australian musical. This description should indicate whether an audience would like it, respond well to it, or not. It is definitely a film for those who like colorful comedies, singing and dancing. It is definitely not a film for those who do not warm to musicals at all.

The film has the advantage of a lively performance from Laura Michelle Kelly, star of Mary Poppins on London's West End. She has a charming vitality on screen, in performance, in singing and dancing, not without touches of irony. The film also has so-far, only acting role

for former Boyzone group member and a popular singer all over the English-speaking world, Ronan Keating. His is the supporting role, the husband who is away from home, his particular work being environmental, sending him to Antarctica for whale exploration and recording whale sounds.

One reason for seeing the film could be the performance by Magda Szubanski. She is a long way from Babe or from Sharon visiting Kath and Kim. Here she is the haughty, ultra-haughty advertising executive who instills fear in all her staff. She enjoys playing the grand dame.

Laura Michelle Kelly is Elspeth, wife of James (Keating) and mother of the most obstreperous twins you are likely to see on screen. Her husband gives her a cam-recorder which she places in her kitchen – which leads to her singing to camera, having a patient supermarket friend set up her connection for broadcast, finding she has some fans and eventually getting the call to come from Hobart to Sydney to be the ‘goddess’ in on-line ads for ladylike computers.

There is some satire on the world of advertising and standards, but Elspeth discovers how ambitious she is. But, lots of complications arise, including nannies for the twins, unexpected returns by James, her friends in Hobart watching and seeing more than Elspeth intended on screen...

It's all very light, songs popping up all the time, especially Elspeth at her sink, where she can thing...

The satirical song about CEO bitches does work well and Elspeth plays it as a corporate femme fatale.

Some cinema chains are advertising Girls Night Out with special screenings of films with goody bags and refreshments. Goddess is a Girls Night out flick!

A GOOD DAY TO DIE HARD

US, 2013, 98 minutes, Colour.

Bruce Willis, Jai Courtney, Sebastian Koch.

Directed by John Moore.

It's Die Hard 5 – and a reminder that it is now twenty five years since Bruce Willis had a hit with the original action drama that led to a franchise. While he looks a bit older and has less hair than he used to, Bruce Willis seems much the same. He flares into action whether he really knows what's going on or not. He still has that wry smile and can deliver an ironic line or two when the script offers him one.

Apart from that, this one has a plot which is farthest-fetched, both implausible and, for survival, most improbable.

The setting is Moscow (with the film shot mainly in Hungary) where Bruce's son, John Mc Clane Jr, is in more than a spot of trouble, in gaol and about to go into court. (He is played by Australian, Jai Courtney, a bit of a stolid young man.) Bruce hears about it and is on the next plane to Moscow to rescue his boy whom he has not spoken to for years. (There is a daughter who lovingly bosses her father about.)

But, what Bruce doesn't know, and we do, is that his son is a CIA operative and is in the middle of an operation to rescue a Russian oligarch/scientist from prison where his former friend and now rival-enemy wants him to stay.

Within about ten minutes we have a car chase, through Moscow's main streets, highways and side roads, that must have been a bid for the Guinness Book of Records for the biggest number of cars crashed, smashed and trashed in a twenty minute sequence. While watching in disbelief at the most reckless driving you might see, it seemed umpteen cars were destroyed – but then you lose count.

After a couple of respites, there is a huge twist and a climax with a helicopter on top of a building that is pretty belief-defying as well, more smashes and deaths all round – except for John and John Jr who are now reconciled. Nothing, says Bruce, that a father won't do for his son.

We see quite a bit of Moscow. We see plenty of shooting – and more. We see Bruce, not yet 60, though close, so why can't he do all these stunts. And that is where that 98 minutes went.

HANSEL AND GRETEL: WITCHHUNTERS

Germany/US, 2013.

Jeremy Renner, Gemma Arterton, Famke Janssen, Peter Stormare, Thomas Mann.

Directed by Tommy Wirkola.

A bash-em-up actioner.

There are plenty of weapons, some guns, especially a gatling-like gun, but this is a fists-and-all show. Of course, it is not meant to be taken seriously. It is for audiences who like gore jokes and who like this kind of graphic novel, kind of computer game mentality all-in brawling between humans and witches.

Some films are character-driven. Not this one. Hansel and Gretel, despite the pathos of the prologue when they are left in the forest and are threatened by the wicked witch (before she finishes up in the oven). Actually, Jeremy Renner is a rather stolid Hansel and Gemma Arterton a charmless Gretel.

Some films are plot-driven. Not this one. It is just find the witches, do battle and destroy them.

This one is special effects and action-driven. Not as wide-ranging as the 2011 Red Riding Hood, certainly not as stylish as 2012 Mirror, Mirror or Snow White and the Huntsman.

The Norwegian director, Tommy Wirkola, directed the cult-horror film, Dead Snow, with Nazi zombies in the Arctic. He brings this sensibility to the classic fairy tale.

HARA- KIRI: DEATH OF A SAMURAI

Japan, 2011.

Koji Yakusho, Munetaka Aoki, Naoto Takenake,
Directed by Takashi Miike.

Hara-Kiri: Death of a Samurai has a strong reputation, especially with the career of the director, Takashi Miike and his films like 13 Assassins and his quite different treatment of a samurai story. The film is a remake of the 1962,.

This is rather a stately film, a film about the Samurai traditions and their meaning rather than a display of samurai battles and sword contests. There is something towards the end but, even then, as the hero fights with a bamboo sword, it is something of a parody and a critique.

In fact, the action takes place in the 19th century, 1617-1634, a long period of peace where warriors have little or no place in society, where they have become impoverished with no possibilities of employment.

The film opens with a samurai coming to the local lord to gain permission to kill himself in the official's courtyard. With the focus during the opening credits on past Samurai glory and icons, it is clear that there is a questions about hara-kiri, considered a most worthy suicide, and its place in the honour and glory tradition of Japan. (And its continuing history even to the kamikaze pilots of World War II.)

The official decides to tell the warrior the story of a young Samurai who had previously asked for the same privilege. This occasions a flashback to the young man, his story, his plea for some money for his wife and child and the issue of whether a samurai can bluff authorities for gain or not – and whether he deserves to die.

The older Samurai listens to the story and takes us on a more detailed flashback of the young man's story, his status, his marriage, his sick wife and baby and his desperate plea to the official.

It is here that the Samurai takes his stand, challenging authority and tradition – and some scenes of martial swordsmanship.

This means that the film is more a portrait of characters, interactions, emotions as well as the challenge to authority and tradition.

The film looks beautiful, stately, as noted before. It is a film of shots that last longer than might be expected, asking the audience to reflect on what they see and on what they think.

(It was post-produced in 3D – not very necessary – which means that when it is projected it may be too dark because of the process and the glasses and it is better to watch it in its 2D print, or remove the glasses while watching.)

THE HOST

US, 2013, 122 minutes, Colour.

Saiorse Ronan, William Hurt, Jake Abel, Max Irons, Diane Kruger, Frances Fisher.
Directed by Andrew Niccol.

Quite an interesting science-fiction film, one with more thinking than action. The original novel was written by Stephenie Meyer, much better known as the author of the Twilight novels. She moves from vampire communities to futuristic alien/body-snatching communities. Once again people with significant differences can exist within the ordinary human community. Except that, this time, the aliens want to take over the humans as they have done on other planets.

Earth is a particular challenge, a dark planet with violent, greedy and wasteful people. At the opening of the film, the aliens boast that they have been able to create a perfect society, where nobody does any wrong, honesty is the only policy and hurting others is not part of the ethos.

Actually, this raises some philosophical issues right from the introduction. It concerns everything happening happily in our world where individual freedom has been taken over and nothing wrong can happen. This is akin to those desperate and suffering questions about God and why God does not intervene to make everything go well for us, that people do not harm others, that there be no pain and suffering, especially in illness and death. One of the morals of this story is that people want to be able to live in freedom, without the intervention of the aliens in any 'god-like way', to make mistakes, to love and assert themselves, not to be body- (and soul) snatched.

Whether audiences will contemplate these issues and see the connections with the film's plot, one wonders. But, the foundation for thought is there.

This has been quite a theme for writer-director, Andrew Niccol, over 25 years. Audiences did realise these issues in his screenplay for The Truman Show. It features in the films he has directed, the futuristic Gattaca, the artificial, computer-personality, [SimOne](#), the ruthless arms sales in Lord of War and separated communities in an artificial future in In Time.

At the core of the film is the excellent young actress, Saoirse Ronan. She has the difficult task (which she makes quite credible) of playing Melanie, a strong young woman amongst a remnant of humans who have not been taken over. However, she is captured and an alien soul implanted in her. Melanie's body is the host for the alien. She becomes Wanderer, shortened to Wanda. However, Melanie is still alive within her and speaks to Wanda, confronting her as she gives information about the human remnant from Melanie's memories to the official Seeker, Diane Kruger (interesting casting giving the pursuant and interrogating role to a woman rather than a man). This makes, of course, for drama and for interesting conversations between the two. It becomes a touch ludicrous when the still teenage Melanie becomes jealous of Wanda's expressions of affection which are not Melanie's.

Much of the film takes place in vast caves where a remnant community survive, hiding from the Seekers and shielding their bodies from being given to alien souls. The leader of the community is played by William Hurt, a benign and wise leader. Amongst the community are Melanie's little brother (Chandler Canterbury), Jared (Max Irons) who loved Melanie and Ian (Jake Abel) who is attracted to Wanda. It is interesting to look at how this community survives underground, with giant reflectors on the walls giving sunlight for crops to grow. The young men venture out to steal from the supermarkets (where everything is free and people are nice and sweet). This does lead to some action as the Seeker pursues one of their trucks and there are chases and crashes.

However, this is a personal drama of Melanie and her struggle for autonomy within Wanda, a community drama of polite body snatchers, except for the Seeker who is conflicted and breaks the bounds of violence in her obsessive pursuit.

The Host is serious-minded, has some humour, especially in Melanie's jealousy, but comes down on the side of human fragility and freedom rather than a kind of passive heaven on earth.

HYDE PARK ON HUDSON

UK, 2012, 94 minutes, Colour.

Bill Murray, Laura Linney, Samuel West, Olivia Colman, Olivia Williams.

Directed by Roger Michel.

Three important quotes from the film: 'People pretend not to see what they do see', 'People see what they want to see', 'It was a time of secrets'. More of these later.

On the one hand, it is a pity that this film comes in the wake of *The King's Speech*. It doesn't have the wide scope and human story of that film. On the other hand, the advantage of its following *The King's Speech* is that many audiences may well want to see it because of their interest in the characters of George VI and Queen Elizabeth.

Not that *Hyde Park on Hudson* is principally about them. Their visit to President Franklin D. Roosevelt before the war is the centerpiece of the drama and is well explored. But the film is principally about Roosevelt and his personality, politics and relationships.

Back to the quotations. Some people have been disedified by the information of the celebrated president's relationships with a number of women. Older people who had John F. Kennedy on a pedestal were disedified, even dismayed, to learn something of the truth about his personal life. But, in this film, it is Roosevelt himself who notes that people pretend not to see what they do see, for a variety of reasons, moral, religious, ethical, political, personal. All are in play in this film in which, it should be noted, everything is presented in a very genteel, 1930s way and controlled language, in terms of the women in the president's life and in the references to the Duke and Duchess of Windsor. These observations reinforce the next statement, that some people see only what they want to see. We do expect people in public office to be completely moral and respectable, though the younger generations may have become more disillusioned (or realistic) about the flaws in character of those who have been put on pedestals. No more evident has this been in the ongoing revelations about sexual abuse in society in general and in the priesthood in particular.

These reflections may seem to give the film more depth than it might appear to have, or even that the film might claim. However, looking at it in this light, listening to the very well-written and intelligent screenplay and appreciating the excellent performances, the film has a great deal going for it. And, for those who might not be absorbed in the way just described, it is always interesting and entertaining.

Bill Murray might seem a strange choice for Franklin D. Roosevelt. But, because the film is showing his strengths (a great personal charm and humour as well as shrewd diplomacy, as well as some moments which remind us of his concern for Americans during the Depression

and the New Deal) as well as his flaws and his weaknesses for women (fostered by the personality and other interests of his wife, Eleanor), Murray is a good choice.

The episodes are related by a distant Roosevelt cousin, Daisy, on whose letters, discovered after her death, the screenplay is based. Laura Linney, who can be both tough and delicate on screen, narrates the story and moves from shy recluse caring for her aunt to a fixture in Hyde Park to a love for the president and shocked by his infidelity to her. Olivia Williams does a fine turn as Eleanor, strong-minded, strong-willed, with an ironic sense of humour – the screenplay lifting blame from her for her husband's roving eye. Elizabeth Wilson is the perfect embodiment of the controlling matriarch whose house Hyde Park is.

But, audiences will be fascinated by the portrayal of the king and queen and will accept the move from Colin Firth and Helena Bonham Carter. Samuel West is excellent as Bertie, nervous about the visit and its purpose, irritated by his stutter (he was still working with Lionel Logue at this time), not sure what to make of the Americans, but willing to be agreeable, placating his wife, and finding that he enjoyed Roosevelt's company, it all climaxing in his eating a hot dog at the official picnic and being photographed. Thanking Roosevelt afterwards, he referred to what has now become a significant phrase for American-British interactions, the 'special relationship'.

Olivia Colman brings new insights into the Queen. She is aware of her dignity, not particularly keen on Americans or American ways (she is shocked by the serving of hot dogs), something of a snob. She is also conscious of stepping unexpectedly into the shoes of the Windsors as monarchs. She doesn't really like the formalities and expectations of her. In fact, the protocols, even in the US, seem rather rigid. She sounds, in the film, like her daughter in real life – which reminds us that Queen Elizabeth has been living this kind of life, giving these public performances for sixty years without complaint.

If audiences do not expect another *The King's Speech*, they will find much to enjoy and think about in Hyde Park on the Hudson.

THE INCREDIBLE BURT WONDERSTONE

US, 2013,

Steve Carell, Steve Buscemi, Jim Carrey, Alan Arkin, Olivia Wilde.

Directed by Don Scardino.

A film about magic does not necessarily mean 'magical'.

This is the story of a boy who dreamed of being a magician – and achieved his goal, but with some melancholy results. Bullied at school, but with the help of a good friend, he grows up to call himself Burt Wonderstone, his friend becoming his stage partner, Anton Marvelton. Together, they become a long-standing attraction at Las Vegas with their own theatre (and manager, James Gandolfini).

One of the difficulties for the film is the casting of Steve Carell as Burt, who becomes more and more unpleasant, egotistical, presumptuously womanizing, antagonistic towards his partner who leaves, self-absorbed and unwilling to face reality. That is not the kind of image we associate with Carell, which, despite his effort in creating this obnoxious character, is

difficult to accept. On the other hand, Steve Buscemi is quite convincing as Anton.

But, if Burt is egotistical, he is out-manoeuvred and out-ego'd by a street magician, into pain feats, played with his usual intensity by Jim Carrey. The challenge and rivalry, and his being abandoned by his manager, helps to bring Burt to his senses (well, almost). He has clashed with his partner, Jane (Olivia Wilde) and has discovered his mentor, Rance Holloway (an engaging performance from Alan Arkin), who is now in a nursing home.

Of course, this is a story of a comeback trail and comeuppance of the bragging street magician. It has many amusing moments, but it is the not quite very incredible Burt who is part of the problem with engaging fully with the film.

IN THE FOG

Belarus, 2011.

Vladimir Svirskiy, Vladislav Abashin, Sergei Kolesov

Directed by Sergei Losznitsa.

In the Fog is based on a celebrated Belarus novel by Vasili Bykov, written in 1989 at the end of the Soviet era (though Belarus is still ruled by a dictator of the old school and style). It has been brought to the screen in the visual and dramatic style of films made from the 1950s in the then Soviet union. It is very serious indeed, with its story of the German occupation of Belarus during World War II, showing life in a village, the domination of the Germans, the hanging of hostages, the work of the resistance.

However, the focus is on a man in his thirties, a farmer, who is arrested with the hostages but allowed to leave, escaping his hanging. Villagers are suspicious, as is his wife. Eventually, two men from the resistance turn up, obviously charged with killing him. This does not happen. One of the partisans is wounded, the other goes foraging and is arrested by the local police and shows them where the resistance leader is.

The central character carries the wounded partisan through the forest. He also takes the opportunity to reflect on what has happened to him, a lengthy flashback: his initial arrest, interrogation, torture, but his being allowed to go free after the German commandant wanted him to spy on the partisans. In letting him go free, not hanging him, he has made him bait for the partisans to come to hunt him down, which is what happens.

Surviving in the forest, the farmer makes his way back home, the two partisan members dead. This means that the farmer will go back to the same suspicions, possibly being a target again of the resistance group, possibly being at the mercy of the German commandant. This is symbolized at the end by fog beginning to roll in and submerge the forest, the farmer making his way through the fog.

The style of former Soviet films was often very slow, long takes, focus on the faces of the characters, plenty of time for audiences to think. This is certainly the case here and audiences used to more rapid editing may find watching the film and gazing at it rather more difficult than they might have expected.

Nevertheless, it is a different picture of World War II in Northern Europe, a picture of the

experience of people in a Belarus village, a character study as well as an invitation to reflect on the meaning of war, loyalty and betrayal, personal integrity, even an implicit reflection on human nature, heroism, truth with the image of the accused man carrying a kind of cross with the body of his accuser.

JACK THE GIANT SLAYER

UK, 2013, 113 minutes, Colour.

Nicholas Hoult, Eleanor Tomlinson, Ewan Mc Gregor, Stanley Tucci, Bill Nighy, Ian Mc Shane, Eddie Marsan.

Directed by Bryan Singer.

After Snow White and the Huntsman, Mirror Mirror, and Hansel and Gretel: Witchhunters, what were we to expect of this version of Jack the Giant Slayer. According to Wikipedia, it is a British fairytale about King Arthur's time but does not appear in print until the 18th century. But 'Fie, Fie, Foe, Fum' are in Shakespeare's King Lear. They are repeated in the film but not with, 'I smell the blood of an Englishman', rather, 'I know where the thunder comes'. And then there is Jack and the Beanstalk! Which also appears here. However, the modern screenwriters have taken some of the elements from both stories – and left a great deal out.

Be that as it may, this is a very straightforward telling of its tale, and all the better for that.

It is directed by Bryan Singer, who began with small-budget films and then made some of the X- Men films as well as Batman Begins, so he knows what he is doing with spectacle. This one abounds in action and fine special effects and can be seen in 3D.

The look is medieval, a castle with turrets and moats, a surrounding town and farmlands. Immediately, the story and its verse are told to Jack by his farmer father and to the Princess Isabelle by her mother. It tells of the vanquishing of the giants, back to their home above the clouds and peace reigning while the crown that governs humans and giants remains on earth. So far, so good.

One day, Jack (a gangly, nice Nicholas Hoult) encounters the Princess (a feisty Eleanor Tomlinson) and saves her from some yokels. She is promised to Duke Roderick (a bewigged, English-accented Stanley Tucci, oozing dastardliness) but runs away. That day a monk who had taken the magic beans gives them to Jack in payment for a horse. Don't lose them – and don't let them get wet! Of course, he does lose one, not his fault, and it rains and Jack finds that a monstrously gigantic beanstalk sprouts, taking his house and the princess way up to the land of the giants. So far, even better.

As might be guessed, the king (Ian Mc Shane) is unhappy. He sends his captains, Ewan Mc Gregor and Eddie Marsan, to climb the stalk and recover the Princess. Jack's help is acknowledged and he is commissioned to go as well. It is a love story too. And Duke Roderick volunteers.

There is quite some excitement as they climb the tree – except for Ewan Mc Gregor who plays his part, with attitudes and lines like those of Dirk Bogarde or John Gregson in those stiff upper-lip war stories of the 1950s, and does it entertainingly. He is prepared for every

opportunity.

The giants are an ugly lot and led by Bill Nighy. They like eating humans (and there is a scene where Ewan Mc Gregor as well as two pigs are rolled in pastry for the oven) and are generally very repulsive to look at and in the way they behave. At this stage, we realise that, though it is a fairytale, the giants and their violence as well as the many deaths, especially from the swishing and swirling stalk as it is cut down, would be too much for many of the under 12s.

For the rest of us, there is more excitement, Roderick getting the crown and commanding the giants, his fight on the cliff's edge, getting down the stalk and the king, fearing for his kingdom, getting it cut down. But, there is more. The giants find the remaining beans and grow more stalks, down to earth. A right royal pursuit ensues, a huge siege of the castle, even with burning moats, while Isabelle and Jack try to warn neighbouring towns.

You may guess how it ends. But, we can all be glad it is happy ever after.

MAMA

Spain, 2013.

Jessica Chastain, Nikolas Coster- Waldau, Megan Charpentier, Isabelle Nelly, Dan Kash.
Directed by Andres Muschietti.

Apart from wanting to see a ghost story, another good reason is to watch Mama because it stars Jessica Chastain, so prolific in performances in recent years (Tree of Life, The Help, Lawless and her Oscar-nominated role in Zero Dark Down). Actually, she is quite unrecognizable, with short, straight black hair, black lacquered fingernails and an abrupt manner as a singer. A reminder of her versatility.

But, the ghost and the haunting are the important things. During a financial crisis, a man kills his partners and his wife and abducts his children, intending to kill them. However, he kills himself, leaving the girls who are lost in the woods for years. When they are eventually found, they are wild children, dirty, hungry, the younger unable to speak. They are entrusted to the dead man's brother and his partner (Chastain).

It quickly emerges that the girls were protected by a mysterious presence whom they call Mama. Mama begins to manifest herself, especially with growing weblike branches on walls and roofs, sinisterly black. We glimpse a presence and hear weird sounds/words.

While the intervention of Mama increases and becomes deadly, especially for the psychiatrist who has worked out who she is and what happened to her and her child in the past (in flashbacks for us). For an educated therapist, the doctor does go into dark and frightening places when common sense would advise not.

Nikolas Coster- Walder is the sympathetic uncle (who falls foul of Mama). When he is hospitalized, Anabel has to care for the children and begins to bond with the elder. When she discovers the story from the past, she returns to the place of death where there is more dramatic intensity as Anabel confronts the ghost.

While the film is in colour, it is muted colour, dark colour at times for this kind of eerie story.

THE PAPERBOY

US, 2012, 122 minutes, Colour.

Zac Efron, Matthew Mc Connaughey, Nicole Kidman, John Cusack, Macy Gray, Scott Glenn, David Oyelowo, Nealla.

Directed by Lee Daniels.

This is a world that most of us do not enter too often. And, at the end (as well as during), we might be wondering what we are doing here.

On the immediate surface, it looks like one of those journalistic films where reporters come to a town to investigate how the law was applied in a particular case. That certainly happens. However, what we are treated to is a motley group of people with problems (real Problems) who interact strangely with one another and who give us a picture of some of the more bizarre aspects of human nature.

It is the American South in the latter 1960s. For some, that might explain it at once. This is a South where many of the white inhabitants are still as racist as in slavery days (probably not acknowledging that these days should have gone long since) – and that includes one or other of the main characters. Perhaps it's the heat or the steamy atmosphere, but sexual behaviour, of all kinds, seem to seep through all the time. With the racism and the sensuality, the investigative journalism takes second place.

But, there is something fascinating about this kind of story, this kind of treatment, this kind of expedition into somewhat forbidden territory. The Paperboy definitely keeps one attentive unless one is immediately repelled and that is that.

The film is narrated by the family maid, Anita (Macy Gray), so already the screenplay offers a perspective from the African American perspective, from a woman who has served the family, been accepted, been humiliated. Director and co-writer, Lee Daniels (Precious) is also African- American.

The focus is on Jack (Zac Efron), younger brother of journalist Ward (Matthew Mc Connaughey). He has been a scholarship swimmer but has dropped out and just seems to be lazing around the house. He leaps at the opportunity to drive his brother around during his investigations. His brother is accompanied by a black journalist (David Oyelowo), who poses as a Londoner to try to maintain some status.

But the straightforwardness of the venture veers off course with the arrival of Charlotte, an easy-going kind of woman who corresponds with prisoners and believes that the accused murderer of a local sheriff, whom the journalists want to have a fair trial, is the man of her dreams – just on the evidence of his letters.

Things go awry.

Charlotte meets her would-be fiancé, Hilary (John Cusack) who has more than a lecherous eye. Jack becomes infatuated with Charlotte, no matter what. Ward has some dark secrets

which lead to him being beaten up. And, in keeping with the pessimistic tone of the film, there are no real happy endings.

One of the compelling curiosities of the film is to see stars playing against familiar type. Nicole Kidman stands out as the slutty Charlotte. John Cusack, usually a goodie, is not so convincing as the loathsome Hilary. Matthew Mc Conaughey plays against his laid-back romantic image. Zac Efron proves that he does not have to stay in High School Musical territory.

This is an excursion into a deep South of contemporary (that is of the 1960s) decadence.

PERFORMANCE/ A LATE QUARTET

US, 2012.

Christopher Walken, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Catherine Keener, Mark Ivanir, Imogen Poots, Nina Lee.

Directed by Yaron Zilberman.

Recently, there have been several films for older audiences, quality films like *Amour*, *Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* and, with themes of music, *Quartet* and *A Song for Marion*. Three have been British, one American. *Performance* is the American film, originally called *A Late Quartet*, but changed because of the release of the British film, *Quartet*.

The setting is New York City. Four members of the Fugue string quartet have been played together for 25 years. The leader of the quartet, Peter (Christopher Walken), is diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease. (Some interesting scenes with interview and exercise with his doctor as well as explanations of how to deal and to cope with Parkinson's.) Peter's wife has died a year earlier.

He takes the news with great dignity, continuing his classes, a key scene being a lesson where he explains to his young students how he had met Pablo Casals when young and, nervously, played for him, ashamed that it was his worst performance. He tells the group that he was praised by Casals for his playing, and thought him hypocritical, just being nice to him. He goes on to say that he met Casals later in his life and asked the master whether he remembered his performances for him. Casals mentioned how he noticed variations of fingering and holding his bow from the usual playing and complemented him on his originality. That was what he had seen and praised. It is a moving story, nicely told.

In fact, Walken gives one of his most sympathetic performances, playing his role straight, a good and decent man, with a great love of music who has devoted himself for many decades to performance, especially in tribute to Beethoven's opus 131, the Fugue - and movements are played throughout the film, explanations given as to the nature of the composition, and the reason for its being played straight through, very difficult for the players as well as their instruments.

The other members of the main cast are exemplary in their performances. We have come to expect a great deal from Philip Seymour Hoffman, showing great versatility in many different roles. Here he plays second violin and has come to a crisis, wishing to alternate with the first violin, played by Ukrainian-born actor, Mark Ivanir. Robert (Hoffman), is married to the

other violinist in the quartet, Juliet, and they have a daughter, Alexandra, who also plays the violin, takes lessons from Peter as well as from Mark.

Part of the drama in the film is Alexandra's resentment towards her mother for being absent as she grew up, and having to travel around the world. She is closer to her father. Alexandra resents the perfectionism demanded by Daniel (Ivanir), in his lessons. However, he breaks through his normal reserve and begins an affair with the responsive Alexandra. This, of course, creates a crisis for her parents, with strong scenes of interaction with both.

But playing Robert gives Philip Seymour Hoffman a great opportunity to show a seemingly submissive of man, finally breaking out, wanting to play first violin and, in a moment of exasperation, betraying his wife who cannot understand what he has done and rejects him. In very dramatic and moving scenes he tries to explain what has motivated him, trying to assert himself.

Beethoven's music is really the background for the film rather than a subject in itself though it is given quite some treatment. The thrust of the film is the drama between the different members of the quartet as well as a portrait of a man who accepts oncoming Parkinson's disease, trying to play for as long as he can, then withdrawing in great dignity. Real-life cello player, Nina Lee plays herself, coming as the new cello player in the quartet.

While three of the characters are around the age of 50, Walken's character is 70. Which means that there is a great appeal in the drama and the music for middle aged and older audiences.

RETURN TO NIM'S ISLAND

Australia, 2013.

Bindi Irwin, John Waters, Matthew Lillard, Toby Wallace, Chris Haywood, Sebastian Gregory.

Directed by Brendan Maher.

Nim's Island was a popular family film of 2009, with Jodie Foster as Nim's mother, Gerard Butler as her father and ex as Nim. It showed the family arriving on a Pacific Island and settling there, the father writing adventure novels as well as being a scientist. Nim was free to range over the island, an opportunity for her and for the audience to be close to nature, familiar, unfamiliar, pleasant as well as rugged. This is something of the formula for this sequel.

This time the attraction for audiences is having Steve Irwin's daughter, Bindi, playing Nim. She is still developing her acting skills but is a lively screen presence with her adventures, especially for girls her age and younger, who can identify with her. And she has a companion in her adventures, a young boy who has run away from his quarreling parents, who wants to share in her experiences on the island, Edmond (Toby Wallace).

This time her father is played by Matthew Lillard, in his younger days a raucous comedian but now playing a serious father-figure, with more emphasis on his concern for the environment than on writing adventure stories. He has a strong bond with his daughter. He also travels to Brisbane to plead his cause, prohibiting a company from building a resort on the island. He has the support of his father-in-law, played by veteran Chris Haywood.

Speaking of veterans, John Waters plays the head of a family which spends its time poaching animals in the Pacific to sell to overseas entrepreneurs, even wanting to sell Nim's pet sea lion to a Russian circus – which means rescue scenes. He plays his role very broadly bracket as he should, providing comedy for to balance the more serious intentions of Nim. He has two sons, one of whom is particularly vain, especially about his face, though he suffers quite a lot of bee stings and swellings. The other son tends to be overlooked and neglected. Of course, they get their comeuppance.

To preserve the island, Nim needs to find and record the presence of endangered species. This she does with the help of Edmond and his camera.

Which means then that all ends well. (It is encouraging to see that the minister for planning in Queensland has a strong environmental outlook.)

A film for the younger family, especially children 12 and under.

UNDERGROUND: THE JULIAN ASSANGE STORY

Australia, 2012.

Rachel Griffiths, Anthony La Paglia, Alex Williams, Benedict Samuel,
Directed by Robert Connolly.

Julian Assange came into prominence with his distribution of secret documents and emails from the American government and military. Sought by the Swedish police for sexual harassment, wanted by the American government, somewhat disowned by the Australian government, with the British police ready to arrest him, he took refuge in the Ecuadorian embassy in London. Opinion is divided about his Wikileaks, some seeing him as a champion of freedom of information and expose of cover-ups, others seeing him as a danger to national and International security.

This film is the story of his late teens and his capacity for hacking into secure sites, especially American military, during the 1990 Gulf War.

The film was written and directed by Robert Connolly (The Bank, Three Dollars, Balibo. His screenplay is favorable to Assange while trying to give some explanation about his motivations, coming from his personality but also from his background and his experience as a child and teenager. Newcomer Alex Williams portrays Assange. Rachel Griffiths is his mother, Christine. Anthony La Paglia portrays the investigating officer.

In his early years, Assange was taken to a secretive community, a cult. His mother, a forthright protester for causes which involved justice, was a strong influence on her son. She escaped from the community with her two sons and lived in hiding and on the run.

Julian was a computer whiz in the 1980s. As were many of his friends. For a bet, he hacked into the site of an American bank. In collaboration with his friends, he went into more serious sites, especially that of the American military with classified information about targets in the Gulf War, buildings bombed with civilian casualties. Assange took a righteous stand about these sites.

On a personal level, Assange became involved with a young woman who became pregnant. Ultimately, she found living on the run too difficult and left him, with his having to bring up the child as a single parent.

The police arrested him and his friends, having to catch them in the act of hacking for the charges of a crime to stick. Assange went to court, was found guilty but the judge treated him leniently because of his age. The rest became history.

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TRANCE

ADVENTURES IN ZAMBEZIA

South Africa, 2012

Voices of: Jeremy Suarez, Abigail Breslin, Leonard Nimoy, Samuel L. Jackson, Jeff Goldblum, Richard E. Grant, Jenifer Lewis,
Directed by Wayne Thornley.

An animated adventure for families and younger children. And from South Africa. Quite an achievement for the Cape Town studio which produced it. Not as elaborate in animation, characters and backgrounds as contemporary American big-budget productions, but effective

nonetheless. There are rather naturalistic backgrounds, desert, rivers and waterfalls, jungle islands. The characters, birds and giant lizards, are traditional in their drawing style. A pity that the producers decided that most of the voice cast should be American rather than local. Marketing demands, one presumes.

And Zambezia is not so far from Madagascar, though it doesn't have as many zany animals as the American series. The focus here is on birds. First of all, we see a young bird (voiced by Jeremy Suarez) and his widower father (voiced by Samuel L. Jackson), isolated from other birds, the father trying to protect his son.

There are some scavenger birds, quite ugly buzzard-looking – and with extraordinary Pommy accents courtesy of Richard E. Grant. Not only do they threaten but there are huge, semi-dinosaur-looking lizards, who threaten the birds (and do a deal with the buzzards).

The young bird flies the coop and joins birds travelling to Zambezia, a kind of huge aviary Utopia, near a waterfall. All is delightful here, a whole range of birds and beauty, paradise. But then the lizards threaten. The battle proves that community works best together, even in heroics. 'No bird is an island'. This message seems important for South Africa post-apartheid, that many groups can live together, work together, prosper together and defend itself common enemies.

ANTIVIRAL

Canada, 2012.

Caleb Landry Jones, Sarah Gadon, Malcolm Mc Dowell, Sheila Mc Carthy, Wendy Crewson. Directed by Brandon Cronenberg.

Weird. And that is a compliment.

This is a very striking film, the atmosphere of science-fiction, with touches of horror, in a world of the future not unlike the present.

This soon becomes apparent as we stare at huge billboard advertising a clinic with a glamorous face endorsing the expertise of the clinic. But, below right, is a scrawny-looking man with a thermometer in his mouth. This framing of advertisement and a man is done with the framing-style of a stills photographer – and this continues through the film enhancing the themes with a strange formality and beauty. Many of the sets, waiting rooms, laboratories are filmed in this way. As are the frequent sinister sets of dingy apartments, piracy centres for stealing patents as well as abattoir-like labs for cultivating the tissues for viruses.

That's the tone. But, almost immediately we learn that the clinic is in the business of making money from the macabre desires of fans of celebrities. They so want to be one with their idols that, even when the celebrity is ill or dying (and, by the end, when they are dead), that the fans want to be injected with the virus of their illness.

Macabre is the appropriate word for this kind of ugly hero-worship, but we might be thinking that the role of plastic surgery, botox, breast implants and other procedures we are familiar with are really in the same vein.

The gaunt young man of the opening is Syd March, an employee and adviser at the clinic. However, a loner, he smuggles viruses out of the clinic, despite strict security checks, and develops them at home to sell to piracy bidders and rival companies. Needless to say, this will involve him in some violence (towards him) and his being subject to experimentation.

Caleb Landry Jones gives a seemingly effortless performance that requires him to range from normal, or what he thinks is normal, to being ill, crippled, hobbling with a stick. He is pallid, very freckled, with sometimes stringy hair and a ponytail. As the film progresses, as he hobbles with his stick, he resembles characters like Igor in the Dracula stories.

The mention of Dracula reminds us that, while the film is not horror in the gory sense, its implications are horrifying. The laboratories are the 21st century equivalent of Frankenstein's with viral blood making monsters instead of electricity. The blood suggests vampires, more than suggested by the final image of the film.

Of course, this is not a film one is going to recommend indiscriminately. Its implications are frightening. There are some repulsive moments illustrating the themes. But, one of the roles of a film-maker is to offer frightening allegories. Writer-director, Brandon Cronenberg is only in his mid-20s. This is his first film. It has a stylish weirdness that is impressive. In fact, he is the son of David Cronenberg who, in the 1970s, was making similar (but even more macabre) films like *Shivers*, *Rabid*, *The Brood* and, in the 1980s, *The Fly*. Judging from this effort, Brandenberg might well emulate his father in his most significant career.

CHASING ICE

US, 2012.

James Bolag,

Directed by Jeff Orlowski

No matter where one stands on global warming, the photography of ice, its shapes, extent, iceberg-forming, melting, is quite extraordinary in its beauty as well as in its scope.

James Bolag pursued geomorphic studies at university but was not interested in science through statistics and computer modeling to continue. He took up photography, producing books of nature studies when he decided to go to the Arctic Circle to photograph the ice. Wary of global warming, he was overwhelmed by what he saw in the ice floes, the ice packs, the icebergs, and decided that this was to be his subject. Which means that he is the subject of this film as well as the ice.

The film has a commentary about Bolag and his career, his pursuits, his intrepid following the ice, despite physical difficulties and injuries. It also shows a number of his dedicated assistants in his project of placing time-lapse cameras in different countries of the Arctic, Iceland, Greenland, Alaska, as well as sponsorship from organisations like National Geographic and the establishing of Extreme Ice Survey (EIS).

The director, Jeff Orlowski, also a cinematographer, followed Bolag in his exploits and has assembled a great deal of his footage to illustrate what is happening in the Arctic Circle and

with the Arctic ice and its melting. With his cameras in place, sometimes in very difficult places, which required ice-tracking skills and mountain climbing, there will be data available over years so that scientists can study what is happening with the Arctic ice.

Because of his lack of interest in statistics and modeling, the film works with its visual impact as well as its emotional impact. This will be welcomed by many people, and popular audiences, who feel bombarded by statistics but need this kind of anchoring in reality, no matter how subjective the approach of the film-makers, to be really aware of the consequences of warming. On the other hand, those who are skeptical about global warming, will not be impressed by beautiful images, challenging images, the course they are not hard science, hard evidence.

Nevertheless, Chasing Ice is well worth seeing for those images.

This blogger who wants science rather than photography and emotion puts that point of view plainly:

Yes, the photography is lovely, yes the photographer passes himself off as heroic, yes the locations chosen are amazing. But this film contributes next to nothing to our understanding of glacial melt or AGW. It is most unfortunate that someone such as he, who once claimed disbelief in the science of global warming, would be so assuming as to think he could take a couple of years worth of photographs, and thereby produce "better" or shall we say more compelling, evidence than thousands of scientists. To those out there so naive of science, please hear this: modelling and statistical inferences are thousands of times more valid evidence of global warming than a couple of lovely photos, PLEASE update your perception of the world! These photos are but anecdotal, they contribute nothing to the understanding of AGW. (IMDb, Tracy from Montreal)

CHEERFUL WEATHER FOR A WEDDING

UK, 2012.

Felicity Jones, Luke Treadaway, Elizabeth McGovern?

Directed by Donald Rice.

The title sounded like that of the comedy, I Give it a Year. But, then the credits sequence, which shows the detail of the printing press and the wedding invitation, indicate that it is 1932. And, back we go, something like entering a time capsule of the period and being trapped there, an alien world of British upper class, some upstairs and downstairs, some clipped and arch dialogue – ‘I’ve missed your custard’, ‘I must go and tend to the partridges’, ‘why did you come...?’. There are some idle rich, cricket games, a benign canon who says grace before meals in Latin, a key focus which is a tortoise, and a preoccupation with the niceties of the wedding. And, you realise almost instantly that you would say of this marriage, ‘I wouldn’t give it a year, let alone a day’.

Enjoyment will depend on frustration tolerance of most of the characters and their hyper-worried concerns.

Felicity Jones is Dolly. The action of the film takes place on her wedding day with flashbacks in brighter hues to her romance of the previous summer. Felicity Jones can be a very good actress (from Page Eight to Hysteria to Chalet Girl), but she spends most of the film pouting,

a petulant-bride-to-be. She is cheerful, however, in the flashbacks. Luke Treadaway seems a nice enough chap, an anthropologist who has been invited to the wedding – and we soon realise (before the flashbacks) why he came. He does deserve some sympathy for the way he has been treated. Elizabeth McGovern? (who appears in *Downton Abbey*) is generally over-melodramatic, urging her daughter on and disliking the nice young chap. There is Dolly's sister, Kitty, who is seems to be in the compensation for being the younger sister mode. Mackenzie Crook and Fenella Woolgar do have some scenes with acidic line-dropping (her forte, with him as the target). And there is the maid of honour who rather fancies the canon, who seems likely to comply. And so on.

Of course, many audiences are happy to re-visit this world (think of the versions of E.M. Forster novels). Potential audiences will probably turn up for day sessions because at night they want to be at home watching *Downton Abbey*.

This one is definitely a matter of taste and interest. Alternate results will be delight or irritation. This review may well have given clues to the reviewer's response!

THE COMPANY YOU KEEP

US, 2012.

Robert Redford, Shia La Beouf, Julie Christie, Susan Sarandon, Stanley Tucci, Chris Cooper, Nick Nolte, Richard Jenkins, Terrence Howard, Anna Kendrick, Sam Elliott, Brendan Gleeson, Brit Marling, Jackie Evancho, Stephen Root.
Directed by Robert Redford.

This thriller will be something of a gift for those audiences who like an old fashioned drama (although listening in, unwillingly, some younger viewers chatted critically about how conservative the film was in technique and in political stances). It is an FBI story, the pursuit of some criminals from the 1960s and 1970s. However, it is far more complicated than that description.

We are taken back to the Vietnam War and the protests, especially in the late sixties and into the seventies, with such groups as the Weather Underground. Stirred by the loss of life in Vietnam, the reaction of police on campuses like that of Kent State, they moved into action rather than mere protest. The characters in this film were involved in a bank robbery at the time when one of the staff was killed.

The tone of the film is set by Robert Redford. He has directed the film as well as taking the central role, a sympathetic protester from the past who had settled in Albany, under a false name, as a reputed lawyer. He has a young teenage daughter - which rather strains the credibility of the film, granddaughter might have been more appropriate since Redford was 75 at the making of the film. However, if we accept this, and the sympathetic performance of the young Jackie Evancho, we will stay believing in him. When discovered, he goes on the run, not to evade the FBI as it emerges, but to prove his innocence in the charge of murder. He wants to do this for his daughter.

In fact, this is how the film starts, with another member of the group, happily married, determined to give herself up for the sake of her children. She is played by Susan Sarandon -

who has a strong scene in prison being interviewed by a reporter and explaining her actions and motives.

The reporter is played by Shia La Boeuf in his earnest, agitated manner, a blend of naiveté and self-satisfaction. Which makes the film one of FBI pursuit as well as of journalistic investigation. It would seem from the screenplay that the journalist is more effective than the FBI.

The film is interesting when it shows Redford on the run, with his daughter, relying on his younger brother, Chris Cooper, to take her in. He skillfully eludes pursuit, meets up with various friends and associates from the past, including Nick Nolte and Richard Jenkins. He also confronts the officer in charge of the investigation at the time of the robbery and killing, Brendan Gleeson, and his daughter, Brit Marling. (And Stanley Tucci, Sam Elliott and Anna Kendrick are also in the cast.)

However, his main objective is to track down former partner and lover, Mimi, played, surprisingly, by Julie Christie. This is important as she is the only one who could prove his innocence, but the difficulty is that she would have to give herself up to the authorities.

Terrence Howard leads the FBI and is intent on getting results. Shia LaBoeuf², however, has started the expose, has been challenged by Redford's character about his integrity and his plans for building his reputation.

This means that there are quite a number of moral issues from the past: the protest about the Vietnam War and some of the violent consequences, the role of the police and the FBI and about some people being able to live anonymously despite their past. And there are moral issues from the present: the relentless action of the FBI without examining circumstances of those they pursue, of the role of the media, the expose and its consequences, and what should be done about those who give themselves up after 30 years or more on the run.

In asking those questions, we realize that there could have been far more in the film than showing Redford's story and his choice of playing a seemingly ambiguous character who is actually a good man. Further examination of the stories of the characters played by Julie Christie, Susan surrender, Nick Nolte and Richard Jenkins would have made for an even better and more challenging film.

DRIFT

Australia, 2013.

Myles Pollard, Xavier Samuel, Sam Worthington, Lesley- Ann Brandt, Robyn Malcolm, Aaron Glenane, Steve Bastoni.

Directed by Ben Nott, Morgan O'Neill².

Drift is a Western Australian film, made in Western Australia, around the Margaret River region. It should do no damage to the West Australian tourism authority and its advertising!

It will be entertaining for those who enjoy surfing and surfing films. It will be especially

entertaining for those who were teenagers and young adults in the 1970s, a chance for reminiscing, looking at the clothing styles of the time, listening to the music, remembering the language, some ideals and some hopes and, of course, disappointments.

The film begins strikingly in black and white, a mother taking the car keys from her drunken husband's pocket, putting her two sons and the luggage into the car and driving through the different landscapes of Australia to Margaret River. It then makes the transition to color, the young boys seeing the surf, the beaches, the cliffs and wanting to settle there. It is not instantly easy, the boys being teased because they came from the east, which leads to some fights and punch ups.

However, the main part of the film takes place when they grow up. Myles Pollard plays the older son, Andrew, good at surfing, but injuring his ankle on his arrival and having to be rescued by his younger brother, Jimmy. Andrew is the responsible son, working at the local mill, Jimmy is carefree, and the local surfing champion. Jimmy is played by Xavier Samuel (a more exuberant role than usual). The mother is hardworking, sewing for a living. She is played effectively by Robyn Malcolm.

The boys encounter a couple from Hawaii. JB is Australian (Sam Worthington) but an itinerant, going from surf to surf, thinking Indonesia has the ideal surf - and bringing back drugs from Indonesia. He has been entrusted with a young Hawaiian girl, Lani, (Leslie Ann Brandt). Both young men are attracted.

There is a moment when Andrew is offered a better job at the mill but he declines and decides to set up his own company, making surfboards with the help of a boyhood friend, Gus (Aaron Glenane). The mother will make the wet suits. They have some moments of success but cannot compete with the bigger companies.

Some complications come with the local bikies and with drug dealing, Gus becoming addicted.

In order to pay off some debt, Andrew decides to go into the regional surfing competition, clashing with Jimmy who goes off by himself up the coast. After some initial success, Andrew loses but Jimmy comes back to take his place, with some daring riding of the waves and daring photography by JB.

The ending is not quite as predictable as we might expect.

The surfing seems a particularly well done, the photography of the waves oftentimes quite magnificent. While it might seem reminiscent of Australian television series, there is more feeling in the characters to engage our interest, though perhaps not for those for whom surfing is something alien!

ESCAPE FROM PLANET EARTH

Canada, 2012.

Voices of: Brendan Frazer, Rob Corrdry, Willam Shatner, Jessica Alba, Sarah Jessica Parker, Jane Lynch, Ricky Gervais.

Directed by Cal Brunker.

This is one of those small animation films that slip in for school holidays, along with the big-budget shows, and get overshadowed. A pity in one sense because the studios that make them do not have the resources of Pixar, Dreamworks etc. The company here is Vancouver-based.

But then, the film is not particularly startling and only moderately entertaining. For small children, that is. Adults may find it doesn't draw them in, though there are few jokey references to Peter Jackson and James Cameron. Adults may find themselves passing the time thinking about the other films that it resembles or draws on: Planet Earth, Monster vs Aliens, even ET and other space stories or trying to identify the voice cast.

With the blue-coloured aliens, who live in the friendly planet, Baab (Bob), there seems to be some relationship with the Smurf movies with their similar blue characters. Another reminder that the film is for littlies.

There are two brothers at work in space missions, a very egocentric brother, Scorch Supernova (Brendan Frazer) and a nerdish technical academic, Gary Supernova (surprisingly the usually bouncy Rob Corrdrey) who tends to stay in the background with his family. When Scorch decides to go to the Dark Planet (in fact, earth), he finds that he cannot cope, especially with the evil General Shanker (William Shatner) who is on a revenge mission to create, of course, a powerful, destructive weapon. He has also imprisoned aliens from other planets who are expert in creating so many of the things that earthlings take for granted.

In order to get back, Scorch has to rely on his brother, Gary, to take command, exercise his wits and abilities to bring him home.

One of the troubles of the boost in animation films since 2000 and their proliferation at holiday times is that this kind of material has become so familiar and many children respond with less than interest.

But, Escape from Planet Earth may well have a further life on television and on DVD.

FIRST POSITION

US, 2011.

Aran Bell, Rebecca Houseknecht, Miko and Jules Fogarty, Joan Sebastian Zamora, Gaya Bommer Yemini, Michaela dePrince.

Directed by Bess Kargman.

First Position is an engaging film about ballet students. Its title refers to the house position for the feet at ballet lessons, but also applies to post position in competition.

As with many similar documentaries, the group is selected and individuals followed throughout the period of rehearsal, performance, competition. However, one of the charms of this film is that it doesn't focus on competitiveness. The students are not competing against each other. Which means that we watch them with their talent, their lessons, the rehearsals, the performances, without worrying about who will win or lose.

The students have been well chosen, a boy from the United States whose military family is based in Italy, a girl adopted from the civil war in Sierra Leone, a boy and a girl from a

Japanese-American family, a girl from Israel, a girl from middle America, a boy from Colombia. Each has the opportunity to show their personality to best advantage. We also see a great deal of several of the parents and their involvement with their children's careers.

The strength of the film is in the editing rather than in the visual style. The dances are presented straightforwardly. However, the inter-cutting of the stories, the cumulative effect of the narration as well as the joy of the final awards, mean that this is a film which can entertain most audiences unless they have a fixation against ballet.

HAUTE CUISINE/ LES SAVUEURS DE PALAIS

France, 2012.

Catherine Frot, Arthur Dupont, Jean D' Ormesson, Hippolyte Girardot.

Directed by Christian Vincent,

Haute Cuisine is the English title for a film called Les Saveurs de Palais/The Tastes of the Palace, referring to the Elysee Palace, the home of the French president. The title in English follows the use of such English words as restaurant, café, menu, soufflé... when a focus is on food.

But this is an entertaining film, especially for lovers of food and cooking, whether they be French or not.

Surprisingly, it opens in Antarctica, where Hortense (Catherine Frot) is finishing a year's cooking for a group on a French base. She is a middle-aged woman, at home in the kitchen, friendly towards the people at the base, yet quite tough in herself. However, she is unwilling to talk to an Australian journalist who has come to make a documentary about her and does not want to be filmed. Fortunately, by the end of the film, she is more open.

The reason for the documentary is that Hortense was for two years the private cook for President Mitterrand. But she is unwilling to open up about that. However, the film opens up as we see her flashbacks and build up the whole story: of the recommendation by top French cooks, of her traveling from her home and farm to an interview in Paris, to taking up the appointment, to her two year career.

At the outset, she discovers that presidential palaces are governed by bureaucrats and protocols. She also discovers a macho dislike of her and her presence from the all male Main Kitchen staff. However, she finds in her assistant, Nicholas (Arthur Dupont), a congenial young man who has a talent for cooking, especially pastry cooking.

Hortense is to cook for the president, personally, and for his special guests. She is to produce menus in advance for approval. The president likes simple cooking and she does her best. This is the part that cooking fans will enjoy, details of her recipes, details of her preparing the dishes, cooking them, with information about timing and temperature, the camera even making a close-up of buttering toast look very tasty and inviting.

The president himself is friendly and there are several references to his relationships with women on his staff. However, Hortense is exemplary in her behavior, enjoying chats about food, the simple food of the past, with the president.

Ultimately, the bureaucrats get the better of her with their budgeting, savings, emphasis on healthy food and general interference.

The film is actually very interesting in its behind the scenes look at the running of the Elysee Palace, pressures on the president, his enjoying challenge, the strict timing and security, the visitors, the socials... As well as of the jealousies amongst the staff and in the kitchen.

Having started in Antarctica, the film continues to return to the base, the last two days of Hortense's work there, her preparations for lunch, for her farewell dinner and the celebration, and a scratch concert where some of the men mock her work for the president, in cheerful fun.

In fact, the film is quite cheerful, the characters well portrayed, and most audiences will be interested in Hortense and her Haute Cuisine.

IDENTITY THIEF

US, 2012.

Jason Bateman, Melissa Mc Carthy, Amanda Peet, Jon Favreau, Robert Patrick, John Cho.
Directed by Seth Gordon.

This review comes with a caution: if you are male and your name is Sandy, be prepared for lots jokes at the expense of Sandy being either a man's name or a woman's name, even after the final credits.

This is another of those American comedies, so popular in recent years, which begin raucously and end up rather sweetly and morally, something which the screenplay in the first half or more would not necessarily encourage you to believe that it could happen. It is directed by Seth Gordon, whose previous film (similar in tone and humour) was Horrible Bosses. Jason Bateman was one of the stars, put-upon by his horrible boss, Kevin Spacey. Now, he takes up a similar kind of character whose horrible boss is Jon Favreau.

But that encounter may be one of the least of his worries. When his credit card is refused at a service station and cut in half, matters begin to crumble for him. Someone is using his cards and identity in Florida. He is far away in Colorado; his wife is pregnant with their third child; he has just taken a job risk to combine with bankers who have found the boss so horrible that they are walking out to set up another company; and, then, the police say they can do very little because of jurisdictions; then it gets worse when his arrested and charged with missing a parole hearing.

We, of course, are in the know. We have seen Diana (Melissa Mc Carthy) forging his cards and going on drinking sprees, shopping sprees, beauty parlour sprees. She is not a nice lady.

This is a road trip comedy because Sandy goes to Florida to bring back his identity thief to establish his innocence. On the way there are all kinds of mix-ups, including drug-dealer assassins as well as a local bail bondsman in pursuit. There is a lot of slapstick comedy with the odd couple, the buttoned-up Sandy on his mission and the extroverted, garrulous and scruple-less Diana clashing and clashing. There are chases and car-crashes, snakes in the

woods, as well as some more credit card fraud on the way home. There are also some quite raunchy sequences and rude jokes.

Many audiences have found the plot too haphazard and unbelievable. It is and strains credibility and, with plot-holes galore, strains plausibility (detectives and their inability to help, assassins and their boss in prison, the bounty hunter chase, getting away with it all). But, it's not that kind of comedy. Leave plausibility behind and accept what is offered!

Jason Bateman is very good at and convincing in this kind of long-suffering role. Melissa McCarthy uses her big frame and bumptious personality - to be big and bumptious. The Jud Appatow Syndrome is relevant again. As in his comedies and those like them, the beginning is more than a touch chaotic and redemption doesn't seem to be on offer. But, by the end of the film, there it is, American hopeful style. It's lightly amusing escapist fare.

IRON MAN 3

US, 2013.

Robert Downey Jr, Gwynneth Paltrow, Don Cheadle, Guy Pearce, Ben Kingsley, Rebecca Hall, Jon Favreau, William Sadler, Miguel Ferrer.

Directed by Shane Black.

Fans of Marvel Comics and their film versions will feel that Tony Stark is an old acquaintance. This is the third Iron Man film but Stark was also one of The Avengers in that very successful film of 2012. We remember him as a brash young man, inheritor of a company that encouraged innovations where he made suits that enabled him to confront villains and save the world.

The film begins with him telling the story of New Year's Eve 1999 in Berne where he was with a scientist Maya (Rebecca Hall) and was accosted by a wild-looking man whom he stands up after promising to meet him. Obviously a bad move.

Robert Downey Jr is a screen master of the sardonic screen presence who can toss off jokey references and one-liners but who can also be charming. He has made the character of Tony Stark his own. Actually, he seems to have settled down with Pepper Potts (Gwynneth Paltrow) but then his seaside mansion is attacked and destroyed and he suffers panic attacks and disappears.

In the meantime, a scrawny-looking character who calls himself The Mandarin, who looks like a cut rate Osama Bin Laden (Ben Kingsley chewing the scenery), cuts into television programs with threats and an on-screen killing, wanting to taunt the American president (William Sadler). Tony Stark is not quite ready to resume action, especially when he is accosted by strange men and women whose limbs and face light up like smouldering charcoal.

We are not surprised when the wild-looking man from the past turns up and takes responsibility. He is played with satisfying mad villainy by Guy Pearce. Maya has sold out to him and he is transforming war-disabled veterans into fiery weapons.

Colonel Rhodes (Don Cheadle) is back, using Stark-invented suits to fly to trouble areas.

Speaking of suits, Tony Stark has quite a wardrobe of suits to pick from, not all of them top quality, some quite breakable, and relies on in his invisible valet (voiced by Paul Bettany) to dress him with the suits, part by part. This does complicate things when Tony is captured and when he ultimately has to face the villain.

Jon Favreau, who directed the first two films, is a letter-of-the-regulations security man who has a weakness for episodes of *Downton Abbey*. Ben Kingsley's *The Mandarin* turns out to be a different villain, with some unexpectedly funny sequences. In fact, there are some funny episodes (like that of the gob-smacked adulation fan who helps Tony) and some funny lines.

Which all seemed quite entertaining – until one reads the angry and disappointed fans who have blogged their displeasure at this sequel. It seems they want action rather than humour – perhaps they need to lighten up. After all they are only comic strips on screen, not dramatic realism.

NO

Chile, 2012.

Gael Garcia Bernal, Alfredo Castro.

Directed by Pablo Larrain.

A nominee for Best Foreign Language Academy Award (but was up against the excellent *Amour*, which won). Pablo Larrain has become well-known on the arthouse movie circuit with such films as *Tony Manero* and *Post Mortem*. With *No*, he has completed a trilogy of life under General Pinochet.

It is fair to say that it would be well worthwhile to do some reading and research about Chile under General Pinochet and that period. While the film does enlarge on the 15 years experience of the Pinochet regime, and focuses on the upheaval with the American-backed coup against Salvador Allende in 1973, some reflection on the history of Chile would enhance the viewing and give some depth to what is being shown.

The title of the film comes from the plebiscite of 1988 which General Pinochet instituted for the public to vote on whether he should continue for another term of office. The presumption was that he would win the plebiscite. However, after 15 years of his rule, and with some modernisation of Chile and some prosperity, the public was prepared for a change. So were those who suffered under his regime. The experience of oppression pervades the film with many of those who opposed Pinochet having the opportunity to come forward, despite the regime keeping an eye on the plebiscite and the campaigns.

While there is a great deal of serious history in the film, the screenplay sometimes uses a humorous tone, relying on the lightness of touch that those in the *No* campaign brought to the advertising and promotion. Late 20th century advertising and promotion is central to the film, an interesting look at the role of media, print, radio and television in political campaigns.

Gael Garcia Bernal portrays a modern advertising wiz, Rene Saveedra (a composite character of the two men who organized the advertising for *No*). The opening of the film shows him presenting a campaign with some modern pizzazz. He has a history in Chile, with his parents and, especially, with his ex-wife who is still an activist. He is invited to consider a proposal to

imagine a campaign for the No camp. Ans, eventually, he agrees and much of the film is discussion about the campaign, its format, its ideas, its tone, the prospect of prevailing. He himself advocates for lighter touch, the more positive approach, the hopes of Chilean people for freedom and happiness and provides some exuberant images and lively presentation of people (even a mime as one of his critics regrets). The campaign was also intended to give hope to those who thought no change was possible and were not going to vote.

Fifteen minutes for the Yes campaign were permitted on the media each day. Fifteen minutes for the campaign. The public responded to the campaign. Many examples are seen throughout the film as the plebiscite progresses - and the campaign has to find material for each day's commercial.

In the background are a lot of discussions, revealing the difference stances, of right and left, in Chile of the 1980s. There is also the atmosphere of the military regime and the possibility of arrest, even torture.

Along with this, there are dangers to the Rene's safety and well-being and to his family, especially the son whom he is bringing up and who is seen to be bewildered by what is happening, especially in the crowd scenes.

One of the significant things about the film as is that it was made on analogue tape, the kind of material and equipment that was used in the 1980s. This gives the impression that the film was filmed at that time, but it also enabled the film-makers to incorporate a great deal of news footage of the period. This gives a greater sense of authenticity.

A film of great historical and political interest. An opportunity to see something of the history of Chile and reflect on it and the role of General Pinochet, and the changes in Chile in the succeeding quarter of a century.

OBLIVION

US, 2013.

Tom Cruise, Andrea Riesborough, Olga Kurylenko, Morgan Freeman, Melissa Leo, Nikolai Coster- Waldau.

Directed by Joseph Kosinski.

Director Joseph Kosinski wrote and directed Tron: Legacy, his first feature film. Oblivion is his second, quite an achievement. And he wrote the graphic novel on which his film is based (and there are another two such Oblivion novels – so a lot is riding on the success of Oblivion, though it has been announced he is working on another Tron film).

To be fair to the film, I could not have given a clear and logical synopsis while watching or immediately after. But, there was enough curiosity to check with friends about plot-lines – and I think I could give one now. But it means that we are puzzled as we watch.

And this is definitely a Tom Cruise film. One reviewer remarked wittily and aptly that equal attention had been given to putting Cruise on the screen as had been given to the production design. And the production design is top-class. Speaking of 'top', Tom Cruise is once again a top gun (even at fifty, giving fifty a good, fit, reputation, vigorous stunts and all), this time,

still on earth, but a post-apocalyptic earth where he flies around maintaining and saving drones which are there to keep ugly aliens at bay. And, especially, watching on the IMAX screen, you are very conscious of Cruise, almost in your face. With Jack Reacher and Oblivion (his performance in Jack Reacher being better), he is still the star.

It is 2077 and earth has been destroyed – as has the moon in a very effective special effect. With Cruise in an eerie eyrie, a pylon home far above ground, with his plane launching pad, is Victoria (Andrea Reisborough), co-worker and partner. Sally, the television face and drawling voice of the co-ordinator of missions (played by Melissa Leo), is always asking ‘are you an effective team?’. They are and they aren’t. Tom, here called Jack Shepherd, has discovered some remnants of human civilization as well as a hidden grassy valley, away from the desert and the dunes, that are the remnants of human life. He is also tantalized by memories of a meeting with a woman on the Empire State Building. (This is part of the plot challenge: how is he remembering, what has happened in the last 60 years since the destruction; who is this woman...? And, discussion afterwards can answer these questions.)

After impressively establishing all of this with wonderful visuals, two new characters enter the story. One is the woman from New York cryogenically preserved (Olga Kurylenko). The other is a venerable leader of survivors (the welcome presence of Morgan Freeman). This builds up to a crisis for Jack Shephard, for his partner, and for the tower control and Sally.

Interestingly, Oblivion has received art-house distribution as well as at the multiplex. Will it become something of a classic post-apocalyptic film? How does it compare to Total Recall and other films we are reminded of? Only time and the fans’ ardour will tell.

OLYMPUS HAS FALLEN

US, 2013.

Gerard Butler, Aaron Eckhart, Morgan Freeman, Rick Yune, Angela Bassett, Radha Mitchell, Melissa Leo, Ashley Judd, Finley Jacobson, Robert Forster, Cole Hauser.

Directed by Antoine Fuqua.

Well no, it’s not a documentary! Some of the antagonistic reviews seem to imply that it is, finding fault with the credibility and the picture of American politics. No, it’s an action entertainment, reminding many people in their reviews and blog comments that it is a Die Hard at the White House. And reminding audiences that in this genre, no matter how great the disaster, no matter how devastating the effects, there is always the enterprising individual, courageous, tough, do-or-die, who is going to save the day.

However, in this action show, the devastation is far more than might have been expected. The Secret Service uses code names for the American president and various official personnel. The White House is obviously an Olympus but we don’t expect any Olympus to fall. But here, it does.

Most people who go along to this kind of film are not expecting realism. What they want is an adrenaline-pumping entertainment. And this one is.

The villains are from North Korea. But they are not part of that government (some diplomatic caution here). They are a terrorist group with their own agenda, led by a man who suffered at

the hands of south Korean and American military intervention. His intention is to take over the White House, and of the president and other officials, turn back the Seventh Fleet from the Indian Ocean, withdraw all American troops from South Korea, and take possession of the nuclear installations in the United States. It's not meant to spoil information about the outcome of the film, but he nearly gets there. As portrayed by Rick Yune, he is an intense 30-something mastermind, with an extraordinary master-mind, who has a propensity for violence and torture.

However, he hadn't counted on Gerard Butler as Mike Banning, with special services training, who has served on the Secret Service attending the president. (On this showing, Gerard Butler should have been cast as Jack Reacher rather than Tom Cruise). A friend of the president, a literal sparring partner with him in the gym, he is a good friend of the president's son and an admirer of the president's wife. However, in the prologue to the action, a dreadful accident happens on his watch and he is relegated to a desk job. Fortunately, he looks out the window and sees the Korean invasion, hurries to the White House, gets inside and, despite some setbacks, saves the day.

The tone of this review might seem a little tongue-in-cheek. But that is the style of the treatment of the film, despite its seriousness and intensity.

The film has an excellent cast with Aaron Eckhart as the president, Morgan Freeman as the speaker of the house who has to take over, Melissa Leo as the secretary state, Angela Bassett as head of security, Robert Forster as chief of staff, and a cameo by Ashley Judd as the president's wife.

Koreans are emerging as a staple, enemy for American films. Red Dawn, GI Joe: Retaliation. With the threats of the North Korean president at the time of the film's release, American audiences may have been a little more apprehensive than usual. But what takes place in the film, the plane flying in to Washington, DC, the terrorist group having more arms than one could reasonably expect, the attack on the president of South Korea, the siege of the White House and the numerous deaths of police and Secret Service agents, could have the audience is more than alarmed. But, our later reflection on security, border control, homeland information, the tale seems really far-fetched. Or one hopes so.

In the meantime, it is entertainment for action fans, though some of us may feel a little guilty animosity towards the United States as it seems to be getting a little of what we feel it has imposed on others. Later in the year we're promised a film entitled White House Down with an even bigger budget than this one.

THE OTHER SON/ LE FILS DE L'AUTRE

France/Israel, 2012.

Emmanuelle Devos, Pascal Elbe,

Directed by Lorraine Levy.

If you would like to see a film that tells an emotional story as it dramatizes the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis (and even if you wouldn't), The Other Son can be recommended.

It may not be the most thoughtful film about the fears and hopes of Israel, about the occupation of Palestine and the political and philosophical/religious implications of the divide, but it shows us images that are definitely worth more than the traditional thousand words and invites us to identify with some Jewish and Palestinian men and women who live the tensions every day. And there is the ever-present wall.

The story has its harrowing moments. It is the story of babies mistakenly given to the wrong parents and the discovery of what happened only when the son of the Jewish family has blood tests before his military service and his blood type is incompatible with his parents. The error occurred during the Gulf War, in Haifa when scud missiles were hitting the city and the children moved for security.

In many ways, this is a familiar story of what happens to children when they discover their birth mother and how they will deal with the mother who brought them up and the newly-found birth mother. That is emotionally demanding in itself, the shock, the questions of identity, how to live with the two families.

What makes this film more demanding on the two sons, and on the parents, is that the Jewish boy has been brought up as an Arab, as a Muslim, and the Arab boy is profoundly Jewish. The Jewish son wants to be a musician, the Arab son has lived with his aunt in Paris and has passed his baccalaureate and will start medical studies.

As might be anticipated, this will be a story of coming to terms with family, ethnic roots and cultural background – and the realization that each young man should have been living the other's life, in the comparative comfort of a Jewish family in Tel Aviv, or in the poverty and restrictions of a Palestinian village.

This inevitably makes the film somewhat schematic as each discovers the other's life and lifestyle. The screenplay is also schematic as both fathers and both mothers are involved. Interestingly, it is the mothers who are most broad-minded and broad-feeling. (The film has a female director.) Each father acts in the hard masculine way of wanting to avoid the issue, denying it, rationalizing it and only then, through personal contact and mutual understanding, come to terms with it.

Each family has a little girl. They are able to break through barriers almost instantly.

A complication comes in that the Arab family has a son who was killed in attacks. The older brother reacts instantly against the brother he has loved, all prejudice against Israel and its oppression surfacing virulently as he can see his brother now only as Jewish. On the other hand, the boy in the Jewish family goes to the Rabbi, since he is devout, only to find that with his mother not being Jewish, he is no longer Jewish and must go through conversions steps. Rigid ideologies can be unreasonable and damning.

The film has so much persuasive dialogue about relationships and human equality and dignity. Filmed on location on each side of the wall – which continually looms high and divisive, along with the humiliating checkpoints – the Arabs discover the affluence of Israel, amazed at people lolling on the Mediterranean beaches, the Jewish family seeing the instant poverty so close to where they live.

If only people could meet, share meals, sing, see others as human beings, then the conflict

(with blame on both sides) might move closer to resolution.

THE PLACE BEYOND THE PINES

US, 2013.

Ryan Gosling, Bradley Cooper, Eva Mendes, Dane de Hahn, Rose Byrne, Ben Mendelsohn, Harris Yulin, Ray Liotta, Bruce Greenwood.

Directed by Derek Cianfrance.

Three stories for the price of one, and each of them interesting. They are also inter-linked, some characters appearing in all three. It is directed by Derek Cianfrance who made an impact with his analysis of a marriage breakdown in *Blue Valentine* (which also featured Ryan Gosling).

Gosling is Luke, the central character in the first of the stories, a skilled bike rider in a carnival show. His life is changed when he discovers that a casual fling as he passed through a town has led to his having a son. His mother, Romina, (Eva Mendes) has concealed this from him because of his being unreliable. She is now with a considerate partner, Kofi (Mahershala Ali) who is a father to the boy. Nevertheless, the rider wants to be part of his son's life.

Now begins a series of links and ironies that will connect the characters and new characters over a period of years.

Luke accidentally befriends Robin (Ben Mendelsohn), a mechanic who lets him stay in a caravan on his property. Admiring his riding skills, he proposes that they rob some banks which leads to an encounter with the police, especially Bradley Cooper as Avery Cross, a lawyer turned policeman.

The second story is that of Avery. He is married with a baby son. But he is caught up with some crooked police in the town (especially Ray Liotta who always looks as if he is a criminal). They become involved with illegally retrieving some of the money from the bank robberies and Avery is faced with a crisis of conscience, whether to be a whistleblower or not.

The third story takes place 15 years later with Avery campaigning to become District Attorney. We have previously seen that, despite his police inexperience, he does know how to wheel and deal. He is separated from his wife (Rose Byrne) and his son, a rather oafish and spoilt teenager with a penchant for rebelling and for drugs) wants to live with him.

But, the story is that of Jason (Dane de Hahn), the son of Luke and Romina. Jason is also something of a rebel and deals in drugs. The two teenagers meet and, while the audience knows the connection between the older characters, Jason doesn't. He wants to know more about his father and tracks down Robin. It does not all go as we might have anticipated, Jason risking his life and freedom for revenge, out in the countryside, beyond the pines.

The film runs for two hours twenty minutes, so we have a long time to get to know and get a feel for the characters, most of them ordinary in their way. Performances are good, so we are interested to see and know more. And several of them have the chance to appear as older, especially Eva Mendes and Rose Byrne.

Both Ryan Gosling and Bradley Cooper have established themselves as strong character actors and they give substance and authority to their stories. Ben Mendelsohn, furthering his American career, is given a different kind of character to play, and well.

Maybe, audiences wanting something faster and more action-oriented may find it less interesting. But, for those who like a well-written and acted drama, there is much to interest and to enjoy.

RUST AND BONE

France, 2012,
Marion Cotillard, Mathias Schonaerts,
Directed by Jaques Audiard.

French director, Jacques Audiard, has made some very strong dramas, even tough dramas like *The Bear My Heart Skipped* and *Un Prophete*. They have made quite an impact on critics and the public alike. So has *Rust and Bone*.

It is strange how people's stories change, how they come across one another in unexpected circumstances – and what becomes of them.

We are introduced to Ali and his 5 year old-son, Sam. They are hitchhiking from northern France to the Riviera to stay with his sister and her husband. Ali's wife has left them, involved in the drug world. Ali is a strong man, a gym man and potential boxer. He gets a job as a bouncer and then as a security guard. He has little sense of responsibility, relying on his sister, especially for Sam whom he loves but does not really know how to express it. At a fight in a nightclub, he comes across Stephanie who takes him home. He gives her his phone number in case she should need it.

We have Stephanie at work in one of the Sea-World? theme parks, training and working with dolphins and their performances. One day, she is suddenly knocked into the water and wakes up in hospital, shocked and asking, 'what have they done with my legs?'. She is left morose and alone, but one day rings Ali. Their lives change.

Ali, with little sense of commitment, opens her curtains to let in the air, takes her to the beach where she agrees to swim. Exhilarated by the sun and water, she begins to come alive, measured for artificial limbs. Ali is casually friendly, offering to help her discover whether she still can function sexually. All in a day's visit for Ali, not for Stephanie. In the meantime, Ali is offered backstreet, few holds barred, fights with bets that improve his financial status. Stephanie accompanies him. She also meets the family and relates instantly well with Sam.

Marion Cotillard proves yet again what a fine actress she is. Belgian actor, Mathias Schonaerts, makes Ali a convincing character, even we feel exasperated with him.

The storyline is fairly simple with a necessary crisis which will bring Ali to his senses, especially on an outing with Sam who is injured in an accident. Stephanie is dismayed by Ali's disappearance but makes another call to the hospital where Ali is waiting for Sam to recover.

Barriers have been broken through and feelings deepened. This is a film about hope.

LE SKYLAB

France, 2012.

Julie Delpy, Bernadette Lafont, Emmanuelle Riva, Lou Alvarez.

Directed by Julie Delpy.

Le Skylab was written and directed by Julie Delpy. She also has a prominent role among the large cast.

This is one of those films the French make so well, a gathering of a large family, meals together, playing together, simmering differences coming to the surface. The setting is 1979, a holiday in Brittany to celebrate the birthday of a grandmother. However, Skylab has been circling the earth and is due to come down. There is media apprehension that it will crash in Western Europe, possibly in Western France. This concern pervades the gathering. In the event, Skylab actually crashed in Australia, a long way away from predictions.

This is a picture of three generations. There are two grandmothers, strongly performed by Bernadette Lafont and the 2012 Oscar-nominee, Emmanuelle Riva (for *Amour*, at age 84). There are six children of Bernadette Lafont in the adult generation, along with their spouses. The film focuses on the four brothers, the genial man whose home is the venue for the celebration, the street actor with his wife (Julie Delpy), and their daughter, Albertine (Lou Alvarez), the older brother who is a doctor, and an angry middle brother whose daughter has left home with his good friend. The film also focuses on the wives, their relationships with their husbands, good and bad, their concerns about their children. One is married to a Spaniard and performs a Spanish song to entertain the family. There are quite a number of children in the youngest generation, a 17 year old boy who thinks he is God's gift to the local girls, another very mischievous little boy with a sense of humor, two bespectacled boy cousins who observe everything, quite a number of girls and little boy who likes dressing dolls. Quite a mixture!

It takes a while for audiences to identify who is who and who is married to whom. However, as the day of celebration progresses, with a big feast outside, interrupted by rain, with the lamb on the spit, we begin to appreciate the identities of the characters and the issues of their lives.

The men play soccer, children go to the beach with their parents, with a nudist beach close by. Ultimately, the children go to a dance, the adults are at home eating, drinking, talking. It is at this stage that some of the deeper themes underlying French society emerge especially with the malcontent brother who still longs for wars in Northern Africa, expressing some especially racist and sexist ideas and an attack on his sister-in-law condemning leftist ideas. This leads to quite some vigorous discussion and indicates aspects of conflict at the time.

However, the film is generally genial, and interesting for those who enjoy this kind of French drama, especially with the focus on Albertine, Julie Delpy's alter ego, a 10 year old at a difficult stage of her development observing all that goes on around her.

SLEEPWALK WITH ME

US, 2012.

Mike Birbiglia, Lauren Ambrose, James Rebhorn, Carol Kane.

Directed by Mike Birbiglia.

Mike Birbiglia is a stand-up comic. He is associated with This American Life and has a following in the United States, less so elsewhere. However, for those who see this comedy, he may attract more followers. He wrote and directed the film as well as starring in it.

The story is semi autobiographical. It is the story of a comedian called Matt, whom, to all intents and purposes, is Birbiglia. He narrates his story directly to camera, involving the audience. As he is driving and turning towards the audience, he tells the story of his recent years in flashbacks.

He has been in a relationship with Abby, Lauren Ambrose, for eight years but, despite her desire to get married, he is reluctant. He also has ambitions to be a stand-up comic. He does get to perform briefly in the club where he is a bartender. However, his 'set' is not particularly funny, even Abby and his friends don't listen to him, saying that they had heard the jokes when they were at college. And they weren't so funny then.

However, in discussing with another comic, he meets his agent, a seemingly hard case who, however, does get him some gigs. In relating some of his own experiences, especially with marriage (and avoiding marriage), he gets laughs and is on the way to more successful shows. In touring the East Coast, he gets a chance to be away from Abby even when, reluctantly, they have become engaged and she is busy with Matt's mother arranging the wedding.

The title of the film comes from his REM-sleeping-disorder and disturbance. Not only does he have vivid nightmares, he starts to sleepwalk, then re-enact the dreams, which are visualized for us, sometimes quite dangerously. They are a sign that he should not get married, that he is avoiding it, and eventually he makes a decision.

One is sorry for Abby. She seems a nice kind of girl and deserves better.

Audiences who share the same age as Matt and Abby as well as sharing some of their issues might find the film quite telling. For older audiences there are the amusing performances of James Rebhorn as Mike's definite and negative father and his dry wit remarks as well as Carol Kane as his loving but ditheringly loquacious mother.

There is a certain sad sack humor with Mike Birbiglia, reminiscent at times of Woody Allen or Albert Brooks, though without their hangdog looks.

SONG FOR MARION

UK, 2013.

Terence Stamp, Vanessa Redgrave, Gemma Arterton, Chris Eccleston, Anne Reid.

Directed by Paul Andrew Williams.

Song for Marion can be highly recommended for older audiences who will identify with the

characters and their experiences. The generation of children of the older audience's may benefit a great deal from seeing the film.

You have to hand it to Vanessa Redgrave. She has had an extraordinary career for almost fifty years. And she has played a wide range of characters in all kinds of films. Which is an introduction to saying that she gives a wonderful performance here as the Marion of the title. Marion has terminal cancer, only a few months to live. Vanessa Redgrave convinces us completely that she is a woman with this cancer and with only a short time before dying. She is a good wife to her husband, Arthur (Terence Stamp). She is a good mother to her son, Jimmy (Christopher Eccleston). She is also a very friendly woman, and enjoys the company of the choir of fellow old age pensioners. The choir title is The OAPZ, the Z for some pizzazz!

You also have to hand it to Terence Stamp. He has also had a strong career for over fifty years. His portrayal of Arthur, a grumpy old man with a gloomy outlook, harsh expectations of his son with whom he has never got on, yet loving and devoted to his wife, caring for her in her final months, is one of his best performances, also completely convincing.

The first part of the film shows his antagonism towards the choir and his worry about Marion belonging to it. He is even rude to the choir when they come outside the house to serenade Marion when she is too unwell to come to practice. However, the culmination of Marion's being with the choir is a solo at an audition for a local competition. It is held outside, a crowd of people from the town coming to hear, joining in the rollicking performance of some rock and roll songs. But the high point is Vanessa Redgrave's rendition of the song, True Colours.

Marion is sorely missed by Arthur, Jimmy and the choir after her death. We miss her as well. But the film is very much Arthur's film and how he copes with Marion's death and absence.

The catalyst for his change is the conductor of the choir, a young teacher, Elizabeth, played attractively by Gemma Arterton. (It is a pleasure to see her in this engaging performance after her humourless and cold portrayal of Gretel in *Hansel and Gretel: Vampire Hunters*.) She leads the choir, respects the elderly and is caring with each of them. She introduces them to a range of songs that they would not normally sing, and with some raunchy lyrics: Love, Let's Talk About Sex. And they perform them with verve.

While we do expect Arthur to come to terms with the choir, watching him do so is part of the pleasure of the second part of the film. He comes tentatively to the group, gradually allows himself to be influenced by them and by Elizabeth, for whom he sings. He also becomes a kind of sounding board for Elizabeth and her own life. As part of the climax, Arthur also gets his solo song, Goodnight my Darling.

All the time, beside the main themes, is the relationship between father and son, quite harsh on Arthur's side and saddening for Jimmy.

While there is the expected happy ending, it is presented in a rather British way, sentiment, yes, but not overstated and a dramatic device that brings the film quietly to a satisfying end.

In recent times, older audiences have had the pleasure of *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, elite singers in a home for retired musicians in *Quartet* as well as the string quartet and Beethoven in *Performance*. They were very enjoyable but *Song for Marion* has the advantage

that it portrays ordinary people with whom most audiences can identify as well as popular songs.

THERESE DESQUEYROUX

France, 2012.

Audrey Tautou, Gilles Lellouche, Anais Demoustier.

Directed by Claude Miller.

Celebrated French author, Francois Mauriac's 1927 novel was brought to the screen in 1962 in a black and white version, directed by Georges Franju, with Emmanuelle Riva (who had come to attention in the late 1950s, early 1960s in *Hiroshima*, *Mon Amour* and *Leon Morin, Pretre*, and who was Oscar-nominated in 2012 as Best Actress for *Amour*) and Philippe Noiret.

This new version, fifty years later, is in colour and has two of France's most famous contemporary actors, Audrey Tautou and Gilles Lellouche. Audrey Tautou is best-known for her fey *Amelie*. She is far more serious here, barely smiling throughout the whole film. Gilles Lellouche has the advantage of being able to immerse himself in quite a range of films and characters.

The setting has been changed by some years to the late 1920s. It is rural France on the coast, mansions built among pine forests. The film looks the part and period, creating a very French atmosphere.

Therese Desqueyroux is in the vein of the novels by Balzac, Zola and Flaubert. It focuses on a woman who finds herself living in the wrong place and the wrong time. She reads, is introspective and wants order in her life. It is expected that she marries a local, wealthy forest-owner. And she does. It is clear from the start, with her self-preoccupied gloom and his gung-ho attitude towards life, towards hunting, towards business and towards marriage, that the marriage is bound to fail.

On paper the plot can sound melodramatic as Bernard Desqueroux, a touch of hypochondria spoiling his outgoing zest, is prescribed arsenic drops. Arsenic drops are always meant as means for death. Since this is a rather low-key treatment of characters in a society where what people think and say is far more important than basic moral issues, there is no real blow-up about Bernard and his illness. Rather, stories are invented to save face.

Therese intervenes in the life of her childhood friend, and Bernard's sister, Anne, when she becomes infatuated with a local young man from a Portuguese-Jewish family (revealing the underlying anti-Semitism in French society) and loses Anne's friendship. Confined to her house, Therese pines away, her life becoming more squalid as she neglects herself.

Clearly, the novel and film are studies of individuals trapped, willingly or unwillingly, in their lives and circumstances, especially women who are confined by patriarchal expectations. Novel and film are also studies of narrow societies, preoccupied with business success and their reputations.

The treatment is measured, not hurried, giving the audience time to watch, reflect and test

their emotional and moral responses to the characters, especially Therese. This was the final film by prominent French director, Claude Miller.

TRANCE

UK, 2013.

James Mc Avoy, Vincent Cassell, Rosario Dawson

Directed by Danny Boyle.

On exiting a screening of *Trance*, this reviewer would not like to be asked to write a synopsis, let alone be cross-examined on dramatic logic of the plot. For a while, it was quite straightforward with Simon (Mc Avoy) a dealer with a London auction company, explaining auctions, security (in the event of an event, as he says) and explaining that no work of art is worth a human life. More than a bit of irony there by the end of the film.

We see the event, an in-detail, boldly staged robbery of a Goya painting, and the aftermath where Simon is brutally hit and suffers amnesia. The head of the gang, Vincent Cassell, intense as usual, agrees that he should undergo hypnosis. A first session makes a good impression of the skills of the therapist, Elizabeth (Rosario Dawson). From then on...

The film's title refers to the hypnosis sessions and the trance into which the subject goes, revealing more and more about themselves. But, what happens is that we have trances within trances, the suppression of memories, the installing of alternate memories and the subject (and the audience) finding it very difficult to know which trance he is in. This does give the film-makers opportunities to dramatise alternate scenarios, hallucinatory experiences, death in one trance but not in another.

And, if that sounds complicated, when an explanation of what has been going on is offered towards the end, there are twists and turns we had certainly not anticipated.

The performances are effective (though strangely eclectic, a Scots lead allowed to speak with his own accent, a French villain and an American therapist). The film looks very stylish. And it is directed by Danny Boyle who, in the 1990s when he was directed *Inspector Morse* films and his cult films, *Shallow Grave* and *Trainspotting*, might never have dreaded that by 2008, he would have a directing Oscar and Best Film with *Slumdog Millionaire* and by 2012 would be celebrated as the inventive genius behind the Opening Ceremony of the London Olympics. He has made eclectic choices for his films (*The Beach*, *28 Days*, *Sunshine*, *127 Hours*) and *Trance* is quite a different genre.

One comment was that *Trance* was a 'hypnotic mess'. There's something in that. It is certainly intriguing, despite the difficulties in following the plot and psychological character changes. Perhaps it is best to allow oneself to be hypnotised and watch it in the equivalent of a trance state. It is something of an *Inception* in its states within states of consciousness.

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THE BIG WEDDING

US, 2013, 89 minutes, Colour.

Robert de Niro, Diane Keaton, Susan Sarandon, Amanda Seyfried, Ben Barnes, Robin Williams, David Rasche, Ana Ayora, Patricia Rae, Christine Ebersole.

Directed by Justin Zackham.

The adjective 'big' is rather inflated for this 89 minutes comedy-drama. It is a comparatively small affair. However, it does merit at the adjective big in relation to its cast, at least.

But, at the outset, it should be mentioned that there is some unwarranted comment and criticism of aspects of the Catholic Church. It is spoken of in a derogatory way that would not be permitted about some other religions so it seems fair/unfair mockery of things catholic. These include pre-Cana conferences for marriage preparation, the rather idiotic advice from the priest (Robin Williams of all people), who has had alcohol and AA problems. There is also a farcical confession sequence, though the priest does give good advice to one of his conversationalists (that divorce is not a license for hate). And the behavior of the priest and his beliefs is completely inconsistent throughout the film, indicating more farce rather than realism.

This sets something of the tone of the film which, without it, may have been more interesting and acceptable.

However, the reason for calling this The Big Wedding is that the various characters have to participate in a lie: the birth-mother of the groom, who has been adopted by this Connecticut family, is a strict Catholic from Colombia who does not approve of divorce. The family pretend that the father and mother are still to get together.

Some of the strengths of the film are in the key performances. Robert De Niro is much more relaxed than usual as a grouchy father, past philanderer, sculptor and general rather unlikable character. His past wife is played by Diane Keaton with her usual manner and aplomb. De Niro's present partner is played by Susan Sarandon, who has brought up his children as well as the adopted boy and is one of the more sympathetic characters. The married couple is played by Ben Barnes and Amanda Seyfried.

There are also some sub-plots concerning the groom's sister (Katherine Heig) who thought she couldn't have children but has become pregnant though temporarily alienated from her husband. The son, played by Topher Grace, is a surgeon, sexually inexperienced, who comes up against the aggressively sexual sister of the groom (willilngly).

One of the unexpected aspects of the screenplay is the proliferation of sex jokes, some of them funny, some of them silly, some of them crass.

All in all, The Big Wedding is something of a letdown.

BROKEN

UK, 2012.

Tim Roth, Cillian Murphy, Eloise Laurence, Rory Kinnear, Zana Karjanovic.

Directed by Rufus Norris.

A very sad film, with some touches of hope at the end. All of the characters are broken in one way or other.

This is a British film, a north London film, generally confined to a street with a closed circle at the end of it, confined to three adjacent houses. In 90 minutes, we clome to understand several of the characters even when it is hard to offer them sympathy. However, we are invited to look at them through the eyes of an eleven year old girl, her nickname Skunk, as well as look at Skunk herself. She is played with skill and verve by Eloise Laurence, her first film.

Initially we see Skunk chatting with Rick (Robert Emms), a young man just over the way. He is cleaning the car and, listening to him, we realise he is a slow-learner. Suddenly the man next door comes out and bases Rick. We learn he is Mr Oswald (Rory Kinnear), widowed with three daughters. Skunk is taken aback, even more so when the police arrive and it is Rick they are taking in.

The situation is soon explained and we begin to learn about each household.

Rick had an accident, almost drowning, when he was five. He is cared for by his loving parents.

One of Oswald's daughters (who become increasingly obnoxious as the film progresses) is found with a condom and says she had sex with Rick to save herself from her father's anger. Once again, we see him go and and bash Rick, calling him a pervert, which is why he was

arrested.

Meanwhile, Skunk lives at home with her father, solicitor Archie (Tim Roth) who tries to intervene and make peace but is himself threatened by Oswald. Archie's wife has left him and he has a woman in, Kasia (Zana Marjanovic) to look after Skunk and her brother, Jed (Bill Milner). Kasia has a long time boyfriend, Mike (Cillian Murphy) who is at home there.

Ordinary enough, but enough for many problems. Skunk is preparing for high school (and Jed is trying to frighten her about how hard it is). She does fall foul of the smallest of the Oswalds who runs a protection racket in the school, with a crass mouth but a determination that is a combination of a young Margaret Thatcher and the criminal Krays. She and her sister also beat up Skunk and Mike intervenes.

Rick stays in his room, his mother trying to persuade him to come out by reminiscing about how his father saved him and how they love him. He goes to an institution, later comes home for a weekend which is tragic.

When one of the Oswald girls has a miscarriage at a party at home, Oswald assumes the worst, bashes Mike. Archie is solicitor for the detective's questioning.

And that is not all, quite a few more plot complications, but it gives an indication of what can happen in any suburban street. We all know people who may live in one or other of these houses. But, this is a brief, effective slice of life which raises the question of who is to blame for what happens, who is responsible – or whether small things, quick lies, temper, betrayals, misunderstandings can lead to more tragic consequences.

THE CALL

US, 2013, 94 minutes, Colour.

Halle Berry, Abigail Breslin, Morris Chestnut, Michael Eklund, Roma Mafia.

Directed by Brad Anderson.

For the most part, this is quite an engrossing thriller. The two central characters are women and watching and experiencing their ordeals will probably be more intense for women in the audience rather than for men. While it is a police drama, the central character is employed for answering 911 calls, some of which are quite tough and harrowing for the operative, emotionally demanding and draining. The victim is a teenager abducted from a mall car park and subjected to violence and some mental and physical torture. In the US, it was released not long before the rescue of three women who had been abducted in their teens and held prisoner in a Cleveland house for ten years.

The film opens very interestingly with views of Los Angeles before going into the key room where the 911 calls are answered. It gives quite a picture of those staffing the phones, of what is required of them, skills in talking to upset callers, typing in information, enabling police to identify callers, bring up their photos as well as tracing car number plates and finding addresses and information as well as doing fingerprint checks.

The first episode has Jordan (Halle Berry) working with a young girl while an intruder is in

the house. The case ultimately leads to failure when the mobile phone cuts out and Jordan makes a connection, the intruder still being in the house rather than outside which was presumed. This has quite an emotional effect on Jordan. She does get good support from other workers and her supervisor.

She becomes a trainer. But, while she is showing the interns around, another call comes in from another teenager (Abigail Breslin) and the core of the film is Jordan keeping Casey on line, advising her on how to knock out lights on the boot of the car where the abductor has put her, pour paint out the hole... But, she has a temporary mobile which can't immediately be traced. And so, the search for the suspect involves police, some concerned citizens on the freeway and Jordan using her wits to encourage Casey to fight.

It is only gradually that we see the face and then the whole person of the abductor who then becomes more desperate and more impulsively violent.

When Jordan is told to stand down and rest, she doesn't (of course) and then goes out in search of Casey. While mobile phones are key to the process, there are a few inconsistencies in their use (leaving a message on a phone which we have seen receives no signal, and Jordan (of course) dropping it a crucial moment).

While the confrontation is tense and an exercise in using wits, it is the final key moment that jars. It is emotionally comprehensible, but morally...?

Strange how a final minute of a film can change a moral perspective and what has been a satisfying thriller leaves the audience cheering (when it shouldn't) or aghast at the decision Jordan and Casey make.

CAMILLE REWINDS

France, 2012, 115 minutes, Colour.

Noemie Lvovsky, Samir Guesmi, Yolande Moreau, Jean- Pierre Leaud, Denis Polydades, Matthieu Amalric.

Directed by Noemie Lvovsky.

Poor Camille. At 40, it looks as though her world is collapsing. Her marriage certainly is. Her husband, Eric, has gone off with a younger woman. Camille is left with her daughter, and a huge bout of self-pity.

She has been drinking. There is an accident. She wakes up. Lo and behold, she is 16 again.. And she is resuming her life as it was, though she knows what is to come. Will it be the same? Can she change it? Does she want to change it, despite knowing?

This serious comedy has been written and directed by Noemi Lvovsky. And she plays Camille, looking rather dowdy at 40 and, to the audiences' eyes and her own, looking the same when she reverts to 16. There she is with her friends at school, back in the styles, the music and the would-be daring of the 80s. There she is at home, amazed to see her mother and father again, relishing the time with them but knowing when they are to die – some particularly strong pathos scenes in her last talk with her mother and her realising that she has died, again.

And Eric? Is he the insensitive middle-aged man that we have seen? Was he always like this? And will Camille fall in love with him again? Well, Eric is not so bad when young – and one of the feelings as we watch is that we wonder how he could turn out as he did and how could he treat Camille in this way in the future.

There are some magic realism moments, especially with veteran Jean- Pierre Leaud behind the counter in a pawn shop and Denis Polydades as the teacher who reappears at the end.

All very French, though the Americans did a variation on the theme in Coppola's Peggy Sue Got Married with Kathleen Turner.

Light touches, serious touches – and Camille comes back to the present, a little wiser, a little more realistic, ready to take charge of her life.

DEAD MAN DOWN

US, 2013, 117 minutes, Colour.

Colin Farrell, Noomi Rapace, Terrence Howard, Dominic Cooper, Isabelle Huppert, F. Murray Abraham.

Directed by Niels Arden Oplev.

Promotion for Dead Man Down might give the impression that this is an action show. The film is book-ended (film-ended?) by two big shootouts, one is a drug-dealer's headquarters, the other in a gangster's mansion. But, for the most part, the film is a drama, a revenge thriller that leads to some deeper characterisations and issues.

After that first confrontation where we see Victor (Colin Farrell) save the life of the gangster, Alphonse (Terrence Howard), where we have made judgments about Victor, Alphonse and their gang, we are led to see a different side of Victor. His being part of the gang is to wreak revenge for the death of his wife and child two years earlier. We see him quietly watching the DVDs of the family.

But, across the way from his apartment – and they are several floors up – there is a woman watching him. Victor has a scarred heart. She has a scarred face, treatment after being hit by a drunk driver. She is Beatrice, French, a beautician, living with her mother. She makes more direct contact with Victor and surprises him and the audience with what she is after.

She is played by Noomi Rapace, the Swedish actress who was the Girl with the Dragon Tattoo. In fact, the film is directed by Niels Arden Oplev, who directed the first film in that Swedish Trilogy, Millennium. And her mother is played by Isabelle Huppert, a bonus for lovers of French films. Another brief bonus is the appearance of F. Murray Abraham as Victor's uncle.

The world we are shown is certainly a world of violence, with some alarming scenes. And there is the puzzle that we do not see any police.

So this is the story of Victor and Beatrice and their relationship, the revenge motivation that has been mentioned, and the theme of sadness and grief.

There is a further complication with Darcy, a young man hoping to climb the gangster ladder,

but who has a wife and young child with Victor as godfather. How does Darcy respond when he learns the truth about Victor.

The screenplay by J.H. Wyman is clever, making all kinds of links with some unexpected connections. However, the no police is a puzzle and there are some convenient plot devices that are contrived. So, realists beware. But, of course, this is not a documentary and contrivance is of the essence of this kind of storytelling. The world is brutal but the story is well told.

EVIL DEAD

US, 2013, 92 minutes, Colour.

Jane Levy, Shiloh Fernandez, Lou Taylor Pulci.

Directed by Fede Alvarez.

Horror fans have put the 1981 original *The Evil Dead*, directed by an as-yet-to-be-discovered Sam Raimi, near the top of their horror cult classics. Small-budget, gory, brutal and a mish-mash of supernatural and demonic eeriness.

Bigger budget this time and slicker production values. Mixed reviews, but the devotees of the original have not always been persuaded.

Of course, this is a film only for horror fans. Anyone not on this wavelength wandering *Evil Dead* by mistake will be exiting the cinema quick smart. Horror films like this intend to be as visually striking (and sometimes disgusting) as they dare or as their imaginations will let them. This usually means a diminishing cast, dispatched in frightening circumstances, capitalising on stunt work and special effects.

And, that is what happens here. It takes itself seriously, not really doing the ironic or tongue-in-cheek thing, though there are moments when fans will gasp and laugh. Unlike the old slasher films, this is not a group of young people going into the woods where they let their capacity for sleazy behaviour loose.

This group is much more serious, trying to help a friend to go cold turkey. Unfortunately for them, their cabin in the woods (there are always cabins in the woods) is the site for witchcraft (which we see in a pre-credits' sequence).

The group find a book of the evil dead and let the demons or whatever evil it is take over and destroy them.

To the extent that the characters are a little more rounded and interesting than usual, to the extent that the gore, slashes and amputations are splashed with large blood spurts, then mission accomplished.

THE GREAT GATSBY

Australia/US, 2013, 140 minutes, Colour.

Leonardo di Caprio, Tobey Maguire, Cary Mulligan, Joel Edgerton, Isla Fisher, Jason Clarke, Elizabeth Debicki, Jack Thompson.
Directed by Baz Luhrman.

Baz Luhrman has said that F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel did not receive good reviews when it was published. Nevertheless, it was popular, was quickly adapted for the stage and then filmed, a silent version which has been lost. Baz Luhrman's version of what is now called the great American novel has not received good reviews either, many of them complaining that he has not filmed the book as they know and like it, losing its subtlety, and indulging in the flashy flamboyance that is Luhrman's trademark. They tend to be reviewing Luhrman rather than the film. And, after all, it is not the novel, but an interpretation.

There have also been three other versions of *The Great Gatsby*, one in 1949 (in black and white) with Alan Ladd, another in 1974 with Robert Redford, and a television version in 2000 with Toby Stephens (giving it a limited world audience). Which means that there has not been a version in cinemas since 1974, the year that Leonardo di Caprio was born – and he filmed the current version when he was the same age as Robert Redford was for his.

Which means that this is a version for the 21st century. It is bigger and brighter. It is more forthright about relationships, betrayals, and sexuality than the previous versions. It has a brighter soundtrack and was filmed in 3D.

Baz Luhrman keeps close to Fitzgerald's plot about the mysteriously rich man who has bought a Long Island mansion in 1922, throws lavish parties even though he himself is not always visible. The glitterati of the time rush uninvited and swamp the wild goings on. But, behind the scenes is a rather simple, even naïve, plot where a man wants to meet his lost love and arranges opportunities so that he can win her back.

The plot is told from the point of view of broker, Nick Carraway, who rented a cottage next to Gatsby's mansion, is a cousin of Daisy Buchanan, Gatsby's love, and went to college with Tom Buchanan, Daisy's husband. The film opens with Nick in an institution where he recounts his memories to his doctor who urges him to write it all down. Nick admires Gatsby, inviting us to do the same, even though Gatsby has more than a shady past, which he lies about, amplifying his reputation - and a more than questionable present. Some critics think that Luhrman has made him too much of a romantic hero, and there is a point in that comment.

The trouble is that Fitzgerald did not have much time (at least in theory) for this rich and self-indulgent crowd, and Nick certainly makes some condemnatory comments about them at the end. The other trouble is that Daisy may have been a sweet young woman when Gatsby, in the army, first met her. But, in truth, she is shallow, selfish and ultimately, quite fickle. Gatsby loves her but over-idealises her. Buchanan is something of a rotter and has an affair with the wife of the local garage operator and throws sex parties at the apartment he has set up for his lover. The situation builds up to a confrontation between Buchanan and Gatsby and a motor accident which leads to more manipulation and tragedy.

There is also that mesmerising billboard near the garage, the eyes staring out at all that is going on.

So, small and rather ordinary scenario given multi-million dollar treatment to bring to the screen a lavish era in America.

The cast is wide-ranging with many Australian actors in supporting roles. Jack Thompson is the doctor, Isla Fisher and Jason Clarke are the Wilsons at the garage, Elizabeth Debicki is Daisy's friend, Jordan. There are glimpses of Barry Otto, Vince Colossimo and other Australian character actors. The production was done in Australia, relying on effects work as well as the costumes and design by Luhrman's wife, Catherine Martin.

But, for the American novel, the stars are American – well, Cary Mulligan, Daisy, is British. Leonardo di Caprio has been a strong and intense performer for over twenty years, since he was a teenager. He creates an effective Gatsby. Toby Maguire (and his voice) are something of an acquired taste, but he fits the role of Nick Carraway very well. But it is Joel Edgerton who gives a striking performance as Tom Buchanan, a selfish and angry man, who won't let go of what he possesses.

As with Baz Luhrman's films, you surrender to them and get carried along, or you resist them and spend the time cataloguing what you think is wrong with them. It's a choice.

THE HANGOVER PART III

US, 2013, 97 minutes, Colour.

Bradley Cooper, Ed Helms, Zach Galafiniakis, Justin Bartha, John Goodman, Ken Jeong, Heather Graham.

Directed by Todd Phillips.

Who would have thought that The Hangover would have become such a successful Hollywood franchise? This one is not as funny (a guilty pleasure) as the first film, which even won a Golden Globe as Best Comedy. This one is much better than the second one which was a raunchy repeat trying to rely on an exotic Asian atmosphere to make a difference. So, somewhere in between one and two! And there are not so many drinks around, until the final credits.

Zach Galifiniakis has always been a strong focus of the films even though he does not get top billing. But it is he, Alan, who tends to control, not always intentionally, what happens. The film opens with a dead animal's joke (and there are more dead animals in the body count this time, chickens and dogs, than gangsters), a giraffe, which has the power to put off some audiences right from the start. But, allowing for the unreality (we hope) and absurdity, it leads us into the tantrums, blind consequences of Alan's man-child attitudes and behaviour. He can be most irritating and, yet, often quite funny. Ed Helms, Stu the dentist, relies on timing rather than flamboyant comedy. Top-billed Bradley Cooper (who has been extending his on-screen range and getting award nominations for The Silver Linings Playbook) doesn't deserve it. He is serious-faced a lot of the time, sometimes suggesting that he would rather be elsewhere, a spoilsport face that doesn't communicate any humour.

Then there is Ken Jeong the mad Mr Chow, who obviously relishes the more screen time he gets and the more manic behaviour that is asked of him. John Goodman as a surly gangster is surly and cruel. The main plotline involves the trio trying to get stolen gold back from Mr Chow for the gangster while the other friend, Doug (Justin Bartha) is being held hostage.

There are some amusing moments and Melissa McCarthy² (after funny turns in Bridesmaids, This is 40 and Identity Theft) has a more restrained funny cameo.

The American bloggers have decided against it – with a vengeance. The message may be that while you are on a good thing, stick to it (at least for box-office returns), but too many repeats is a risk and you can run out of steam, and puff.

THE HUNT/ JAGTEN

Denmark, 2012, 109 minutes, Colour.

Mads Mikkelsen.

Directed by Thomas Vinterberg.

In the last twenty years, awareness of the realities of sexual abuse of minors, individual, in families, in institutions, in the churches, has increased, more than could ever have been anticipated. The Hunt, an excellent film, can be seen in an important and significant context.

But, the consciousness is quite different in different cultures. English-speaking countries were the first to experience this surfacing of issues of abuse with consequent police investigations and court proceedings. In the 1990s, many commentators from countries in continental Europe were in denial about such events in their cultures. They have had to face the problems since. So, it is interesting to see a film from Denmark. While it is an education situation that is dramatized here, it is a secular case, nothing to do with church or church institutions (although it is a Lutheran ceremony that serves as a catalyst for a confrontation, as will be mentioned later).

It can be noted that The Hunt was awarded the prize of the Ecumenical Jury in Cannes 2012.

The focus is on a kindergarten teacher in a small Danish town. He is shown as a popular man with the men, many of whom are literal hunters of deer since venison is a favoured meat. The teacher himself, Lukas, hunts. We see him playing in a lively way and vigorously with the children at the kindergarten (something that would not be permitted in many countries now). He is a good man, an average man, who is lonely after his separation from his bitter wife who allows him to see his son only every other weekend.

Klara, the daughter of his best friend, Theo, is fond of Lukas' dog and wants to take him for a walk. When her parents quarrel, he takes her to school. One day she kisses him and he tries to tell her that this is not quite right. At the same time, her brother and his friend show her pictures of an erect penis (which we, the audience, see so that we are experiencing our own reactions as well). In a little girl pique, she indicates to the principal that Lukas had exposed himself to her.

The audience knows that Lukas is innocent, so the film-makers invite us to share the experiences of a man who is not only the victim of a little child's lie, but incurs the wrath of the town who readily believe that a child does not lie. He is demonized and is ostracized, even in the supermarket where we are horrified at the violence and hate in a bashing from people who assume the worst. This is lynch mob mentality in a contemporary setting.

The audience is made to witness the handling of the situation by the kindergarten principal and an expert she calls in. While they are sympathetic and think they are doing the right thing, their questioning is completely unprofessional, asking leading questions, putting ideas and images (especially in naming aspects of male sexual behaviour) in Klara's mind. While the little girl does hesitate and even contradict herself, it is clear that she has become confused as well as willful, can't quite remember what she has said and acquiesces in what could become implanted memories.

The only support Lukas gets is from a friend and his family where the father is a lawyer who helps, especially after Lukas is arrested and interrogated by the police. This interrogation is not part of the screenplay. We do not know how the police handled it. By this time, all the children believe that they have been abused – but their memory describes places that do not exist. The other support for Lukas is from his son who is also ill-treated, becoming angry and angrier.

As mentioned earlier, it is a Christmas Eve ceremony in the local Lutheran church, with prayer and the children singing hymns where Lukas is able to confront Theo about his innocence. The Christmas spirit and his conscience touch Theo.

Then, the film seemed to be moving towards a very Hollywood ending, nice, until a final shot jolts Lukas and the audience as well. The experience and the stigma might never go away.

Danish actor Mads Mikkelsen has played many a villain in his local films as well as in international films (like *Le Chiffre* in *Casino Royale*). He won the Cannes Best Actor award for this role and, generally quietly, bewildered, then angry at people's unquestioning hatred, he enables us to share something of what this experience is like, how at times, it seems that he can never escape from it, that his fate is doomed.

Director Thomas Vinterberg is no stranger to these themes. His 1998, *Festen* has become something of a classic, the audience going into a home to share a feast and celebration only to find the surfacing of the ugliest of secrets, and sexual misconduct, within the family.

The public these days have strong opinions and feelings about sexual abuse, especially towards perpetrators and to authorities who have protected them. Stage government enquiries and the Royal Commission will surface more and more horrendous stories over the coming years. *The Hunt* is a reminder that, especially with small children, greater care needs to be taken when they tell their stories so that they will be protected but that the truth will come out and anyone wrongly accused will be treated with justice and compassion.

(Indictment: *The Mc Martin Trial* is an American film of 1995, well worth seeing. The staff of a child care centre were the targets of some false accusations, the children caught up in sharing each other's alleged memories, with the danger of psychiatrists not simply surfacing repressed memories but suggesting and implanting memories.)

MUD

US, 2012, 130 minutes, Colour.

Matthew Mc Connaughey, Tye Sheridan, Sam Shepard, Reese Witherspoon, Ray Mc Kinnon, Sarah Paulson, Joe Don Baker.

Directed by Jeff Nichols.

There are many good things in *Mud* (despite the tone of the title). It has been written and directed by Jeff Nichols who made the striking mid-American apocalyptic drama, *Take Shelter*. Once again, he is in the mid-West, on the Mississippi River in Arkansas. The photography of the small town, the boats on the banks, the rivers in mid-stream, helps us to feel that we have been there.

This is the story of two young lads growing up, working on the river and with fish sales, dealing with problems at home, discovering the attractiveness and the sometimes fickleness of girls, then faced with some crises that they should never have had to face. Tye Sheridan as the young Ellis gives an excellent performance, credible and sympathetic. As his friend Neckbone, Jacob Lofland is harder, more wary of what happens, yet a backup to Ellis.

But what is the mud of the title? The wet beach on the island? The sludge near the houseboats on the river? Rather, the question is who is Mud?

He is a local who has gone away, experienced a muddled kind of life, always following his childhood sweetheart, Juniper, who falls in and out of love with him. In anger, Mud has shot a man who was violent to her and is now on the run. He has found a boat stranded by low tides in a tree on the island. The boys come to claim it and find Mud. He asks for help, for food, for tools, for an engine for the boat. While Neckbone is suspicious, Ellis likes Mud and helps him.

Life is complicated for Ellis because his mother is tired of life on the boat, wants to move to town and take Ellis with her. But he is devoted to his father as well, working with him on deliveries. Neckbone, meanwhile is being looked after by his oyster-farming uncle (Michael Shannon who starred in *Take Shelter*).

Mud plans to rendezvous with Juniper (Reese Witherspoon) and asks Ellis to be a go-between, involving him in matters he cannot quite understand and appreciate. And which becomes dangerous when the family of the dead man come searching for vengeance.

The other character is an old CIA agent and assassin (Sam Shepard) who had been a father-figure to Mud and whom the boys bring out to the island to talk with Mud.

The characters are well-written and well-acted, drawing the audience deeply into the story. The star attraction is Matthew Mc Conaughey as Mud. In recent years, Mc Conaughey has moved away from the romantic comedies he seemed to be stuck in and has made fine appearances in *Bernie*, *Magic Mike*, *The Paperboy*.

On paper, Mud might seem ordinary, even slight, but on screen it makes a strong impression.

THE RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST

US/UK/Qatar, 2012, 130 minutes, Colour.

Riz Ahmed, Liev Schreiber, Kate Hudson, Kiefer Sutherland, Om Puri, Martin Donovan.

Directed by Mira Nair.

A strikingly challenging film.

Based on a Pakistani novel, this is a parable for a post-9/11 world. It is the story of Changez, a young man from Lahore, who goes to the US, to Harvard, where he completes a successful degree and is head-hunted by a top Manhattan financial company, a company who not only advises but closes down unprofitable businesses. He lives a late 20th century version of Wall St and greed is good. Changez excels in his work, travels to Manila and Istanbul, and is offered a partnership. We see all of this in a series of flashbacks as Changez is being interviewed by an American journalist, Bobby Lincoln.

British actor, Riz Ahmed is convincing as Changez. Liev Schreiber has a substantial role as Bobby.

But, the context of the interview is the abduction of an American university professor in Lahore and the surveillance of Changez's family, his father (Om Puri) being a celebrated poet and the family in the spotlight because by this time, 2011, Changez is a professor at the university, teaching courses on ideologies and violence, well-respected by his students, but under suspicion by the local CIA operatives, led by Martin Donovan.

An important development in Changez's life is his encounter with a photographer (a solid performance from Kate Hudson) which mellows him. But, unintended events after 9/11 have disastrous consequences.

After the flashbacks narration of Changez's life in the US, there follows the narrative which makes Changez the reluctant fundamentalist of the title. He is in Manila when he sees the planes crashing into the twin towers. He returns to a United States already embarked on the war against terror. In declaring it a war, President George Bush set up a fierce dichotomy against American citizens and Arabs from Middle Eastern nations as well as Arabs in the US who became targets of the bigoted patriotism that ensued the declaration of war, compounded by the attack on Afghanistan and, later, on Iraq.

We are shown this American aggression and bad-thinking bigotry: an wrong identification in mid-Manhattan where Changez is taken into custody (just doing my job says the arresting policeman), his tyres let down in a car park and a driver spitting on him, calling him Osama. The worst, which audiences will find irking, is his being taken aside on his return from Manila, segregated and strip-searched on the assumption that he was suspect because of his look and his beard. There are even unthinkingly snide remarks in the office.

And, back to Changez and Bobby, the CIA attacking the café where they are speaking, student protests, deaths and the anti-American stances, even of those who love America (as the final words of the film indicate).

It is easy, outside the United States, to look at both sides than it may be for American audiences. There is great regret at the events and deaths on that September day. But, it is the consequences that we live with, one of which was the often blinkered anti-terrorist responses amongst officials and from ordinary citizens.

SCARY MOVIE 5

US, 2013, 86 minutes, Colour.

Ashley Tisdale, Simon Rex, Erica Ash, Terry Crews, Charlie Sheen, Lindsay Lohan, Jerry O'Connell, Mike Tyson.

Directed by Malcolm D. Lee.

Scary Movie 5 comes in quite a long line of film parodies of horror stories. They began in the 1990s, introduced by members of the Wayans family. They relied on broad parallels with some of the popular horror films of the time, on some fairly obvious puns and jokes, on a fair amount of crassness. And some of the Wayans family participated in writing and acting. Anna Faris was a regular as the put upon heroine. This time it is Ashley Tisdale.

Once again, current films have been targeted.

The obvious popular target at this period is the film series, Paranormal Activity, four of them to date. This means that a lot of the film is done with handheld camera with the timing patterns, and the speeding up, in the bottom right hand corner. However, while there are parallels to scenes in these films, the basic plot is taken from the thriller Mama, with Jessica Chastain: an uncle searching for his nieces who disappeared, their reappearance in a wild state, the inability of their uncle's partner to deal with them, her getting used to them. In the meantime, the eerie mama keeps appearing in the background until the anticipated cliff-top climax. References also to The Cabin in the Woods.

The film unexpectedly brings in The Black Swan, the aunt having a career in ballet, scenes with a very camp director, auditions, a black rival who is able to do pole dances, but helps the heroine in the search for the children - along with a gratuitous lesbian fantasy. And the finale of the ballet is nothing like Tchaikovsky!

Another film parodied is The Rise of the Planet of the Apes, with the uncle working in laboratories, bringing of the Caesar, the ape home, his reactions after its discovery that it could speak, its collaboration with other apes – but not nearly as much mayhem as in the original.

And, even though the film has not yet been made, there is a send-up of Fifty Shades of Grey with Jerry O'Connell and Mike Tyson!

The other spoof at the beginning and the end is a bedroom scene with Charlie Sheen and Lindsay Lohan, full of speeded up sexual gymnastics, parodying the reputation of both stars always in the news for their behaviour. And there are some extra jokes about Lindsay Lohan's drinking and bad driving. Whether this was good judgment on their part is another matter, though it is funny.

Given the list of films that are being parodied, it is not so much a matter of surprise with parallels but rather audiences enjoying the parallels as well as the contrasts.

This kind of spoof film is ephemeral, and pokes fun at the tastes and interests of its period.

SNITCH

US, 2013, 117 minutes, Colour.

Dwayne Johnson, Jon Bernthal, Susan Sarandon, Barry Pepper, Rafi Gavron, Benjamin Bratt.
Directed by Rick Roman Waugh.

Audiences have generally found Snitch much better than they anticipated. And that is probably because of their opinion of Dwayne Johnson and remembering that he started in show business in wrestling as The Rock. His early films were action shows (as have been some of his later films) and required more brawn than brain. However, over the years, he has shown that he can be a strong screen presence and can do ironic comedy (Get Shorty, Get Smart, and his turn in Tooth Fairy with Julie Andrews) as well as drama. Here he opts for drama.

The opening proclaims that the story is based on actual events, and the closing credits that it draws upon a television documentary. It is about drugs, the strict legislation against dealers and suspected dealers, the work of the DEA, Drug Enforcement Agency, and the role of prosecutors.

When his son is arrested for ecstasy-dealing, construction company boss, John (Johnson) confronts the law and, especially the district prosecutor, Susan Sarandon handling a good, strong role, with a proposal that, if he could bring dealers down, his son's sentence could be lessened. He enlists the help of one of his workers, Daniel (Jon Bernthal) who has served time for drug offences – though he does not tell him what he is really up to – and he hauls drugs from El Paso where a Mexican cartel boss opens fire on the local dealers.

Which leads to an even bigger deal for the prosecutor, to transport millions of dollars in cash to the cartel. While the drama has been tense up till now, adrenalin is pumped all round with some spectacular car/truck chases in the American extroverted way. And the prosecutor is up for re-election and this is a publicity ploy as well.

It can be said that there is some use of guns, but far less than might have been expected. But, most of the time, it is a drama about family and the lengths a father will go to save his son.

SPRING BREAKERS

US, 2013, 94 minutes, Colour.

James Franco, Vanessa Hudgens, Ashley Britt, Selena Gomez, Rachel Korine.
Directed by Harmony Korine.

Interesting is not the first adjective that comes to mind while watching this surreal and gaudy film.

Spring Break films (and there have been many over the decades) are generally an excuse for showing college students behaving badly, a self-indulgence experience where goals are completely hedonistic, sex, drugs, sex, drugs, sex...

This is all here in Spring Breakers (and then some). There is a credit for costume designer (which would have made almost no demands for the female characters). But Harmony Korine is making an ambiguous film, boring us into understanding as someone wrote.

The film is like a visual collage rather than a narrative. One can draw out a narrative. Four girls think they live boring lives (though one is a born again Christian) and are determined that their spring break is going to free them and change their lives. What is involved is a robbery for them to finance their holiday, an encounter with a gold-filled toothy mounted character called Alien. He finds them in court, takes a shine to them but is also interested in getting them to do some of his dirty work against a rival. It ends badly for some of them.

But, it is a collage, not presented in linear form, dipping into episodes moving backwards and forwards in time, repeating phrases, especially phone calls home to mother or grandmother. It is as if the director told the cast what to do, how to pose, perhaps improvise with some dialogue and then films short sequences, ready to edit them in whenever he feels like it. This means that the performances, especially of the girls (who are a bit interchangeable), do not create credible characters, cyphers for the points Korine wants to make. James Franco, on the other hand, with those gold teeth and banded hair-do, is much more successful. But, he too is still presented as a collage character. There is also a black dealer and his women and a violent end.

Many commentators have said that Korine is anti the spring break ethos. Probably, but there is lots of sex and sand and drugs that looks like self-indulgence as well.

STAR TREK INTO DARKNESS

US, 2013, 132 minutes, Colour.

Chris Pine, Zachary Quinto, Benedict Cumberbatch.

Directed by J.J.Abrams.

We are into it instantly. We are in the middle of a mission, Kirk and Bones fleeing from a primitive, spear-brandishing tribe, with Spock descending to deal with a fiery-fierce volcano. This review is based on a 3D version on an IMAX screen with pounding score.

But, the tribe and the volcano are not the main story. In London, a Starfleet expert, John Harrison, wreaks destruction on a vast plant. In San Francisco (both cities 200 or more years hence looking futuristic, of course, with tall buildings and speeding vehicles), the Starfleet conference room is attacked by the same expert. He is played by Benedict Cumberbatch, who is having an increasingly important film career in films but also as Sherlock in the modernised television movies. Yes, another British villain! But, as we listen to his speeches (and he has quite a few), we realise that Americans don't have the diction, accent or voice modulation that a clipped, clear, rounded, vowel-perfect British voice can give to such rhetorical interventions.

But, back to the crew and the plot.

We are four years on from J.J.Abrams first Star Trek film which brought the franchise alive again on the big screen and which brought a younger cast in to replace, with as many similarities as possible, the original crew of Starship Enterprise.

Chris Pine became Captain James Kirk and continues his adventurous, sometimes pig-headed, leadership of the Enterprise – with some scenes of American superiority at its gung

hoest. Zachary Quinto is a very effective new Spock. Simon Pegg provides humour and his scientific know-how as Scotty (with some beaming ups – or beamings up), Zoe Saldana is something of glamorous Uhura, John Cho is a Korean Sulu, instead of the original Japanese, Karl Urban a wry Bones and Anton Yelchin fiddling with an Eastern European accent as Chekov. There is another addition to the crew, Alice Eve as another expert, daughter of the Starfleet admiral (Peter Weller).

So, there is quite some satisfaction with the crew. There is more than satisfaction with the set and production design, the vast sets of the space ships and their docking bases, the enormous interiors. And, as for special effects and stunt work, they are most impressive. Plenty of action.

At one stage we see Leonard Nimoy on the screen, the older Spock talking to the younger Spock. In probing the identity of John Harrison and his cargo of cryogenic allies planted secretly in powerful space torpedoes, the older Spock makes a vital link with the past, a connection in characters, plot and issues with the films of the past. Which, of course, makes it that much more interesting.

Lots of heroics, of course: Kirk prepared to give his life in the radiation core of the ship to save his crews' lives, which gives Spock the opportunity to do individual battle with Harrison, Uhura coming to the rescue. Bones helps dismantle torpedoes as well as looking after health. Scotty races and uses his wits so that Kirk and Harrison, in flying suits hurtling through space can rendezvous on the admiral's ship. Sulu has the chance to be acting captain.

Mix all that together, especially in a plotline that is always clear, even when it is convoluted, and you have a spectacular screen experience, vast action along with 3D cameras which enable you to see every contour, every line, facial hair on Kirk's face in minute close-up!

It has been announced that J.J. Abrams' next project is directing Star Wars Episode 7. On this evidence, no wonder. And, as fans might say, 'Bring it on'.

FILM REVIEWS JUNE 2013

AFTER EARTH

AUDIENCE, The

DESPICABLE ME 2

ERRORS OF THE HUMAN BODY

EVERYBODY HAS A PLAN/ TODOS TENEMOS UN PLAN

FAST AND THE FURIOUS 6, The

HAPPINESS NEVER COMES ALONE

INTERNSHIP, The

IN THE HOUSE

LADY IN PARIS, A

LONE RANGER, The

MAN OF STEEL

METRO
MONSTERS UNIVERSITY
ONE MILE ABOVE
STILL MINE
SATELLITE BOY
TO THE WONDER
WORLD WAR Z
YOU AIN'T SEEN NOTHIN' YET

AFTER EARTH

US, 2013.
Jaden Smith, Will Smith, Sophie Okonedo.
Directed by M Night Shyamalan.

Probably best to describe this futuristic story, set a thousand years from now, as a film for boys age, say, ten to fifteen. The hero is a 14 year old, a recruit for the rangers on the Nova planet. He is brash and not promoted which compounds his sense of guilt for the death of his sister when he failed a test, thinking his father blames him. His father is the commanding general of the rangers.

But, the father takes his son on an expedition to bond with him. When their space ship crashes to earth after being damaged by a meteor storm, they are stranded. The boy has to travel 100 miles to find a beacon to fire for safety. Will he do it? Earth has a different atmosphere. Animals, some ferocious, roam. The temperature lowers at night.

The film has received bad reviews, some of it critical of the director whose reputation has lessened after his success with *The Sixth Sense* in 1999. His last film was *The Last Airbender*. And some commentators are critical of Will Smith. He wrote the story of the film and co-wrote the screenplay with the director. It is a star vehicle for his son, Jaden. He gives him top billing. They had worked together some years ago in *The Pursuit of Happyness* and Jaden Smith was *The Karate Kid* in the re-make with Jackie Chan.

So, if *After Earth* is judged according to the expectations for more adult-oriented films like *Oblivion*, then it fails. If it is reviewed as a Boys' Own Adventure for teenage boys, it is a short story with some nice touches as real-life father and son portray father and son and their bonding. Jaden Smith is certainly not the world's best actor but he manages and gets better as he has to hold the story together. It's a limited film, limited by its scope and target audience as well as in performance. It deserves a chance.

THE AUDIENCE

UK, 2013.
Helen Mirren, Richard Mc Cabe, Edward Fox, Haydn Gwynne, Paul Ritter.
Directed by Stephen Daldrey.

With its excellent performances, its cleverly constructed plot and, its fine, often humorous, dialogue, this film could also be described as 'miraculous'. At least in this regard, that in its

presentation of Queen Elizabeth the second and her audiences where seven of her prime ministers over many decades, it could actually make a staunch Republican very sympathetic to her majesty.

This is a filmed version of a performance by the National Theatre at the Gielgud Theatre in London's west end. It is one of the very successful series of National Theater Live, transmitted in the United Kingdom to a number of cinemas around Britain then, later, screened in cinemas internationally.

The play was directed by Steven Daldrey (director of Billy Elliot, The Hours, The Reader). And what makes it particularly special is that Helen Mirren reprises her performance as Queen Elizabeth from her Oscar winning role in the film, The Queen.

But one of the main contributions to the success of the play is the writing by Peter Morgan. Morgan has had a very successful stage, television and screen career, writing such films as The Deal, The Last King of Scotland, The Queen, The Special Relationship, 360. One of his greatest stage successes was Frost Nixon, also filmed.

This film is a development of Morgan's interest in the queen. It is pointed out that the queen meets her prime minister every Tuesday evening at 6:30 PM. What goes on is confidential but Morgan has speculated, given a lot of facts about the queen and the prime ministers concerned, as well as the historical context, what might have occurred in some of these audiences. In fact, he offers great insights into the prime ministers themselves as well as into the queen and her attitudes towards them and her dealings with them over 60 years. 12 prime ministers have served during her reign.

There is a great deal going on in the background of the play. An Equerry appears throughout the film, explaining situations, describing the rooms where the audiences take place, setting the scenes, ordering the servants about. There are a number of servants who serve tea, show people in, and gather around the queen at key moments while the audience is looking at other characters and transform her with dresses and wigs to move from one era to another.

One device for distracting attention is the presence of a young girl, Nell Williams, as the young Elizabeth, revealing something of it what was like discover that she was going to be heir to the throne, what her life was like in being privately tutored with Princess Margaret, with the formalities in addressing her mother and father, her wanting to go outside into fresh air, her being in the girl guides, her rather determined approach to do her life, especially with the restrictions that have applied from the time her father became king. There are scenes where the older queen and the young princess discuss what it is like to be queen.

Helen Mirren gives a very fine performance, rather theatrical in its style, due to the performance on the stage with a live audience giving its responses, both laughter and applause. But one sees her versatility, especially with the play opening in the 1990s, reverting to 1952, then moving backwards and forwards depending on the prime ministers who were participating in the weekly audience.

This election of prime ministers who appear onstage is intriguing in itself. The big absence is Tony Blair, though there are some disparaging remarks are made about him and some jokes at his expense, especially with the Gordon Brown. David Cameron does indicate some admiration for Blair.

What Morgan has done is sketch each of the prime ministers, highlighting their personalities, their political stances, their political experiences, especially within their own party, and he shows his skill in being able to give a significant impression in a comparatively short time. He also gives the queen some pointers about her longing for some kind of privacy, her political shrewdness in dealing with prime ministers and the way that she learned to do this, especially in the period of Churchill and Anthony Eden. Over the decades she comes particularly wise, particularly astute, not always agreeing with her prime ministers but constitutionally bound to support them. This offers particular insights into the queen and her stances, her sense of duty, her marriage and the Duke of Edinburgh, her love of the Britannia, her devotion to the Commonwealth and her admiration for several of the African leaders.

The first prime minister we see is John Major. This is a very interestingly written sketch and performed showing significant diffidence in Major by Paul Ritter. It indicates Major did not expect to be prime minister and found his experience draining, and would have preferred a life with cricket, because he did not do well in school. The queen is sympathetic to him but realizes that he is out of his depth in his leadership. Audiences will be pleased that Major makes a second appearance during the play.

He is followed by Edward Fox as Winston Churchill in his latter days, presuming on his past and his reputation, talking down to the young queen, who shrewdly points out that in delaying her coronation, allegedly for experience, he will not be able to resign or be ousted because of his commitment to this important event in British history.

There is some humour with Gordon Brown and his exasperation with Tony Blair, in his realising that he was not as good at being prime minister as he expected, and perhaps might have been better being an academic. And he knows he will be defeated at the coming election.

On comes a blustering Richard McCabe as Harold Wilson, audiences expecting some kind of clash between the Labor leader and the queen. In fact, the initial meeting is not so successful, with Wilson going on and on about his background in Huddlesfield, the Labor party, his expectations about the queen and her political stances. However, Wilson makes two more appearances, becoming more and more comfortable in his interactions with the queen, after initially having a photo taken with her on his first visit, the queen looking particularly stone. But then they are on holidays in Scotland, at Balmoral, and an easy interaction has set in, Wilson very much at home with the queen, considering her a lefty at heart. She enjoys his company. Later, when David Cameron rather indiscreetly asks whom she got on best with, the Equerry indicates that he knows who it was - and Harold Wilson comes in again, showing his signs of increasing senility and Alzheimers. The queen is genuinely concerned, and indicates to him that she and the Duke of Edinburgh would be happy to accept his invitation to dine at Downing Street.

Audiences have been waiting for Mrs. Thatcher to arrive and they were not to be disappointed. Hayden Gwynne is quite impressive as Mrs. Thatcher. It is a very interesting section of the play, the queen clearly not getting on well with Mrs. Thatcher, disapproving of her economic rationalism, hinting to the press that Mrs. Thatcher lacks compassion and completely disagreeing with her stance on sanctions against South Africa. Mrs Thatcher gives her 'no society' speech.

There are also some moments with Anthony Eden who considered the queen inexperienced in the mid-1950s and concealed from her French and British meetings with Israel concerning the Suez Canal and its management, and the ambitions of President Nasser. However the queen has done her homework and is able to challenge him on what has happened. Then, towards the end, the queen lists the prime minister and forgets one. James Callaghan bursts in to claim his place and that the queen not forget him.

The film raises so many issues and indicates the passing of time with the Equerry in the 1990s trying to deal with his large mobile phone and in 2013, the grandchildren putting an I-Pad² in grandmother's purse and its playing music themes to her bewilderment. In fact, in the play there are mentions of Baroness Thatcher's funeral, Pope Benedict's resignation period and the forthcoming birth of the new heir. So the film covers just over six decades.

The audiences will enjoy the frequent wry remarks made by the queen, the gaffes made by the prime ministers, a lot of political jokes, comments about the family, pathos and irritation about Diana, false expectations about the marriage of Prince Andrew and Sarah Ferguson, comments about the ups and downs of the popularity of the royal family. And the corgis make several appearances.

With the quality of the play, the performances, the insights into British politics, The Audience would repay more viewings.

DESPICABLE ME 2

US, 2013,

Voices of: Steve Carrell, Kristin Wiig, Russell Brand, Steve Coogan, Benjamin Bratt, Sean Hayes, Miranda Cosgrove.

Directed by Pierre Coffin, Chris Renaud.

Despicable was certainly not the word that fans used for the original Despicable me. Everybody liked it, even with its sinister hero, the despicable Gru, who was working on a scheme to steal the moon – well, somebody thought they should do it!

But, at the end, Gru succumbed to the charm of three little orphan girls and reformed.

At the beginning of Despicable Me 2, Gru is maintaining his reputation for honesty, and is employed in making jams and jellies. However, there is a little deception for one of the little girls who was counting on the fairy princess coming to her birthday party – when she doesn't turn up, Gru dons the costume and saves the day. The little girl reassures him she knows what he did but she won't say anything to spoil the pleasure of the other children. So, all seems sweetness and light. And Steve Carrell offers his highly entertaining voice for Gru.

But, his ally, Dr Nefario (Russell Brand) decides that the honest life is too dull and goes off to work for another villain (Benjamin Bratt) wanting to transform the world into evil. The authorities of the Anti-Villain² League approach Gru to work on the side of good and bring the villain to justice. So, lots of funny adventures, Gru with his special weapons and skills – and the help of agent, Lucy (Kristen Wiig) who is wary of Gru but falls in love with him. The little girls all approve.

The creatures from the original films, the minions, who look like roly poly balls, whose voices are like kiddy mumbles, with silly giggles and naughty sniggers often steal the show. But... the villain is able to transform them into slimeballs who do his will. Gru has to combat them. But, there is a way for them to be changed back into their old selves. Plenty of jokey action here. And Dr Nefario has a crisis of conscience.

Undemanding, with some visual inventiveness, and some funny sequences – for children and even for adults.

EPIC

US, 2013.

Voices of: Colin Farrell, Josh Hutcherson, Amanda Seyfried, Jason Sudeikis, Christoph Walz, Beyonce Knowles, Chris O' Dowd.

Directed by Chris Wedge.

A brightly animated film that combines a modern story with a fairy tale – and has an environmental message.

As with a number of animation films, it is often hard to gauge just who is the target audience. Is it for children (well, yes, but what age)? Is it for boys and girls? Will adults enjoy it as they take their children and grandchildren?

With Epic, and its female central character, it looks as though it might appeal to pre-teenage girls. While the male character is not really a wimp, he has to work hard to impress. A boys' audience might have to be a little tolerant. For teens? Maybe. But they might be saying that they have grown out of this kind of thing.

But, what do we have? First, the most nerdish, absent-minded and clumsy professor-father in a long time. He has been investigating his theory that there are little people in the forests. When his daughter, Mary Katherine, MK as she wants to be called, is drawn into the world of the Leaf People, he eventually is happy that he had been right.

But a lot of adventures before that.

It is a special time for renewal in the forest and the powers of darkness, an ugly lot who fire arrows which give kinds of boils to everyone and everything, are preparing an onslaught to prevent the moon from shining on the flower which must bloom to ensure the queen of the forest will continue her reign of light. While that may sound sweet, there are a lot of battles, some of them in the air with the Leaf Men warriors flying to combat the creatures of gloom. Come to think of it, quite a lot of battles. And myriad bats blocking out the moonlight.

Nod, the young rebel wants to be a warrior without curbs, despite the wise advice of the elder, Ronin, who trains him. And he wants to impress MK. There are some comic characters around, especially some wise-cracking slugs. And the queen at the beginning of the film is spoken by Beyonce. As regards the other voices: Colin Farrell is Ronin, Josh Hutcherson is Nod, the princeling, Amanda Seyfried, Mk, Jason Sudeikis the professor and Christoph Waltz the villain.

An ending when MK has to regain size and go back home? Separated forever?. Who said

Skype was not a great invention and just might work in the forest! And Epic is a much too grandiose title for this fairy tale.

ERRORS OF THE HUMAN BODY

Germany/US, 2012.

Michael Eklund, Katherine Herfuth, Tomas Lamarquis, Rik Mayall.

Directed by Eron Sheean.

Errors of the Human Body might be described as bizarre. It is a science-fiction film about genetics and experimentation.

The film was directed by Enron Sheean who spent six years as an artist in residence at the Max Planck Molecular Institute in Dresden, in the former East Germany. By working with the scientists, looking at their experiments and their plans, he devised this drama, this melodrama, about a scientist who goes to Germany to develop a process whereby organs can be reproduced. He is wracked by personal guilt with the disease of his son and the alienation of his wife.

All seems initially well. But the audience is probably suspicious with this kind of institute, the laboratories, the eerie corridors, the lighting, and suspect there is something amiss. And they are correct. The scientist, possibly becoming paranoid, suspects a conspiracy amongst his fellow-scientists. He enlists the help of one colleague, is suspicious of another, has interviews with the head of the institute. However, the film begins to introduce some touches of the horror genre when the scientist himself is infected adversely by what he was developing. It can be developed for good or for ill.

The film maintains its atmosphere, audiences wary of the laboratories. But the film develops with some visual ugliness with the infection of the scientist.

Michael Eklund (the serial killer in The Call with Halle Berry), is the scientist. Surprisingly, comedian Rick mayall appears as the head of the institute.

A curiosity item, intriguing.

EVERYBODY HAS A PLAN/ TODOS TENEMOS UN PLAN

Argentina, 2012..

Viggo Mortensen, Daniel Fanego, Soledad Vilamil.

Directed by Ana Pitabarg.

Viggo Mortensen has the opportunity here to portray identical twins. Not that the two characters appear in many sequences together, but they certainly do look very much alike and the plot counts on the fact that most people can accept one as the other.

It's a serious story, very serious and rather dour and grim, even gloomy. The setting is a delta in Argentina, not the exuberant vitality of Buenos Aires, music and dance, but a quite dingy world of river, islands, remote town, a centre for abductions and ransoms.

One of the brothers lives in the delta, a beekeeper, helped by a young woman, Rosa, but caught up in the schemes of boyhood friend, Adriano. When an abduction goes wrong, it will

have repercussions for both brothers. The other twin is a doctor in the city who experiences something of a breakdown.

Audiences will anticipate quite early what is going to happen and waits to see if they are right. And, they may get a little impatient, because the pacing of the film is very measured (slow would be the complaint of action-wanting audiences).

Mortensen gives an effective performance. Some have suggested he gives three performances: one brother, the other brother, and the brother acting as the other. But, there are some plot puzzles, especially in the brothers and their relationship to Rosa (they over fifty and she just twenty).

There is an Argentinian current of very serious, slowly-paced dramas which feature at international festivals. This is one of those films.

FURIOUS 6/ THE FAST AND THE FURIOUS 6

US, 2013.

Vin Diesel, Paul Walker, Michelle Rodriguez, Dwayne Johnson, Tyrese Gibson, Chris Ludacris Bridges, Jordana Brewster, Luke Evans.

Directed by Justin Lim.

Trivial Pursuit question: what 2013 action film has a group grace before meals at the end? Furious 6, of course! The team sit down and pray before eating. True.

But, also of course, fast is key to the film and there is a fair amount of furious. At the end, as the survivors watch a huge plane conflagration, the thought comes to mind: this is a multi-million dollar extravaganza for adrenalin-addicts. And then comes the thought: does too much adrenalin get to the brain and dismantle all sense of realism and logic? Because realism and logic don't play a big part in this sixth episode in what is now one of the most popular movie franchises. Half a billion dollars worldwide in little more than a week.

Dwayne Johnson as an agent was after drivers, Dom and Brian, Vin Diesel and Paul Walker (not showing any vast improvement in their acting skills) in Fast Five. Now he hires them (with pardons if successful) in tracking down a master criminal involved in stealing a billion-dollar piece of military IT hardware. If this elaborate plot with final chase involving a tank and a huge cargo plane, is the way to steal and transport the material... there have to be far simpler ways for a mastermind to think up!

Which is not important logically, because this is about cars, chases and leaping-through-the-air action, which Vin Diesel does, from one side of a bridge, over a gap, catching Michelle Rodriguez, and both being winched to safety on the other side – this is not a spoiler because it still has to be seen not to be believed.

There are some spectacular locations, especially the opening race along the coast roads in the Canary Islands. Believe it or not (not), there is a chase through central London including Piccadilly Circus. And, at the end, there is one through Tokyo, to say nothing of the bridge battle and on the tarmac and in the plane.

Plotwise, Dom discovers Letty didn't die as thought, has lost her memory and is aide to the villain, Luke Evans (British, of course, and ruthless). Brian has a baby, risks everything for a pardon by helping Dom and the agent, even going to the US undercover to interrogate a key drug lord as to what happened to Letty. Friends and loyalty are everything. Once we think all is well and the film can end, Brian's wife and child are kidnapped, which gives Jordana Brewster as Brian's wife, a chance to show her driving skills as well.

Michelle Rodriguez's first film was *Girlfight*, and here she goes again (twice) with martial arts star, who appeared in *Haywire*, Gina Carano.

There are plenty of comic touches with Ramon and Tej (Tyrese Gibson and Ludacris) from the previous films.

There is a twist at the end with one of the key characters being revealed as the traitor – and that makes little logical sense as well. And one key character is killed off rather instantly while trying to save the life of another.

The Tokyo car chase takes place soon after the final credits begin which enables those rushing out of the cinema not to miss a trailer for *Furious 7* with Jason Statham turning up and looking threatening. He is not going to be on Dom and Brian's team!

HAPPINESS NEVER COMES ALONE/ UN BONHEUR N'ARRIVE JAMAIS A SEUL.

France, 2012.

Sophie Marceau, Gad Elmaleh, Maurice Barthelmy.

Directed by James Huth.

This is one of those French romantic comedies that should prove entertaining for those who like French romantic comedies. And for those who like Sophie Marceau. In the past Sophie Marceau has been a rather solemn, sometimes pouting presence in films (*D'Artagnan's Daughter*, *Anna Karenina*, *Braveheart*) and did not seem to be a likely candidate for comedy let alone so much of the slapstick jokes that punctuate the film. Her pratfalls are very funny and she effects them with perfect timing.

But this is also the story of Sacha (Gad Elmaleh), a pianist who leads a carefree, no responsibilities, one-night-stand, kind of life. He plays piano at a club (and very well, especially as he plays during the opening credits), composes commercial jingles and is preparing a show (music, dance and mime) with one of his friends.

As it pours raining outside an office building (into his open sports car), Charlotte (Marceau) literally trips and falls flat on her face in front of him (and then is drenched by a passing car and gets hit in the head as the valet throws the car keys). As Sacha gives her a lift, they fall in love.

This changes Sacha almost completely and the couple begin a relationship – and more pratfalls as her bathroom and basin collapse in a mess. Then he discovers she has a son. And then he discovers that she has two more children. He had previously declared himself 'anti-kids'. But, he clicks with them. They click with him. It all seems perfect. Except that the

arrogant and womanizing head of the advertising company, with whom he has clashed, is her ex-husband (and she has another ex-husband as well).

And the show? An opportunity to go to Broadway? But, there is more going on behind the scenes... But, it is no secret that the film will have a happy ending, but we wonder towards the end how this could be possible.

THE INTERNSHIP

US, 2013.

Vince Vaughn, Owen Wilson, Rose Byrne, Aasif Mandvi, Max Minghella, Will Ferrell, John Goodman, Josh Brenner, Dylan O' Bryan, Josh Gad.

Directed by Shawn Levy.

Surprisingly entertaining and funny.

Star Vince Vaughn thought up this story and co-wrote the screenplay. It has something for everyone, old and young – and some useful messages for both those same old and young.

Billy (Vince Vaughn) and Nick (Owen Wilson) are crack salesman, with humorous pitches, lots of hail-fellow-well-met palaver, and personalized play for customers. The trouble is their watch company has folded and the boss, John Goodman, tells them they are out of a job. Redundant in early middle age! Nick gets a job from his sister's boyfriend, an amusingly sneering and obtuse Will Ferrell. Billy finds an ad for an internship with Google.

This is definitely a Google film with the logo everywhere of course and lots of promotion. But, it is done quite well – and who doesn't use Google! The DVD distributors of Flashdance and Jennifer Beal won't be sorry that Billy often uses the film as his way of urging his young collaborators to take risks – the youngsters have never heard of it and play a joke on the oldies by sending them off to Stanford to meet Professor Charles Xavier. They meet a lookalike with some momentary dire results. Poor middle-aged oldies have never heard of the X-Men!

What seems to loom as a satire on older wariness of computers is not. Billy and Nick certainly make lots of mistakes, even referring to being on-the-line, but they do apply themselves and do learn a lot to find a place in a 21st century IT world.

In fact, there is quite some satire on the young IT nerds/geeks/whatever who are whiz kids on programming, terminology and solving computer problems but whose dedication to sitting and staring at screens is turning them into virtual zombies. Billy and Nick urge them into a real world, though the strip club, drinking and bar brawl is a too long and silly an initiation into macho reality – the sitting and looking at the view of the real San Francisco is ultimately more rewarding.

Billy and Nick are put in a competitive team of leftovers not chosen by the crack teams, including a Japanese- American with a tyrannical mother, a Latina, a couldn't-care-less white boy, all under the wing of the most earnest nerd. What hope have they? But, despite all appearances to the contrary (and 'all' is the operative word), we know that they are going to succeed: a team drawing on all talents.

And, of course, there is quite a nasty self-important young villain (Max Minghella) who compensates for having no people skills by being arrogant to everyone, his team included.

Not to forget a pleasant romance between Nick and Rose Byrne, an ice-maiden IT professional, allowed to keep some of her Australian accent.

This is a good-natured film, surprisingly less crass than might have been expected, with a lot of wit and jokes and Vaughn being difficult but redeemable and Owen Wilson being nice and pleasant.

IN THE HOUSE/DANS LA MAISON

France, 2012.

Fabrice Lucchini, Ernst Umhauer, Kristin Scott Thomas, Emmanuelle Seigner, Bastien Ughetto, Denis Menochet.

Directed by Francois Ozon.

In the House seems a rather nondescript title for this intriguing film. However, by the end of the film it has quite some significance.

And the film can be recommended because of the work of its director, Francois Ozon. For almost 15 years, he has been making a film every year, many psychological dramas, *Under the Sand*, *The Swimming Pool*, *5 X 2*, *The Time Remaining*, but also a excursions into musical, *8 Women*, or fantasy, *Ricky*.

This film is based on a Spanish play by Juan Mayorga, *The Boy in the Back Row*. It is successfully transferred to a French setting, a town with the focus on the school where the central character, Germain, is a teacher. His wife, Jeanne, runs a rather avant Garde gallery in the town. He has been teaching for many years and seems rather resigned to his students not paying much attention, illustrated almost immediately by the very poor essays he receives from the students about their previous weekend. She is rather frustrated, the owner of the gallery having died and his twin daughters, whom she considers as lacking in culture, may fire her unless she produces a significant exhibition. So far, so ordinary enough.

But one student writes a standout essay, two pages worth, full of detail, quite mundane in detail. It is by a 16 year old student, Claude.

Germain becomes interested in Claude and his writing, the boy becoming rather a favorite student, the teacher giving him much time, analyzing his essays, suggesting ways of writing better. But he is also intrigued by the content of the essay which always finishes, 'à suivre', to be continued...

Germain reads the stories to his wife and she too becomes fascinated. We wonder about their curiosity, Germain's motivations, why he is attracted to the boy and his writing: is it psycho-sexual, is it because he is a frustrated novelist, is it because he is childless and wants to father someone?

But the main question is: why are we, the audience, so attracted to the story, curious about

what happens, more than a touch of the prurient as Claude delves deeper into the lives of the family that he has chosen for his stories? We are observing something of ourselves in the way that Germain and his wife are dramatized.

On the day-by-day level, nothing startling really happens. It is all in the detail. Claude has chosen one of his fellow-students, Rapha, to befriend and tutor him in math in which he is hopeless. Rapha responds well, and invites Claude into the house. The meaning of the title begins to take shape. What Claude does is insinuate himself into the household, getting to know the father who is in business, frustrated by his boss, having to do two extra jobs to entertain a Chinese business partner. His name is also Rapha. Then there is his wife, Esther, who intrigues Claude, who makes disparaging remarks about her, seeing her as a bored housewife, frustrated and reading home decoration magazines because that is what she wanted to do with her life. He prowls around the house snooping. All these details are reported to Germain in the stories. And they continue for some time.

Of course, we the audience are also interested in the two Raphaes as well as Esther. When, following Germain's advice, Claude starts to invent material, with Germain sometimes appearing in the background of conversations, suggesting that a lot of what we're seeing is fiction. We wonder about Claude and his motivation and, particularly, his manipulation of people, the family as well as of Germain.

Germain asks the class to write an essay about their best friend and makes Rapha read his in public, embarrassing him considerably, which arouses the anger of his father, and the suspicions of the headmaster. Germain has also compromised himself by stealing the text of a maths exam for Claude to show to Rapha and help him get an A, which she does.

Germain, and we the audience, become so entangled in the story that we wonder in which direction it will go. We see Claude becoming seductive for Esther and the possibility of the young Rapha killing himself.

There is the opening of the exhibition at the gallery, but Jeanne thinks she will be fired. And then Claude comes to the door... We're almost to the end and the strange story does not quite have the ending that we might have imagined. While Claude was able to get right inside the Rapha house, he also intrudes into Germain's house of the end. But is all this a house of fiction and we are inside that house.

Fabrice Luchini is excellent as Germain. Kristin Scott Thomas is also excellent as Jeanne, with Emmanuelle Seigner fine as Esther. The young man, Ernst Umhauer, who portrays Claude gives an assured performance which should guarantee his future in cinema.

Well worth going inside the house.

A LADY IN PARIS/ UNE ESTONIENNE A PARIS

France/Estonia, 2012.

Jeanne Moreau, Laine Magi, Patrick Pineau.

Directed by Ilmar Raag.

A Lady in Paris, makes the original French title sound a touch more aristocratic than it really

is. It is *Une Estonienne à Paris*, which means that it could refer to the central character, an Estonian woman who is a professional carer employed to look after an elderly widow. Or, as the English title implies, it refers to the widow.

The film is a French/Estonian co-production. The director is Estonian, Ilmar Raag. So is Anna, the carer. The first part of the film is set in that country.

The picture of Estonia is rather grim, and the opening sequence in winter, at night, a woman, Anna, trudging through the snow-covered streets, an alcoholic man calling out to her. It continues grim with his being her ex-husband and her elderly mother with dementia being afraid. However, Anna is loving towards her mother, caring for her for two years. Then the mother dies. Anna grieves but she also caters for the wake. What is she now to do?

An offer comes to her to go to Paris to look after Frida. Frida is played by Jeanne Moreau, at age 83. In *Amour*, Emmanuelle Riva portrayed an ageing woman when she was 84. Elderly French actresses have commanding presence on screen. Jeanne Moreau has always had a commanding manner and she employs it here.

The film works as a portrait of Anna, presenting her initially as dowdy, but an adventurous incoming to Paris, withstanding the tantrums of Frida, looking at the dresses and perfumes in French shops, gradually transforming herself and gaining in self-confidence. The film works as a portrait of Frida, a refugee from Estonia long since, who has forgotten her native language, who has become more French than French, spoiled, wealthy, will acting on whims, giving orders.

We guess, however, that there will eventually be a bond between the two women. It is interesting to watch the dynamics between the two, the mistress and the servant, the mellowing of the mistress, growing affection between the two women, their venturing out of the house, agreeing to host visitors...

However, there are still tensions, especially because of Frida's life and her antagonisms in the past, her relationships with men and the breaking up of marriages. There is still one man who is devoted to her, Stephanen, Patrick Pineau, once her lover but now the manager of a café which she financed, who visits her, employs staff to look after her, wanting to be freer from her dominance, yet deeply devoted to her.

The film portrays a fairly enclosed world, the world of the house, the world of the café, with some visits into Paris, the Eiffel tower, the shops, and Anna wanting to find the Estonian community in Paris with the response that the older people are dying out and the younger are not interested.

Audiences will probably have different ideas on how plausible the resolution of the problem is and the nature of the ending. Suffice to say that the filmmakers have not opted for despair and disappointment.

THE LONE RANGER

US, 2013.

Johnny Depp, Armie Hammer, Tom Wilkinson, William Fichtner, Ruth Wilson, Helena Bonham Carter, Barry Pepper.

Directed by Gore Verbinski.

‘What’s with the mask?’ is a question that recurs throughout this quite rollicking film. It is the question to the Lone Ranger, from goodies and baddies, Indians and Chinese, all wanting to know why John Reid is wearing this mask with his bright white hat.

After the press preview, many of the reviewers were agreeing that the 2 ½ hours had passed very quickly, especially for this kind of holiday adventure. They were in a good mood. It’s the kind of action show, with laughs, that extroverted audiences might applaud wildly.

Just as there have been films showing the origins of Batman and Superman, this is the film that shows us the origins of the lone ranger and his partnership with the Indian, Tonto. While the film can be described as rollicking, there are shifts of moods right throughout the film. At one moment, the film is spoofing aspects of the western genre. The next moment we’re wondering about the portrayal of the Indians, the history of the Native Americans, Johnny Depp portraying Tonto, and racist issues. But then we are back with the narrative, the humour, and quite some poking fun at white Americans and American stereotypes – while not forgetting the injustices to the Native Americans and their being used by unscrupulous tycoons to break the peace treaties..

The story opens in San Francisco in 1933, a carnival with an attraction showing pictures of the history of the American west. A little boy, wearing a Lone Ranger mask, goes into have a look and stops at the picture of ‘The Noble Savage in his Setting’. And there is a statue of the Indian, (a bit like A Night at the Museum) coming to life and having a conversation with the little boy, telling the story of the Lone Ranger. It is an aged Tonto. The screenplay keeps coming back to San Francisco and the little boy who keeps asking questions which Tonto doesn’t answer quite accurately some of the time, being accused of making up the story as he goes. And he definitely is. This is one of those ‘write the legend’ instead of ‘print the facts’ kind of story.

The film was made in New Mexico and the photography of the desert and the majestic mesas is most impressive. The recreation of the Texas Town of Colby, where, in 1869, the railroad is progressing through the Lone Star state, helps us feel at home in this west (as it does when the baddies start pursuinig the train and there is a shootout. The production company actually built some miles of rail for the filming of the period and there is the town itself, frontier style. There are farms along the river. There are mountains and caves for mining silver. So the production looks very good. And there is a rousing score by Hans Zimmer.

But, of course, it is a Johnny Depp film. Here he is working with director Gore Verbinski after his collaboration with him for the Pirates of the Caribbean films. His Tonto is far more restrained and ironically witty than his Jack Sparrow. He uses his eyes and body language for his comments on characters and events. There is also quite a lot of slapstick and a great deal of stunt work, action in trains, on top of trains, through trains, horse riding, chases and shootouts.

John Reid, who becomes the Lone Ranger, is a city DA travelling with a group of Presbyterians to the west, studying the rules of government treatise of John Locke. And he is against guns. But as an ultra-serious lawman, he intervenes where prudence would offer some restraint, coming into conflict with the very evil and evil-looking villain, Butch, played by William Fichtner who has done many villains but excels as this one. Mean-looking, mean-

acting. And their plenty of sequences to show how he can act in the most dastardly manner.

Army Hammer, who starred in *The Social Network* and *Mirror, Mirror*, is a straight up and down hero who is moved towards justice, tries to control himself against violence, partners Tonto and is led to an ambiguous revenge narrative. This performance won't do Armie Hammer's career any harm.

The producers bring in British support with Tom Wilkinson as the evil corporate villain, Ruth Wilson as the wife and love interest, Helena Bonham Carter as a Red, the manager of the local saloon.

As the film goes on, the heroics become rather incredible, and even the military coming in led by Barry Pepper. But it all builds up to a huge confrontation, two trains, a large wooden bridge which is set with dynamite, horse pursuits, riding on top of carriages, and a whole lot of derring-do. And this is all set (at last one might think), to the Lone Ranger theme, a loud and vital rendition of the William Tell Overture.

The little boy goes home from the museum satisfied enough while we are more than set of satisfied and watch the aged Tonto, during the final credits, walk into the far distance. (For movie buffs this may be a tribute to Abbas Kiarostami and the ending of *Through the Olive Trees*!). And, should there be a sequel, why not?

MAN OF STEEL

US, 2013.

Henry Cavill, Amy Adams, Michael Shannon, Kevin Costner, Russell Crowe, Diane Lane, Laurence Fishburne, Christopher Melon, Harry Lennix, Richard Schiff.

Directed by Zack Snyder.

There have been many incarnations of superman. The word 'incarnation' is used intentionally and will be commented on later. The comic strip created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster began its life in the 1930s, the period of popular comic strips and comic books. In the 1940s, actor George Reeves embodied superman (and was portrayed by Ben Affleck in *Hollywoodland*, 2006). There are 91 entries in the Internet Movie Database for Superman in film and television. There were animated versions of the character but in 1978, world attention was drawn to a spectacular Superman by Richard Donner, starring the unknown, Christopher Reeve. From that time Reeve was the perfect embodiment of Superman and there were three sequels. Unfortunately, the attempt at re-introducing superman worldwide, *Superman rRturns*, directed by Bryan Singer, with Brendan Routh, was not as successful as hoped for.

Now comes, as they say, the rebooting of the Superman story: *Man of Steel*. In its first release weeks it has been very successful at the box office.

One of the main problems for Suprman film is to cast a successful successor to Christopher Reeve. This time it is English actor, Henry Cavill. He has appeared in a number of films including Woody Allen's *Whatever Happens* as well as the mythological story, *The Immortals*. It has to be said that he has a lot of striking resemblance is to Christopher Reeve which should satisfy many of the fans. This version is very serious so he does not get much

of a chance to smile or have the Reeve twinkle in his eye.

This version might be described as a prequel to its successors. It actually ends with Clark Kent putting on his spectacles and turning up for his first day of work at the Daily Planet. What has gone before is the story of his father and mother sending him from Krypton to Earth, his early life in jobs around America with flashbacks to his childhood in Smallville. This was the material covered in the first third of 1978's *Superman: The Movie*.

In this earlier film, the section was written by novelist Mario Puzo (*The Godfather*), and was filled with explicit references to Christian theology, some of the language derived from the Gospel of John: the unity between God the Father and God the Son and his being sent to Earth. Within it there was the collapse of the planet Krypton, the role of General Zod – the latter kept for *Superman II*. Now General Zod is the principal enemy.

The scenes on Krypton with the father preparing his son for Earth is quite reminiscent of the earlier film without the detailed parallels with the Christian themes and language. However, it is not very difficult to make the same connections given the nature of the script, and the role between father and son. This time the father, as with Marlon Brando earlier, is solicitous about his son and acts something like God the Father, confident that people on earth will see his son as a god. Since he is played with great dignity, very great dignity, with rounded and articulation of vowels in the *Gladiator* fashion, by Russell Crowe, he does fill something of an image for God the Father. Even though he dies, his consciousness can materialize again and so Russell Crowe does appear throughout the film, to give guidance to his son, Kal- El.

The film then moves to seeing Kal- El as Clark Kent working in the Arctic, making decisions to use his strength to save people's lives. When news comes of a space ship trapped in Arctic ice, he goes there, sees his father and gets an explanation about his life and his destiny. However, another person who goes searching for information is the reporter from the Daily Planet, Lois Lane, played cheerfully by Amy Adams. Clark Kent cauterises her wound. She knows who he is and wants to get the story out but is prevented by her editor, played by Laurence Fishburne.

In the meantime, with the destruction of Krypton, General Zod and his officers are free again to roam the universe, searching for Kal- El who has the code for the rebirth of the people of Krypton. Clark Kent thinks it might be a good idea for Kryptonites and humans to live together but that is certainly not the intention of General Zod. This, of course, leads to confrontation and battles. With Michael Shannon as Zod, it is a mean and deadly confrontation.

One criticism of the film could be that the battles go on for too long, too long, too long. They're quite spectacular and, it would seem, there is very little left of New York City, far worse than any 9/11 destruction. The special effects are quite awesome, especially collapsing skyscrapers, but there is more than enough of a good thing which, in some ways, halts the pace of the film.

Throughout the film, there are flashbacks to Clark and his childhood, saving people, having to keep his secret, his foster-father reinforcing this with self-sacrifice. His human parents are played by Diane Lane and Kevin Costner.

Back to the word, 'incarnation'. In the 1978 film, it is quite clear that the baby was a Christ-figure, spoken to by his father in words reminiscent of the Gospel, his vehicle for earth looking like a creep. The Kents served as his foster parents parallel with Mary and Joseph.

After a long period of hidden life, he emerges to do battle with evil.

While the references are not so explicit in this film, it is not difficult to see that the same process is at work in David L. Goyer's script. In fact, some reviewers even used the word Christ-like. What this film emphasizes is that Kal- El, Clark Kent, has the potential to be a messiah, to save the world. However, it is thought that the world would not accept him until the right time. (Reinforced in the film by the public's fears and the war against terrorism phobias of the American military.

It is also very clear that he has, so to speak, two natures: one from beyond this world which gives him greater power and one from this world, human. And it is quite clear that both operate in the one person. And just when one might be thinking that this kind of theological analogy, which fans pick up quite easily, isn't fanciful for this more secular age, it is said that he came to earth 33 years earlier...

This Christ-figure text gave the first part of Superman: the Movie some depth. But then the film moved almost at right angles and became the humorous comic strip with the adventurous hero battling Lex Luthor. This film maintains the incarnation of the two natures in Clark Kent right to the end. And in this sense, and with the confrontation with General Zod and the Kryptonites, a far more serious film in tone. It is hoped that this film will be successful because it will be really very interesting to see how the film makers treat Superman's emergence into the world and his acceptance as its saviour.

METRO

Russia, 2013, Colour.

Directed by Anton Megerdichev.

Metro is a disaster film, a spectacle, with chaos and heroism in the Moscow underground. It emulates the styles of the American disaster films and makes quite a success of the attempt. It is very strong on special effects as well as stunt work.

The film also has a human story running through it, sometimes referred to by several characters as soap opera. However, it gives a human underlying narrative to the disaster story.

The film opens well, highlighting Moscow, its underground train system, the tunnels, water mysteriously seeping through the roof and the sides of the tunnel. An old security man makes a report and the officials ignore him. In the meantime we are shown an emotional triangle, the wife and mother having an affair, her husband a doctor working hard in a hospital, the daughter missing her mother and asking questions about her. This is all done very early in the film and then it gets some of these characters on to the train and into the disaster area.

There are also explanations as to why the disaster happens. There is a device of the young man in the train, flirting with a young woman, explaining that he was a tour guide and giving an outline of the track, tunnels, the history, a secret bunker, river levels... Where later shown the officials meeting and discovering the truth about the situation and discussing plans and backup plans, especially for evacuation of the city. A further complication is that the streets of more Moscow are experiencing gridlock with too much traffic.

There is a focus on time, the action happening over one morning, with frequent references to clocks. There is also a deadline for searching for survivors before the tunnel is sealed and liquid nitrogen is poured into the tunnel to permanently block it.

The film focuses on the peak hour, the crowds of people on platforms, and in the train carriages.

And when the spectacle comes of walls collapsing, trains careering out of control, off the tracks, people being bounced about, the photography and effects work very convincingly.

Because the screenplay has been careful to highlight several characters, they form the survival group and a lot of time is spent with them, walking through the water, uncertain about what was to happen, experiencing waves, even getting to a skylight and trying to shout to people and traffic passing by, without success.

And throughout the disaster, there is conflict because the father and his daughter are on the train as well as the wife's lover. And this conflict comes to a head.

The film is strong on showing people using their wits, taking advantage of whatever means are available for trying to survive, and explanations are given as to what was happening and why.

The film comes to a satisfactory end, and has capitalised on all the conventions of the disaster genre. And a little humorous final moment with the dog!

MONSTERS UNIVERSITY

US, 2013.

Voices of: Billy Crystal, John Goodman, Helen Mirren, Steve Buscemi, John Kraskinski, Nathan Fillion, Bonnie Hunt, Dave Foley, Alfred Molina.

Directed by Dan Scanlon.

A pleasing film that might have you with a smile on your face right throughout the film – and not rushing out during the final credits, waiting to see the final good joke.

Those who delighted a decade ago, venturing into the world of Monsters Inc, will not find this film providing the instant joy of meeting Mike Wazowski and Sully for the first time. Rather, it is meeting up again with old friends. As voiced by Billy Crystal at his humorous best (though with some pathos as his goal in life is to study to be a scarer at Monsters University and he can't quite make it) and with John Goodman as his perfect foil. And for good measure, there is Helen Mirren voicing the imperious dean of the department, Dean Hardscrabble. It really is a top voice cast.

It should be said that Monsters University is not a sequel to Monsters Inc. It is a prequel. It takes us back to the little Mike (very little because Mike, round with his one eye, is little even as a grown-up). He hero-worships a genial monster who encourages him to study, and gives him an MU cap which becomes Mike's treasure.

He grows up (still little) and goes off to university.

At this stage, the film is a happy variation on the youngster-goes-off-to-college movie, arriving, full of awe, seeing the students, invitations to join clubs, registering, finding his room, getting a roommate who is skilled in disappearing (and has to get rid of his glasses which don't disappear). This parallel with the teen and young adult college movie is not a bad thing. We enjoy observing and smiling at the similarities.

There are classes, tuition, tests, a nice lecturer and the winged dean with her sudden and solemn appearances. Can Mike really scare anyone? Then Sullivan, Sully, arrives, the son of a very famous scarer, coasting on the family reputation. He is accepted into the top fraternity and looks down on Mike.

When Mike does not qualify, he remembers the ad for the Scare Games. The film-makers have done some remembering themselves: The Hunger Games. The bulk of the latter part of the film is the competition of the games. In order to qualify, Mike needs Sully on his team. Then he has to have a fraternity and the only one that will accept him is the lowliest, a collection of entertaining characters (and the mother of the softest and nicest one).

It's exciting, of course, and then there is a blow which leads to the last part of the film, Mike and Sully in a haunted house, not to haunt it, but to escape from the local ghost busters.

Young audiences will enjoy this 2013's Pixar Animation Studios contribution, top value as usual. Those who enjoyed the monsters in the past (but might think they are a bit old for this) can find a good excuse to go to see it: take their younger brothers and sisters. And the adults will enjoy it, no questions asked.

ONE MILE ABOVE/ KORA

China/Taiwan.

Directed by Jiayi Du.

Kora/ One Mile Above is a Chinese/ Taiwanese collaboration. It has an interesting background with the traditional enmity between mainland China and Taiwan as well as the situation of Tibet and its being incorporated by China. Perhaps this film indicates some possibilities for collaboration.

The film is about endurance. And the audience experiences something of this endurance as they watch the film. Perhaps they are comfortable in their seats but, if they have done any serious bike-riding, they will actually feel that they are sitting on the bike, pushing hard on the pedals, with the balls of the feet rather than heels, trying to be one with the bike as they move along the roads, but especially as the journey starts to get steeper and steeper, going through the mountains, sometimes freewheeling down hundreds of feet and then climbing again. When the rider skids/falls on the way down, the audience realises that there are dangers in the descents as well as in the ascents.

In Taiwan, a young man dies and his younger brother reads his diary which was put in the coffin at his funeral. He discovers that his brother wanted to cycle to Lahsar. The young man then decides to honour the memory of his brother by undertaking the same journey. He takes his own bike from Taiwan and lands in China and begins a journey of over 2000 km. (On

screen, the film continually shows the heights above sea level.)

The film is something like a docudrama, indicating the difficulties of the ride, showing the beauty of the terrain, the growing ruggedness of the mountain ranges, the beauty of the peaks, the vagaries of the weather as it moves into winter. Fortunately for the young man, after being conned about identity cards being necessary, he meets up with a rider who is on a journey each year to improve his luck, wanting to see the peaks of three mountains as the clouds lift. He does not and later suffers a harsh accident in which the student is also involved.

The film also shows something of the hospitality along the way, a kind and welcoming Buddhist woman who provides traditional tea, and a friendly family who have pictures of Jesus, the Sacred Heart and the Virgin Mary on their walls. It introduces us into something of the village life, especially as the children go to school.

One of the drawbacks of the film, dramatically, is that it shows a desperate scene and suddenly cuts much further forward in the plot, for instance, the accident on the mountainside and suddenly the scene shifts to the hospital. This is sometimes dramatically jolting, rather than the pace at which the rest of the film is moving. There also scenes in hospitals and with the police warning the young man about the dangers, truck drivers on the road...

The film will probably appeal to inveterate cyclists who will be identifying all the way from China to Tibet. For less active audiences, it is a great opportunity to see the beautiful countryside, and to experience something of the way of life and the people. (It is not a film that takes up any of the burning political issues of the area, especially that of Tibetan independence.)

SATELLITE BOY

Australia, 2012.

David Gulpilil, Cameron Wallaby, Joseph Pedley.

Directed by Catriona Mc Kenzie.

The best audience for this Australian story would be children. The story is principally about children and the events are experienced by children from their perspective. This is an Australian aboriginal story.

The film opens with a grandfather and his grandson walking through the sparse bush but feeling that it is alive and that it owns them. The grandfather is a wise old man who speaks his own language as well as English. So does the boy, but he is a modern boy from the technological age, a 'satellite boy', who needs to learn the lore and traditions from his elders. But, his mother has left with dreams of opening a restaurant and the boy lives in a derelict drive-in.

What gives the film some immediate gravitas is the fact that the grandfather is played by veteran David Gulpilil who, for more than 40 years, has been in key Australian films from Walkabout to Australia via Crocodile Dundee and Rabbit- Proof Fence. His words about the land are completely convincing.

Pete and his friend Kalmain get into trouble, dream about being astronauts, play with modern robot toys. But, when a mining country starts to burn the grass around the drive-in for storing equipment and the family have to get out, he decides to go to see the bosses and argue his case. This means a 21st century walkabout. But, the boys are ill-equipped, have not planned and just go. The grandfather has a sixth sense about their travels and guides them. They fortunately come across a river, but Pete can't swim and Kalmain helps him across. They find a satellite dish and sleep on it. They find a well-stocked house and find something to eat – and a gun.

When they do get to the company's headquarters, they are eventually reunited with their mothers. Perth, new clothes (and ice cream) are an incentive to stay with his mother, but he hops out of the car, throws away his shirt and returns home, to an initiation, to walking the bush with his grandfather.

Children's audiences can identify with Pete and Kalmain and learn about how aboriginal boys face the technological present while not losing the traditions. Adults will have a chance to reflect, via a story, about the implications for indigenous Australians and a changing landscape and the challenges of the modern world.

The setting is the Kimberley around Wyndham.

STILL MINE

Canada, 2012.

James Cromwell, Genevieve Bujold, Campbell Scott.

Directed by Mike Mc Gowan.

Still Mine is a film about aging and mental deterioration. It is a film which will resonate very strongly with older audiences and also with those in their forties fifties and sixties who are thinking about their parents and what the future will bring for them. However, this is a film of strength and hope.

It is based on a true story, set in the province of New Brunswick, Canada. The location photography brings the town and of the surrounding countryside to life.

Central to the film is the character of Craig Morrison, played with great strength and determination by James Cromwell, who, after his turn as Farmer Hoggart in *Babe*, has appeared in many strong roles, a fine screen presence. As his wife, Irene, Canadian actress Genevieve Bujold, who in the past played Anne of the Thousand Days, gives a wonderful, unglamorous performance, slowly losing her memory, trying to cope with this, supportive of her husband as he is of her. In the story, they have been married for 61 years and have seven children, the story of their marriage told with delicacy, with intimacy.

The Canadian economy is in decline. Craig has to sell his cattle. He grows strawberries but they are rejected because they are not brought to the depot in un-refrigerated trucks. Because the family house has been so big, he decides to build a new one for Irene and himself. It is here where the difficulties really start. He relies on his own ability, learned from his father, his knowledge of lumber and cutting down trees and making planks to build the house.

Suddenly, he is forbidden to build. He doesn't have a permit, then he doesn't have plans, then his wood is not stamped with approval. There is a threat to have the place bulldozed and he eventually goes to court. The bureaucracy tells him that he is disobeying rules. He makes the distinction between rules and standards and that his work is above standard..

Craig he is helped by one of his sons and is constantly advised by one of his daughters, a mixture of both Craig and Irene. When Irene is hospitalized, there is greater concern.

The audience is certainly on Craig's side, even though we know he is a strong and stubborn man and needs to make some kind of compromise. It is when a friend with whom he has been sparring for many years dies and he weeps, we realize that he has great tenderness and that he has shown it to his wife for all the years.

Some commentators have made the link between *Still Mine* and *Amour*. The latter Oscar-winning film was intense, confined to the house, focusing on the couple and Alzheimers, with an intrusion by a zealous daughter. While it showed the great love and tenderness, and the stress on the husband, as *Still Mine* does, it does not have the scope of the down-to-earthness and hope that this Canadian film does. At the end, there is a credit to the Morrison family and indication that both Craig and Irene were still living at the time of the film's initial release. He was 91.

TO THE WONDER

US, 2013.

Ben Affleck, Olga Kurylenko, Rachel Mc Adams, Javier Bardem.

Directed by Terrence Mallick.

To begin with, a caution which may be helpful in approaching *To the Wonder*. Writer-director, Terrence Mallick has made very few films in 40 years, *Badlands*, *Days of Heaven* in the 1970s, then *The Thin Red Line* in 1998, *The New World* in 2005. More recently he has become very active, with *The Tree of Life*, both a cosmic exploration and a focus on an ordinary family and ordinary human beings, in 2010. There are several films in process of production. The first to be released is *To the Wonder*.

And the caution? Narrative clarity is not a clear concern for Mallick. There is a narrative but his preferred way of communicating is more like visual art, music and poetry. The film is arresting to look at: the first part is in France, in tourist attraction places like the Luxembourg Gardens as well as the ordinary streets in Paris, the French countryside and a visit to Mont Saint Michel, the monastic island which can be cut off from the mainland of France at high tide. Its chapel and gardens are a wonder. The next part of the film is set in Oklahoma, very flat territory, rather monotonous suburban streets and homes, open fields, and watercourses that have to be tested for pollution.

Words are to a minimum. In the French section, it is French that is mainly spoken and there are subtitles. Later in the film, in Oklahoma, there is again some French but there is also a Hispanic character who speaks in Spanish, with subtitles.

Some reviewers have found Mallick's filmmaking exhilaratingly artistic and poetic. Other audiences, who prefer straightforward communication, have found the film baffling or

bewildering, Many not prepared to give it their attention.

Having said this, it is important to say that Mallick has a very distinctive type of film making, attractive and interesting in its way, but building up a niche market rather than appealing to the wide audience.

The story is in many ways very simple: an American and a Ukrainian refugee in France fall in love; she has a daughter; they are together but he cannot commit to marriage; we share their passionate love for each other. It is different in Oklahoma. He has a job as an engineer. She languishes. Her daughter wants to reconnect with her father and leaves. There are some complications, coming and goings in the life of the woman and the engineer. At one stage, he is compensating by taking up a relationship with a friend from school. She is Protestant and evangelical, quoting St. Paul, reading her bible in public, asking the engineer to pray with her.

The other central character is a Hispanic priest. He works in a parish in Oklahoma, has a very distinctive outreach to the poor and marginalized. He communicates well with them and is concerned for them. The engineer is a catholic and attends mass. The woman comes to confession and communion, her prelude to a very bad decision she makes which has an effect on the relationship.

For audiences with interest in religion, struggles with personal belief, the reality of prayer and an interior life, the priest character would be most interesting. We hear his questions, his longing for God, for a sense of God's presence. He is in some dark night of senses and soul. We glimpse his loneliness as he is filmed walking detached through a joyful wedding reception. It is not as if he has lost faith. Rather, his desire for a greater awareness of faith and the presence of God he is a desire for prayer, is prayer itself. Towards the end he prays the breastplate of St Patrick.

So here is a rather commonplace story, presented with visual flair, poetic style, expecting the audience to do a lot of work in their responses, filling in the gaps, reflecting on the characters and their situations, on their stances and values.

The final image of the film is Mont Saint Michel, an ending to indicate some of the deeper meanings of the film experience.

Ben Affleck plays the engineer. Olga Kurylenko plays the woman. Rachel Mc Adams plays the friend. Javier Bardem plays the priest, and very effectively.

WORLD WAR Z

US, 2013.

Brad Pitt, Mireille Enos,

Directed by Marc Forster.

World War Z. And, yes, Z is for Zombies.

Even though the film has a big star, Brad Pitt, a reputable director, Marc Forster (Monsters Ball, Stranger than Fiction, The Kite Runner), and a big budget for locations, special effects

and action sequences, audiences who do not like zombie films will not be converted. It is a film only for those who like or who can tolerate zombies on screen.

The quiet family opening sequences gives a false sense of security and calm. It is a mere lull. A traffic jam in Philadelphia follows where we share the frustration of the family and then, boom. Explosions, zombies smashing into windscreens, crazed crowds in panic, vehicles crashing everywhere. So, we are off. All around the world, the zombie plague is overwhelming, reports from everywhere. Can the world survive this plague? For most of the film, our bets would be that it won't.

Fortunately, Dad is a previous UN expert and he is being called in. After a scary chase, hiding and zombie pursuit in Newark (with scenes of looting in a supermarket reminiscent of several Zombie movies like *Day of the Dead*), the family is whisked away to a ship off shore which has a huge and sometimes frantic war and strategy room. Gerry (Pitt) is sent to find the source of the outbreak, which leads him to a tense visit to Korea, then off to Jerusalem.

The Jerusalem section raises queries about what it is showing. Israel is free from plague because of its security, especially the wall. But outside the wall, and clambering mountains of zombies scaling the wall, people are infected. It might give an impression that Israel is safe and saved and those outside in the Palestinian territories are infected and killers. But, when Jerusalem is invaded and citizens become zombies, it might seem that Israel's walls to keep enemies out is a vain hope, a false sense of security. Whatever the interpretation, the Jerusalem crowd scenes are quite spectacular in their way.

But, no solution there and Gerry is off to a World Health Organisation research centre outside Cardiff. Some plot aspects here (crashing so near the plant, Gerry impaled but able to walk, the Israeli soldier who was bitten on the hand and Gerry instantly slicing off her hand to save her) defy credibility.

In the facility, there is a collection of European character actors including Peter Capaldi, Moritz Bleibtreu, Ruth Negga, Pierfrancesco Favino, who give some gravitas to the tension.

There is a possible solution but the film ends on a moment of hope that the war will be won – but that it is just beginning. A sequel is possible although something similar was seen in *Contagion*.

YOU AIN'T SEEN NOTHIN' YET

France, 2012.

Denis Polydades, Michel Piccoli, Pierre Arditi, Michel Robin, Annie Duperey, Sabine Azema, Anne Consigny. Matthieu Amalric, Lambert Wilson, Hippolyte Girardot, Gerard Lartigau.

Directed by Alain Resnais.

You Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet is the work of French director, Alain Resnais. At the time of directing this film he was 90 years old. Yet it is not the film of an old man. It is, rather, the film of a man's long experience in cinema and theatre and wants to pay tribute to this French tradition.

The screenplay it takes up the myth of Eurydice and Orpheus and is based on the work of playwright, Jean Anouilh.

The whole film is quite artificial and relishes this artificiality. A famous playwright is reported to have been accidentally killed and his butler summons a group of actors to his home to commemorate his life. This is a bit like the device in *The Cat and the Canary* where the family is invited to listen to the will which is spoken by the dead man on a video. But this time the author wants to create an event to his own memory. He has been planning a modern version of Eurydice which has been filmed on video and he begins to play it for the audience. The reason for the actors being present is that they have performed the play in the past and have been invited to enjoy the new version and make comparisons.

What happens is that the actors are caught up in the spirit of the play and begin to recite the lines that they performed in the past. As this gathers momentum, there is performance of the play amongst the different actors. There are two each for Eurydice and Orpheus from different past stagings.

As with much French drama, the language is rather abstract even though in the context of melodrama with reference to the original mythology. What is important is the range of performances, the articulation of the text, the passion for ideas. It is interesting to see the interaction amongst the past actors and, ultimately, interaction between the audience in the room and the actors on the video screen.

It is a great pleasure to see many of France's top actors and actresses from screen and theatre. The two actresses who perform Eurydice are Sabine Azema and Anne Consigny. Two actors playing Orpheus are Pierre Arditi as the older, and the younger, Lambert Wilson. Included in the cast are veterans Michel Piccoli and Michel Robin and Annie Duperey.

Certainly not a film for everyone, but for connoisseurs of French cinema, admirers of the director and those who have been impressed by performances from the cast.

REVIEWS JULY 2013

100 BLOODY ACRES
BEHIND THE CANDELABRA
BEYOND THE HILLS
BLIND DETECTIVE
BLING RING, The
CLOUDBURST
CONJURING, The
GUN IN EACH HAND, A
HEAT, The
NOW YOU SEE ME,
ONLY GOD FORGIVES
PACIFIC RIM
PRENOM, Le/ WHAT'S IN A NAME?

REALITY
THIS IS THE END
WAY, WAY BACK, The
WOLVERINE, The

100 BLOODY ACRES

Australia, 2012, 90 minutes, Colour.

Damon Harriman, Angus Sampson, Anna Mc Gahan, Oliver Ackland, Jamie Kristian, John Jarratt.

Directed by Colin and Cameron Cairnes.

No deceptive title here. No false advertising.

We are in country South Australia, on the road in broad daylight. We see a whole range of ads and notices along the road, funny, indicating the way of life in the backblocks of the state – and a parody tone. Almost immediately, Reg Morgan (Damon Harriman) is busy lifting a man, bloodied in an accident, into his truck (very awkwardly), which advertises blood and bone on its side, the company owned by the Morgan brothers, Reg and his older, domineering brother, Lindsay (Angus Sampson). So, we know the tone of the film at once, comic with blood.

Three young people on their way to a country music festival break down and thumb a lift with the at first reluctant Reg: Sophie (Anna McGahan) in the front and James and Wes (Oliver Ackland and Jamie Kristian) in the back with the covered corpse.

We know, more or less, what is going to happen, so we keep anticipating every move to see if we are right. Lindsay is more bonkers than we thought. Reg is subservient, wanting to please his brother but also to assert himself.

We are in an Australian version of Texas Chainsaw Massacre territory – or a more local Wolf Creek (confirmed when John Jarratt turns up as the local, earnest, policeman). Those suggestions of inbred communities is confirmed when Aunty Nance turns up (with an unnecessarily explicit interlude between herself and Lindsay). It is also reminiscent of one of the best of these horror parodies, Tucker and Dale Vs Evil.

Meanwhile, back in the shed for the grinding of bodies, there is a surprise turn of events, soon remedied by some bloody action. Then it is the turn of the three hitchhikers. Sophie does her best to charm Reg (though he has a thing for TV's Rebecca Gibney). James spends most of the rest of the film hanging upside down over the grinder. Wes takes some pills and has a rather wild escape attempt which also includes his hand, a gun and the dog.

Not quite all as we might that thought – but near enough, except for the final unexpected joke which puts a smile on your face whether you wanted to smile or not. There is some blood and gore, but not nearly as much as in the American backblocks horror stories. This one is more ironic and so much is played for smiles and laughs.

If you like this kind of cult comic horror, then it is better than most. Otherwise, it will probably not be your bucket of blood!

BEHIND THE CANDELABRA

US, 2013, 117 minutes, Colour.

Michael Douglas, Matt Damon, Dan Aykroyd, Debbie Reynolds, Rob Lowe, Scott Bacula, Paul Reiser.

Directed by Stephen Soderbergh.

Audiences have been promised a biopic of Liberace for a long time. Production companies hesitated. It is a story of a (very) camp pianist, about gay relationships, about an AIDS virus death in the 1980s. He has been dead for almost three decades, so is not a household name as he was in his heyday (or years). However, Home Box Office decided to film Richard La Gravanese's screenplay and Steven Soderbergh directs and is, as usual, director of photography using a pseudonym, Peter Andrews. It screened on American television but in cinemas around the world.

This is a lavish production. Las Vegas performances are re-created, the lush staging and the costumes Liberace and some of his associates wore (literally incredible with fur, glitter and trains). It is a frank story, going behind Liberace's façade as heterosexual, taking us into his quite promiscuous world, descending into some sex addiction, his strong relationship with the young Scott Thorsen, his final illness.

Those who remember Liberace will be fascinated (some may be dismayed) by this portrait of the artist as an older man. Those who do not remember him may find this picture of California showbiz and its exuberance, extravagance and reality behind the façade, (part of which was the candelabra on Liberace's piano, symbol of his showmanship), not what they might have been expecting.

The time span of the film is 1977 to 1987 and the death of Liberace. It is based on Scott Thorsen's 1988 book. Thorsen still lives in Reno (when he is not in court or in prison) and is happy with the film. Liberace seems to be at the peak of his popularity, though he had been performing for decades. There seemed to be nothing to stop him with his resorting to face lifts. But his private life and proclivities caught up with him.

Michael Douglas would not be the first actor in most people's minds to portray Liberace, but he does so with flamboyant style as well as giving some depth to the portrayal. But, Matt Damon, with the less showy part, is quite convincing as Scott Thorsen, from naïve young helpful, through smitten lover, to bitterly discarded companion. He has to play straight man (so to speak) to Douglas's camp exuberance. There is some interesting casting (and make-up and wigs) for Dan Aykroyd as Liberace's sometimes venal manager, Debbie Reynolds (at 80) as Liberace's mother and Rob Lowe as one of the most sinister-looking and stoned plastic surgeons to be found in Hollywood.

For many, this may be more than we want to know about Liberace. On the other hand, it offers a sound dose of reality to the images of celebrities who seem to be real only when they are on show or in the gossip columns and magazines.

BEYOND THE HILLS

Romania, 2012, 156 minutes, Colour.

Cosmina Stratan, Cristina Flutur.

Directed by Christian Mungiu.

Christian Mungiu has become one of Romania's most celebrated directors. He won the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 2007 for his powerful film on abortion, *4 months, 3 weeks, 2 days*. He made an intriguing collection of Romanian short stories in 2009, *Tales from a Golden Age*. In 2012, *Beyond the Hills* won the prize for best screenplay and the best actress award, shared by the two stars, Cosmina Stratan and Cristina Flutur, who had never made a film before.

Beyond the Hills is based on actual events which occurred in 2005. In a Romanian Orthodox monastery in Moldavia, in the eastern part of Romania, there was the death of a young woman during an exorcism ritual. The police investigated and those taking part were found guilty of the woman's death. This film opens up the case, highlighting the condition of the woman who died, her mental and emotional states, focusing on the role of the priest in charge who decided on the exorcism and the nuns who assisted.

Mungiu has a powerful visual style. So many of the sequences are like filmed stage action but the impact is not theatrical in the confined sense. Rather, the focus of the audience on the scene, the characters and the action in medium close-up and long takes, means that the sense of realism is heightened. We, the audience, are right there, observing the accumulation of realistic detail, and being drawn into the action. This may account for the length of the film, over two and a half hours, but for most audiences this will not matter so much because of the intense and real experience.

While the film begins at a crowded railway station and there are visits to the local hospital, most of the action is in the remote monastery, where water comes from a well, where there is no electricity but communication is made through mobile phones. The priest in charge, who may be something of a rebel against the diocese and is called Papa, is devout and manages a functioning community where the religious superior, called Mama, is a practical and motherly nun. There are several sisters and associates and the faithful sometimes come for prayer. Life is basic, there is an outreach to an orphanage in the town, but there is a good spirit in the group.

When Amina comes back from Germany to see her friend Voiticha who has entered the community, she makes a move to stay but is mentally disturbed because of her relationship with Voiticha (lesbian undertones), her loneliness in Germany, her lack of faith. She is made to confess and attend prayer but this leads to breakdown and seizures which the doctors cannot take care of. Which leads to further disturbance which the priest interprets as diabolical possession and performs rituals while Amina fasts. This has a profound effect on Voiticha, her sense of vocation and prayer.

Clearly, the priest and the community, relying on their sense of tradition as their practical ways of dealing with problems are out of their depth, not recognising the mental issues, thinking they are doing the right thing, good intentions but limited experience. The medical response is particularly harsh while the police are far more sympathetic.

Romanians have said that the film needs to be considered in the cultural context of the remote area, the traditions of the Church (which is certainly unecumenical here with the priest saying that entering a non-Orthodox deserves damnation), the isolation of groups from the mainstream, limited experience of illness and mental states.

The film is quite a powerful experience and ends with a striking moment as a truck drives past the police car on a wet morning! (Some of the subtitles are too American in their colloquial tone for such a setting: What's up?, that's tough! And the use of the word 'read' for 'perform the ritual' seems odd.)

BLIND DETECTIVE

Hong Kong, 2012, 130 minutes, Colour.

Andy Lau.

Directed by Johnny To.

The idea behind Blind Detective seems rather whacko! How can a blind detective actually detect? This film certainly gives the answers, a blend of the serious and comic, and some outlandish scenes including a shootout and blind driving.

The film should be seen in the tradition of the Hong Kong dramas about police and crime detection. The director of this film, Johnny To, has contributed a great deal to this tradition over more than 20 years. This time he is working with the lighter touch.

We are introduced to Johnston, Andy Lau, who has lost his sight during his work as a policeman. Now he tracks down criminals and survives on the bounty money. We see him immediately in action following a large man who looks innocent but in fact has a career in throwing sulphuric acid on to crowds from the top of buildings. Johnston saves the day, but his police rival, especially for the affections of a tango dancer in the past, tricks him out of the bounty money. But he does offer to give him a meal, a considerable gift because Johnston, though very thin, has a huge appetite for food and spends a lot of the time of the film eating. But the police rival, watching Johnston through binoculars, asks the young woman in the force who is out buying food, to follow Johnston. She is hugely impressed by his work and visits him in hospital, after he has been hurt with sulphuric acid, to express her admiration and ask whether she could work with him.

The rest of the film is seeing the young woman and Johnston working together, re-creating scenes of crimes, re-living them, imagining action, asking questions, the film visualizing what is going on in Johnston's imagination. This leads, of course, to some bizarre episodes.

However, the young woman wants to locate a school friend who disappeared and this becomes linked with quite a number of women who have disappeared in Hong Kong over a period of seven years. This does lead them to a killer, quite a bizarre killer, but the disappearance of the young schoolgirl is quite another story. And this takes smart detection, mysterious twists, including some murders, and a birth scene.

Some audiences may not get the Hong Kong sense of humour. Others may think it is all rather silly. But, if the audience surrenders to the basic idea, there is a lot to interest and

entertain.

THE BLING RING

US, 2013, 90 minutes, Colour.

Kate Chang, Israel Broussard, Emma Watson, Taissa Farmiga, Leslie Ash.

Directed by Sofia Coppola.

Unless you are young and have a certain empathy with these Californian teenagers, while enjoying (perhaps) but questioning their shenanigans, or have a passion for the soundtracks of the movies, you might find it hard to sit through this, comparatively brief but seemingly long, odd story which is based on actual events.

Some years ago, Larry Clarke upset many audiences with his *Kids* (1995), a picture of teenagers behaving badly in New York City, middle-class many of them. But, many audiences asked, 'where are the parents?' and 'don't they know what their kids are doing, how they think and feel?'. In *The Bling Ring*, there are some scenes with parents but they are quite ignorant of what their children are doing, or they are caricatures of New Age parents who are eternal optimists with their faith and fads. Not a pretty picture!

Actually, there is a great deal of prettiness about it, because what the kids are doing is googling information about young and wealthy LA celebrities, finding their homes and addresses, and when they are away from home for filming or promotion or parties, invading. They go to the houses (which always seem to have one unlocked door) and help themselves to what they want. The only boy in the group, Mark, usually exclaims 'wow' or has four-letter frets about 'getting out of here'. The four girls, especially in one sequence, limit their articulate response to exclamations to repetitions of 'O my God' as they pick up each dress, shoe or handbags. Actually, they usually let each other know what the brand name is. They are not particularly interesting characters and will irritate those who are anti-US-teenagers, specifically anti-California. Audiences will find their characters, talk and behaviour exasperating.

Early, we do see that they police arrest them and witness some comments, mostly self-serving, which are intercut through the home invasions. But, here is a picture (ultimately critical of them and their self-centred attitudes) of self-indulgent, extravagantly-narcissistic, affluent, celebrity-wannabes.

Actually, the young cast impersonates their characters with some skill. Kate Chang is Rebecca, the instigator who draws Mark into her clutches. Israel Broussard looks a bit too ordinary, even nerdish, to turn into the drug-indulgent follower that he does. Mark is the only one who expresses some kind of regret. It is Emma Watson, not the ringleader but an over-assured and ambitious girl who even keeps shushing her indulgent mother (Leslie Mann) reminding her that the *Vanity Fair*'s interview is with her.

And, advising as she looks straight to camera at the end, that we can follow her exploits on her Facebook page!

Sofia Coppola grew up around these places and young people like this so we presume she knows what she is talking and film-making about.

CLOUDBURST

US, 2011, 93 minutes, Colour.

Olympia Dukakis, Brenda Fricker, Ryan Doucette.

Directed by Thom Fitzgerald.

It is being said that, at least in Australia, there is a growing audience of senior citizens enjoy going to the cinema. The criticism is that there are not enough films for this audience, so much being made for teenage audiences and young adults.

Here is a film with elderly characters at its centre. However, a warning is probably needed to caution the potential audience as to whether they want to see the film or not. The subject matter is still controversial. And this particular film has a great deal of raunchy dialogue, some of which might put Melissa McCarthy², star of *Bridesmaids* and *The Heat*, into the shade. However, the film wants us to see through the raunchiness and the sexual references to the tenderness and the dignity of the central characters.

Olympia Dukakis plays the 80 year old Stella, almost 80 herself at the time of making the film. Brenda Fricker plays her companion, Dot. They have been together in a relationship for 31 years. They live quietly in the northeast of the United States. However, Dot has become blind and is, even though very patient, dependent on Stella. She has been married and her granddaughter is very concerned and wants to get power of attorney. And she arranges for Dot to go into an institution.

The film shows the effect on Stella who gets Dot out of the institution and, somewhat on impulse, they decide to go to Canada to be legally married.

The film then becomes a road movie, from Maine up into Canada, through beautiful countryside, especially with the water, lakes and coast. The women decide to pick up a hitchhiker, a provocative young man, Prentice, who has been something of an exotic dancer in New York, but wants to go home to see his dying mother. In many ways, the audience sees the two women through his eyes as he listens to them, shares their journey, is puzzled by them. He is played by Ryan Doucette.

We get to know the women much better. Stella, very masculine in her style and mistaken in the diner for a man, has a very tough exterior, brought about by surviving in a critical world. She is certainly very earthy in her outlook, her language, her references. But this also masks a tenderness, and affection and love for Dot, no matter how am disabled Dot becomes.

There are two key episodes to follow. The first is Prentice arriving home, the encounter with his ill mother, the clash with his father and some odd the comedy with Dot and his father. The second is arriving in the town and the arrangements for celebrating the wedding, Stella making demands but also phoning the granddaughter. There is some mix-up, and some pathos at the end, with Prentice once again helping the two women. They intend for him to come home with them.

As a film about old age, it has much to offer in terms of mutual love and support, especially through times of illness. As a film about same-sex relationships, it is one of those films, whether one is in sympathy with the situation or not, whether from religious and moral

perspectives or from secular tradition, which presents characters in real life and challenges audience with the human and emotional dimension to give a perspective to a rational response.

THE CONJURING

US, 2013, 117 minutes, Colour.

Vera Farmiga, Patrick Wilson, Lily Taylor, Ron Livingston.

Directed by James Wan.

The Conjuring has been the subject of discussion in the media, especially about what the Catholic Church thinks of this kind of horror film based, allegedly, on actual events. (And, it made \$42,000,000 in the United States alone in its first days of release.)

Not that it is not an interesting film, and delivers for its audiences enough scares and shocks for people to jump in their seats. The director, James Wan, was the director of the first Saw film and has made a number of horror thrillers, including Death Sentence and Insidious, to prove that he is more than adept at this kind of film.

The main interest is the theme of satanic possession, the presence of evil in the world, mediated through human beings, the experience of hauntings and the possibilities of exorcism.

The Conjuring is based on a story by Ed and Lorraine Warren, the latter acting as a consultant for the film, a Catholic couple who have been involved in investigating hauntings and possessions for many decades. Their pictures appear in the final credits as well as do the family who are the central focus of this particular film.

Because there are references to the Catholic Church in the screenplay, with the Warrens being Catholic, and having a familiarity with Catholic rituals, especially for exorcism, and consulting a priest about this particular case, many have thought that it is a Catholic film. However, it is difficult to say that The Conjuring is 'a Catholic film'. The references are scattered, sometimes slight, relying on crucifixes and holy water, and the general statement that Hollywood writers are fond of, 'it will need approval from the Vatican', without explaining who in the Vatican, how or why this kind of approval is needed or given. This contrasts with the original The Exorcist, 1973, which drew on an actual case, had Jesuit advisers and used the text of the ritual exactly. It also contrasts with the film, The Rite, 2011, which showed audiences aspects of the course on exorcism currently available in Rome.

Later in the film, because the Vatican approval has not come through, Ed Warren performs the exorcism himself. The introduction to the film states that he is one of the few lay exorcists approved by the church.

This is really a haunted house film, all stops out. A family of father and mother with five daughters moves out of the city into an old house sold by the bank. They should have checked on its reputation because it is connected, not with any Catholic history at all, but with descendants of a Salem witch of the 17th century, Satan worship in the 19th century which leads to human sacrifice and suicides. It is these characters who are haunting, wanting to get back into the world with their malevolence, taking possession of the mother (Lily

Taylor subject to terrible torments), while inhabiting some of the daughters at times. So, there is religious background from the Protestant past. The haunted family is not religious at all, though the Warrens suggest it might be better if they were baptised.

But, 'the Catholic thing', is the background of the Warrens (Ed dying in 2006, aged 80) and Lorraine, now 86. They have been described as devout Catholics and this is taken for granted in the film. The most famous case, movie-wise, is that of the Amityville house and its haunting, filmed in 1978 as *The Amityville Horror*, with half a dozen sequels for television, and remade in 2005. There have been other films based on their cases, *The Haunted*, 1991, and *A Haunting in Connecticut*, 2009. They appeared in a number of television programs and are described as 'paranormal investigators', he a demonologist and writer, she a clairvoyant and medium.

While Ed Warren, played rather stolidly here by Patrick Wilson, mentions scepticism quite often, he and his wife, a sympathetic Vera Farmiga, give lectures which are packed out with eager students asking questions. There are some episodes where they visit a house and explain the sounds and creakings quite rationally. But it is a reminder that it is often easier to believe in a haunting than to believe in God, that the credibility of possession is more credible than that of a truly spiritual world. While the Warrens have been consistent and public in their work, there have been accusations of fraud and hoaxes.

So, *The Conjuring* is an entertainment of the ghosts/poltergeist/hauntings kind. The clever writers, Chad and Carey Hayes, have drawn on the conventions of the horror genre and borrowed, without deepthing, some Catholic associations.

A GUN IN EACH HAND

Spain, 2012, 95 minutes, Colour.

Javier Camara, Luis Tosar, Ricardo Darin, Eduardo Fernandez, Jordi Molla, Eduardo Noriega, Alberto San Juan, Leonor Watling, Cayetana Guillen Cuervo.

Directed by Cesc Gay.

A Gun in Each Hand sounds like either a western or a gangster film. It is neither.

In fact, this is a very urban drama, set in contemporary Barcelona. It is also something of a cinema talk-fest, the impact relying on the dialogue and performance rather than any action. This means it will be fascinating for those who enjoy looking and listening, frustrating or tedious for those who prefer fewer words and more action.

Not only is the film principally dialogue, it is divided, basically, into five acts. In each of the acts, two characters converse with each other, although the final act has a double set of characters. And the conversation is principally amongst men.

The first story sets the tone, a seedy-looking man arriving at a building, looking for a lawyer. By chance, he encounters a friend that he has not seen for ten years who is emerging from a therapy session. They stop on the ground floor and have a conversation which runs for more than ten minutes. They reveal themselves, their characters, their friendship, the absences, marriage and divorce, the role of therapy. They say they should meet again but we suspect that they will not.

A woman is introduced into the second conversation. She is at home, working, caring for the children. Her ex-husband comes to visit, wanting to make connections again, as they talk about responsibility, family. It is not likely that they will reconnect.

In the third episode we are taken outside, a man sitting in the park, watching the apartment where his wife is now living and preparing to marry someone else. When a man walking a dog passes by, they connect, the gradual realisation that the man with the dog is the new husband.

There is change of tone in the fourth story as a seemingly shy young man approaches a rather vivacious worker in his office. He has lustful intentions and she leads him on. He is eager to believe her and becomes the subject of humiliation and mockery.

In the final episode, before a concluding party where several of the characters come together though not necessarily connecting, two men are on their way to the party as are two women. One couple goes by car, the other walking, but each of the women describes the sexual behaviour of her husband to the other, the men being friends. There is a frankness in these discussions.

A very fine cast of celebrated Spanish and Latin American actors contribute to the power of the film. However, ultimately, it is left to the audience to make any judgments on the characters, how interesting they are, how real their lives and problems.

THE HEAT

US, 2013, 117 minutes, Colour.

Sandra Bullock, Melissa Mc Carthy, Demien Bichir, Jane Curtin, Michael Rappaport.
Directed by Paul Feig.

There have been any number of male buddy-movies, especially police-partner comedies and dramas. They were very popular in the 1970s in cinemas and on television - and have been ever since. Audiences are very used to the male-bonding of the partners, Starsky and Hutch and co, and are very familiar with the male characters, macho attitudes, and, of course, the way they handle (and mishandle) suspects. There have not been so many female buddy-movies, or television programs. The main one that comes to mind is Cagney and Lacey.

The Heat offers a little compensation, featuring Sandra Bullock and Melissa McCarthy? has a very odd-couple, female pairing of investigators, the first from the FBI, the second a detective in Boston.

This of course offers the opportunity for audiences to make comparison about males and their dealing with crime situations and females. Maybe. Bullock and Mc CCarthy are not your typical law enforcement agents. That is enough in itself. However, the film offers the opportunity for them to act in sometimes outlandish ways, mirroring (realistically and satirically) masculine behaviour.

So, underlying the comedy, there are some serious investigation stories of drug dealing and murder. It means that the film offers a murder mystery, with a somewhat surprising twist at

the end.

However, it is enjoying the performances of Bullock and McCarthy², each expert in her own style, that make the difference for the heat.

Audiences have become accustomed to see Sandra Bullock, a really glamorous star, now in her forties, in very serious roles but know that she can do ironic comedy like the Miss Congeniality films. On the other hand, Melissa Mc Carthy, especially in more recent years, has established herself: exploiting her physical size and manner, as the kind of slob with a loudmouth, less than scrupulous in manner in dealing with criminals, barging in, and making her more uptight partner quite embarrassed. She has done it in Bridesmaids, Identity Thief, This is 40 and Hangover Part III. She may well repel some audiences. But her skill in creating this kind of character and her aplomb in carrying it off means that many audiences who may not like to meet her on the street will enjoy the outrageous behaviour - while, perhaps, thinking she has gone too far in language and sexual references and behaviour.

Most of the film is on the Boston streets, and there is quite some toughness, even moments of savagery, in the behaviour of the drug lords in the city. Ultimately, the women get their man, though not without some very tight and dangerous moments.

And it is clear from the beginning the Sandra Bullock will eventually become much tougher, less uptight and duty and rules bound than she is. On the other hand, it is also clear from the beginning that Melissa Mc Carthy is going to mellow or we are going to see a more tender character underneath the bravado surface. This is especially true because of her relationship with her eccentric family and the involvement of her brother, Michael Rappaport, with the drug chiefs. Her angry mother is played sharply by Jane Curtin.

A lot of the dialogue is also very funny, Bullock's irony, Mc Carthy's one liners, when one is sometimes surprised at the joke one is laughing at.

The two actors work very well together and it will be no surprise if there is to be a sequel.

NOW YOU SEE ME

US, 2013, 115 minutes, Colour.

Jesse Eisenberg, Mark Ruffalo, Woody Harrelson, Isla Fisher, Dave Franco, Michael Caine, Melanie Laurent, Morgan Freeman.

Directed by Louis Letterier.

This caper with comic touches reminds us of the perennial attraction and power of magic.

We are introduced to three magicians in some detail. At the end of what seems like an audition for us the audience, we realise it is an audition for a mastermind who will employ them for over a year to work his magic in public, in Las Vegas, in New Orleans, in New York City. And they certainly do.

Jesse Eisenberg is a controlling type with ambitions – he asks someone to pick a card and suddenly there it is, the correct card, in lights on the side of a building. Wondering whether this would work for someone in the cinema audience, I also chose a card – and there it was in

lights, the card I chose. How could this be? Did the shuffler hold this card just a little longer so that it attracted attention? I still don't know, but that's what happened. Woody Harrelson is in fine form as a mentalist and hypnotist and his first demonstration is very good, embarrassing an unfaithful husband. Isla Fisher is a Houdini-imitator, struggling to get free before piranhas are dropped into her tank. This one we can all work out. Dave Franco does tricks on ferries but is good at stealing wallets.

There is a lot of talk about magic throughout the film, about not too much concentrating, about noticing, about being the cleverest in the room. A lot of this comes from Morgan Freeman as a magician-buster, with a TV show and reputation for exposing those he thinks of as second rate performers. He tries to be ahead of the game.

And there is Michael Caine was a businessman who has invested in the show, enjoying the prestige, but coming to regret it.

Once the four do their magic in Las Vegas, quite a trick, the police are after them because they have invited a member of the audience to rob a bank – and he is a Frenchman and they transport him via a helmet to France to rob his bank! The police are led by one of those obtuse detectives who think they know the answers at once and don't notice obvious clues and are continually being upstaged. He is played by a ruffled Mark Ruffalo. Then there is the sudden appearance of the young Frenchwoman from Interpol, which occasions some anti-French remarks from the detective. Why is she there?

Plenty of showmanship in this entertaining film, but there is an exciting but implausible car chase through a crowded Manhattan, something the director, Louis Leterrier (Unleashed and Transporter, as well as The Incredible Hulk and Clash of the Titans) has relished in other films.

Most audiences will enjoy the film, watching the magic – and getting some explanations. You really need NOT to know the ending when you go in, so this review is written using the magic advice of how to misdirect your audience.

ONLY GOD FORGIVES

Denmark/ Thailand, 2013, 94 minutes, Colour.
Ryan Gosling, Kristin Scott Thomas,
Directed by Nicholas Winding Refn.

A revenge melodrama.

What is left at the end of a revenge drama or melodrama – even thinking of Shakesperian and Jacobean tragedies like Hamlet or The Duchess of Malfi? A large number of corpses, a temporary peace and a conqueror who finds that they are in isolation after wreaking their vengeance.

Those 16th and 17th century melodramas are quite stylized in their staging and in their use of language and of poetry. We accept these conventions (or withdraw, shocked) and move into this stylized world. 20th century and 21st century films have their own conventions, vigilante action films, for instance.

But, Danish Nicholas Winding Refn has his own conventions for his quite violent stories. He often pares his screenplay of words. In this film, star Ryan Gosling has fewer than 100 words of dialogue. Refn presents characters like icons, his camera remaining on them and their poses. Many shots are like stills come to life (well, at least, to some kind of minimal movement). It is almost like (as in his medieval drama, *Valhalla Rising*) that each sequence is like a part of a video installation that could be set up in a museum hall. And, he relies on his use of colour which pervades (or is drained from) his shots to suggest atmosphere and moods.

This is particularly important for *Only God Forgives* with its settings in Thailand. While there are scenes in the streets and markets and vistas from building roofs, most of the action (not exactly the right word) takes place indoors, in corridors, hotel rooms, clubs, kickboxing venues, each with its distinctive colour, as well as shade and darkness. And the music, blend of west and Thai sounds, is also stylized.

Winding Refn has built up quite a reputation but, for many critics, *Only God Forgives* was a step or steps too far and a number condemned his violence and his style as pretentious. Be that as it may, it is certainly distinctive.

Re plot? Julian (Ryan Gosling, directed to just be, to sit and contemplate – showing the audience what we should be doing as we sit and watch) is connected with kickboxing. His older brother deals drugs. He also rapes and murders a young girl which leads to a powerful Thai policeman to initiate moves to have him killed. Which he does. That is the beginning of the revenge and its bloody consequences. There are some grisly scenes, especially in a club where a western gangster is tortured in very ugly ways. But, the officer has told all the girls in the club to shut their eyes during the brutality. Audiences may wish to do the same.

The other complication is the men's mother, a drug gangster herself, who flies in from the US to get her dead son's body. She is the total dragon lady, blending Lady Macbeth and Medea. And she is played to the hilt by a blonde-wigged, foul-mouthed Kristin Scott Thomas.

The ending will leave audiences puzzled. The Thai officer goes back to the police club as he does throughout the film, takes the microphone and sings. While Julian survives, the final image and his action raise both exclamation mark and question mark.

Little evidence that God forgives.

Refn has made an arthouse, bloody revenge melodrama.

PACIFIC RIM

US, 2013, 130 minutes, Colour.

Charlie Hunnam, Idris Elba, Rinko Kikuchi, Clifton Collins Jr, Charlie Day, Burns Gorman.
Directed by Guillermo del Toro.

Quite an overwhelming experience of a futuristic, science-fiction tale. It should have all fans of this kind of movie experience and extravaganza quite excited.

The film is set in the future, at least for engineering companies to be able to build the giant

size Robocop-looking encasements for the human hunters of the giant size monsters who have appeared to overcome and, even, take over the world. It must be in the long-term future. Even so, there is a picture of President Obama addressing people on the television!

The opening of the film moves fairly swiftly. We are informed about the break in the tectonic plates, the emergence from out of the depths of the oceans, these gigantic monsters. And we see them do violence on a range of cities in the Pacific rim. Interestingly, perhaps because of the special effects, the creature attacking Sydney moves comfortably between the Opera House and the Harbour Bridge. The damage that they cause is enormous, but we are spared seeing the destruction of our icons. One is tempted to use the word 'jaw-dropping' to describe the special effects, the intricacy, the detail, pace, editing and the overwhelming impact, but 'jaw-dropping' would be something of a cliché.

One of the temptations while watching the film is to wonder what movies were influencing the screenwriter and the director. The immediate thought is Transformers, big and loud (but with much more thought behind it!). Robocop has been mentioned already. And, of course, the giant monsters immediately suggest Godzilla. And at the end, in the depths of the sea, it is something of The Core.

Actually, the idea of the creatures attacking humans for dominance is really a variation on alien attack and The War of the Worlds, the creatures coming from down there rather than up and out there.

What is the world to do? The good thing is that governments put their differences aside and collaborate. This is just as well as the Robocop-looking armor that they build would cost zillions. But they build them, train people to go inside, have a process whereby their minds are linked and unified, put them in the machine whereby they stomp out to do battle with the monsters. Again the effects are often astounding.

There is a very a serious-looking commander, played by Idris Elba. He has previously been a fighter and is strictly in control of the battle. However, after some years, the authorities want to close down his program. Fortunately, there is an enormous (enormous being an understatement) for this huge set, where the new machines are built and fighters trained as well as having a vast technological communications space. This enables him to utter quite a line: 'We're cancelling the apocalypse.'

One of the early fighters is played by Charlie Hunnam, who worked with his brother, but who was killed by a monster. Shattered, the surviving brother goes to work on construction but is recruited to join the new program. His potential partner is a young woman, played by Rinko Kikuchi who was so effective in Babel. There is a powerful scene where the two unite their minds, but the experience overwhelms as she is controlled by her memories of being threatened as a little girl by a monster and her terror. However, we know in our heart of hearts, that she is going to be part of the grand finale to stop the monsters. A spoiler: she is.

Meanwhile there are two scientists, disagreeing with each other, one a practical person, the other theoretical, a kind of odd couple humorous duo. Burns Gorman is overly eccentric as the theorist. Charlie Day overacts (acting is too complimentary a word), and gets into frantic situations, mind joining with a monster, seeking out illegal dealers in monster parts, led by an over-comically sinister Ron Perlman. They compensate for the seriousness of Idris Elba.

Oh, and there are two Australian characters, father and son, father played by an American actor, son played by British actor. The son is surly, antagonistic, but comes around. The father is earnest, very supportive of the projects, with acquired flat Australian vowels, saying that the danger is in 'Category Foive'!

It all builds up to the final confrontation, dangers under the sea, graphic battles, and a final matinee-like holding-of-breath climax.

For those who enjoy these shows, it is certainly one of the best of its kind. And it was directed by Guillermo Del Toro, the Mexican director who moves easily between arthouse classics like *The Devil's Backbone* and *Pan's Labyrinth* and this kind of science-fantasy like *Cronos* and *Hellboy*.

LE PRENOM/ WHAT'S IN A NAME.

France, 2012, 109 minutes, Colour.

Patrick Bruel, Charles Berling, Valerie Benguigui, Guillaume de Tonquedoc, Judith El Zein. Directed by Alexandre de la Patelliere, Matthieu Delaporte.

It's best not to take the light touch too seriously at the beginning of this film as an indication that this will be another frothy French tale of friends gathering for a meal and reminiscing about their lives with each other since they were children. The froth soon dissipates and we are drawn into reminiscences that lead to recriminations, old stories that reveal resentments, and some present shocks. As we move into the conversation, drawn into it by the intensity, we will be amazed at the deep feelings on display but, perhaps, not really surprised that under the surface are hurts that need to be aired – and healed.

We are taken on an amusing ride through the streets of Paris as the film opens, but the pizza deliverer goes to the wrong door and needs to move on. We stay at the mistaken door and find ourselves at preparations for a dinner, Moroccan style. The home couple are hosts, he a university professor, she a local teacher. Visitors are her brother and his wife and long-time friend who plays the trombone.

The brother and his wife are expecting – and they ask what the child's name will be. They guess and guess, he giving the letter A. When he reveals the choice, the gathering freezes over and, as it thaws, it really heats up, each character taking the advantage of venting their spleen on each other. The screenplay is very well written, strong stories and memories being given quite eloquent voice, with some malicious invective. A lot narcissism in the room, a lot of pettiness, a lot of wounds, a lot of bitterness. A bit of truth or dare with some important emotional and rational (and irrational) consequences.

The film is based on a play and most of the action takes place in the dining room and kitchen of the house, but it does not make the audience feel confined. There are some flashbacks to open things out a little. These are effective in introducing each of the characters, showing them in their work situations. Later in the film, they are just imagination sequences (false as it turns out) and others which are just illustrating the words.

The initial credits list everyone only with their prenom! The final credits do have family names, but also with a baby or child photo of each of the cast and crew.

A stronger drama than we might have expected.

REALITY

Italy, 2012, 117 minutes, Colour.
Aniello Arena, Loredana Simioli.
Directed by Matteo Garrone.

Despite Luciano's laugh at the end of the film, this is, overall, a rather sad film.

Director, Matteo Garrone, has won awards by dramatising the main myth of Naples, the Mafia. Now he goes to a much more mundane, but no less prevalent, myth: reality-TV.

The reality of the title refers to reality TV, specifically the Big Brother program, so popular all around the world. At the time of the making of this film, it was in its 12th season in Italy.

There is a symbolic beginning as we watch a long the aerial shot over the outskirts of Naples, the background of Vesuvius, finally passing the cars in the streets to focus on an ornate carriage, carrying a bride and groom and going into a theme park called Le Sonrisa where marriages are celebrated, celebrities flown in, locals dressing up in costumes to be part of the background to the celebrations. We see ordinary people dressed up in a fantasyland.

But, then they go home, to very ordinary homes where they are very ordinary people. Not exactly poor, but not exactly well-off. And while the father works at a fish market, he is also involved in scams with a new product of robot-cookers.

But it is the Big Brother program that preoccupies him. Persuaded to do an audition, Luciano is called to Cinecitta in Rome for a second audition. But then there is the long wait for a phone call to ensure that he is a candidate to go into the Big Brother House. This long waits turns into an obsession, as he sells his fish market shop, as he broods, watches Big Brother on the television, moves out of reality to the concern of his wife, thinking that the producers are secretly watching him and thinking that he should do charitable deeds, including giving away his furniture, to ensure his being chosen for the Big Brother House.

Aniello Arena is completely persuasive as Luciano, the very ordinary man, very ordinary-looking man, who gets caught up in the atmosphere of contemporary pop media, the reality shows, thinking that he will become famous, thinking that he will make money, thinking that his family will esteem him more. Another character, Enzo, sweeps in and out of the film to great acclaim, the celebrity for the masses.

The film offers a lot of background detail for life in the suburbs of Naples. It also has the highly emotional outbursts of the Neapolitans. It is interesting to note that there are a couple of church scenes, elderly ladies pray the rosary in church, a brief sermon from a sensible priest on appearances and reality, Luciano and his friend Michele working in a soup kitchen of the parish and, finally, the going to the stations of the cross on good Friday at the Coliseum. These scenes seem to indicate that finding a place in the Big Brother House is a secular alternative to going to heaven.

Just as the film opened with an aerial shot into Naples, the film ends with a long rising tracking shot from Luciano in the Big Brother House laughing, but giving us plenty of time to wonder what is the nature of his laugh, satisfaction in getting into the house or a mad giggle.

THIS IS THE END

US, 2013, 107 minutes, Colour.

Seth Rogen, Jay Baruchel, James Franco, Jonah Hill, Craig Robinson, Danny Mc Bride, Emma Watson, Michael Cera.

Directed by Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg.

This is the end! But, in fact, it was only the title at the beginning. After fifteen minutes of a Hollywood stoner party, it really seemed as if it were the end. But then there is a huge earthquake, a vast chasm in front of a mansion and some of the guests, not without deserving it, fall in and descend into hell. In the distance, others are taken up in the rapture. And then the film goes on for another hour and a half.

The film is a Hollywood in-joke. It is very much an exercise in self-indulgence as well as self-promotion for its stars.

The film was written and directed by comedian Seth Rogen and his writing counterpart for several films, including Superbad, Evan Goldberg. The film opens with Seth Rogen as himself, or a chosen version of himself, meeting Jay Baruchel at LA airport. They hang out for a while together and then go to a party at James Franco's house, Franco also playing himself or a version of himself. Amongst the many guests are Jonah Hill, Craig Robinson and, for a while, Michael Cera playing a crude version of what he might want to be (or thought of) before he is impaled on his way to hell. Of all people, Emma Watson turns up, certainly in different company from what she is used to.

Most of the film is interaction between the five survivors as well as Danny Mc Bride, who also turns up uninvited. Not one of this reviewer's favourite actors (see/don't see Your Highness, Thirty Seconds or Less), but with his blunt saying what he thought and acting it out, he seemed to be the funniest of the group. There are many references to the films all of the leading players have made as well as to other movies. This is slightly amusing for those who know the actors.

In the attempts at survival, the cast indulges in what they do in most of their stoner films, Pineapple Express, Super, Your Highness... There is a continuity of crass jokes which tend to go on and on because there are no time limits on the screenplay. Plenty of scatological humour. Plenty of drugs. And most of the characters showing their meaner sides. Response to the humour depends on one's liking for the actors themselves and their styles, Seth Rogen generally being nice but cowardly, but not always, Jay Baruchel trying to be self a righteous. Craig Robinson has some funny lines, especially about race. And Jonah Hill, pretending to like Baruchel when he really loathes him, finally becomes possessed by a devil and there is a parody of The Exorcist.

And then come the devils, Godzilla-size monsters trampling over a burning Los Angeles. But, there are moments of redemption, with an exploitation of the theme of the rapture. And then there is heaven, with most people in white, better-dressed than at earthly parties, which is

really just another stoner party.

There is a paraphrase of themes from the Book of Revelation, some discussion about heaven and hell and the presence of God, some attempts of hope of the end for people to be their better selves and experience the rapture. Fans of the stars will inevitably be filled with rapture. The rest of us will remain stranded on earth, either still sitting in our seats or having gone out to do something better with the rest of our lives.

THE WAY, WAY BACK

US, 2013, 103 minutes, Colour.

Liam James, Steve Carell, Toni Collette, Sam Rockwell, Alison Janney, Anna Sophia Robb, Maya Rudolph, Nat Faxon, Jim Rash.

Directed by Nat Faxon and Jim Rash.

Troubles of a 14 year old adolescent? Again? Well, yes. But more interestingly explored than usual – and with some nicer touches.

Liam James is particularly convincing as Duncan, travelling to a holiday house on the Massachusetts Coast with his mother (Toni Collette) who has taken up with a divorced father, Trent, (Steve Carrell) and his rather self-centred teenage daughter. Duncan is sitting in the back of the car when Trent asks him how he would rate himself from one to ten. He tries six. He is a rather lugubrious looking boy and is dismayed when his prospective stepfather tells Duncan he thinks he is a three. And it rankles.

At first, the holiday is a disaster for Duncan. He is supportive of his mother, angry with Trent, putting up with his daughter. Then there is the extraverted-off-the-page next door neighbour (Alison Janney at her outrageously exuberant best) and her son with a cast in his eye and the somewhat unhappy daughter (AnnaSophia Robb). They all go into the mix for some very serious episodes and some humorous episodes to offer some balance.

But the best of the comedy and drama takes place at the theme swimming pool, Water Wizz, where Duncan comes across Owen (Sam Rockwell, with the touch of the zany, but with a while lot of sympathy), who befriends him, helps him work at Water Wizz (without his mother knowing) and the boy comes alive, is not literal in everything he hears, finds friends, including the girl from next door, opens up to be boy he could become. His communication with Owen is very effective, a father-figure when he needs one, not paternalistic but offering sensible advice and affirming him.

But, there are the heavy scenes, especially at the beach, where Trent is exposed as a thoughtless cad, and Duncan, beginning to defend his mother, upbraids her for not standing up for herself and for running away from crises. He surprises himself – and us – with this highly emotional and public outburst.

Audiences will enjoy various parts of the film depending on whom they are identifying with, the older generation or the younger. The screenplay highlights the vulnerability of a woman abandoned by her husband, trying to cope with her morose son, and testing the possibilities of a new relationship and being hurt and frustrated by it but not having the courage of the strength to do much about it. Toni Collette is particularly good at communicating the feelings

and frustrations of this character. It is a surprise to see Steve Carell playing such an obnoxious and fickle character as Trent. But it is Sam Rockwell who shows how someone very ordinary can have the power and the strength of character to enable a sad boy to begin to find himself.

The ending brings some kind of resolution but is still open.

The film was written and directed by Nat Faxon and Jim Rash. The former plays Owen's co-worker at the Water Wizz. Jim Rash plays the entertainingly hypochondriac, Lewis, who is always threatening to leave his kiosk – but doesn't.

THE WOLVERINE

US, 2013, 126 minutes, Colour.

Hugh Jackman, Tao Okamoto, Rila Fukushima, Famke Janssen, Svetlana Khodchenkova.
Directed by James Mangold.

This is the sixth time that Hugh Jackman has let his hair grow and put on his claws to be Logan, better known as Wolverine.

The film opens arrestingly in Japan, enemy prisoners of war, the Japanese guards afraid and committing hara-kiri. However, one of the prisoners is Logan, in a deep pit. He persuades one guard not to kill himself and, together, they witness the atomic bomb dropping on Nagasaki.

Then, later, there is Logan living in a remote part of North America, quite anti brutal hunters who barbarously kill bears. Where is the film going? What is Wolverine going to do? Well, a brightly active young Japanese woman arrives to persuade him to come to Japan. The old Japanese soldier is dying and wants to see Logan to thank him again. And off he goes.

So, most of the film is set in Japan. The old man is dying and leaving his biggest-company-in-Japan to his daughter and not to his son. Obviously, problems all round, with Yakuza, a most deadly Russian femme fatale who seems straight out of a Bond movie (villain, of course), and a gigantic Robocop like creature.

On the other hand, while it is an action show, comic book style, it is also a quieter film than many, concentrating on Logan and his character and his dealing with his Wolverine powers which the femme fatale has been able to lessen, bringing him and the two Japanese woman into danger. But...

Hugh Jackman is always a genial screen presence and is so here. The plot is interesting while not being memorable, so an entertaining holiday show.

REVIEWS AUGUST 2013

BEST OFFER, The

BLUE JASMINE

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V/H/S/2

WE'RE THE MILLERS

WHAT MAISIE KNEW

WHITE HOUSE DOWN

WORLD'S END, The

YOU'RE NEXT

THE BEST OFFER

Italy, 2012, 124 minutes, Colour.

Geoffrey Rush, Jim Sturgess, Sylvia Hoeks, Donald Sutherland.

Directed by Ennio Morricone.



There are many, many reasons for seeing The Best Offer – and, probably, many reasons for seeing it again. It is, to say the least, intriguing.

One of the main reasons for seeing the film is the central performance by Geoffrey Rush. He is at his best. He is art dealer and auctioneer, Virgil Oldman, an extreme aesthete who lives a solitary private existence, coming to life with surprising vivacity as he conducts auctions. Rush is persuasive when

he goes into extroverted action but, since most of the time, he is a shy and often withdrawn introvert, his skill is manifest as we realise that we share so much of his interior life. Since he is not, initially, in any ways sympathetic – he is snobbish and arrogant – it is fascinating to realise how we have been drawn into his life.

The writer-director has fashioned a complex screenplay – and by the end, we realise just how complex it has been, and we go back to puzzle over what we have seen and what has really happened. It is a film by Italian Giuseppe Tornatore (filming in English), most famous for *Cinema Paradiso* and Italian stories like *Everybody's Fine* and *Malena*. However, he made *A Pure Formality* in 1993, with Gerard Depardieu and Roman Polanski, which was also a puzzle which challenges the audience's perceptions and response to changes and twists.

The reserved Virgil is asked to evaluate and catalogue the art works and furniture in an Italian mansion, commissioned by a young woman (Sylvia Hoeks) who irritates him because of her failure to come to meetings. As their interactions continue, ups and downs, his curiosity is aroused and, to his surprise because of his many decades of wariness and avoidance of women – except for his huge collection of classic portraits of women which he sits and contemplates in a secret gallery-room – a sexual attraction emerges for the mysterious young woman who employs him. He is also fascinated by some pieces of machines which are identified as 18th century and parts of an automaton. His other passion is for the automaton to be re-constructed as he finds more and more parts. He is helped in this pursuit by a genial young mechanic, Jim Sturgess, who also becomes a sounding board for Virgil's emotional journey.

The other central character is Billy, an amateur artist friend of Virgil, who attends auctions and makes bids on behalf of Virgil, played by Donald Sutherland. Philip Jackson is the caretaker.

At this stage, publicists advise reviewers that they should go no further with any plot information, so that audiences will experience the film as the reviewers have and be drawn deeper into the characters and their lives and the twists of fate.

What can be said is that Tornatore has written a clever and intelligent script. There is a lush score by Ennio Morricone. We can contemplate a number of works of art. And we can admire the performances. And, yes, it would repay seeing again.

BLUE JASMINE

US, 2013, 98 minutes, Colour.

Cate Blanchett, Alec Baldwin, Sally Hawkins, Peter Sarsgaard, Andrew Dice Clay, Bobby Cannavale, Louis C.K.

Directed by Woody Allen.



This is certainly a film for Woody Allen's many admirers. Those who are not his fans might be very well impressed by this film. He wrote and directed it when he was in his mid-seventies, with a long career in humour and film behind him, and serious issues in his private life, traces of which seem to surface in this film.

Part of the film is set in his familiar New York City, the world of the affluent, the social snobs. But there is also a connection to Wall Street, financial fraud and the problems of the first decade of the 21st century, the global financial meltdown. Some commentators have linked some of the themes to Bernie Madoff and his exploitation of people and gambling with their money, as well as to his wife Helen.

Alec Baldwin plays Hal, her charming member of the rich set, but shady in his financial dealings and extravagant in his lifestyle, pampering his wife, but also a womanizer.

Most of the film, however, is not set in New York City but in San Francisco. This is something new for Woody Allen and he photographs the city very attractively as well as showing ordinary life amongst ordinary people. But, there are also affluent people in San Francisco, similar parties to those of New York City. And there are beautiful homes on San Francisco Bay.

However, this is a story about Jeanette, adopted as a child along with another adoptee sister, Ginger. Ginger has run away from home at the earliest opportunity. Jeanette has bigger ambitions and has changed her name to Jasmine. At college, studying anthropology, she was swept off her feet by Hal and married him.

As the film opens, she is travelling from New York to San Francisco by plane, talking incessantly about herself to her fellow-passenger. Jasmine does a lot of

talking to herself, her external self-esteem seems very strong, but below the surface she is often bewildered.

Jasmine is played by Cate Blanchett, who offers great performances in her many films, this being certainly one of her best. She commands the screen, audiences involved with her even if they don't like her and would disapprove of her. She has a great fascination. As the film moves fluidly from present to past and back again, quite often, we see Cate Blanchett's performance as the seemingly self-assured, pampered wife of the millionaire. But in San Francisco, we see her neurotic, drinking and pill-taking, presumptuously demanding, sponging on her sister, irritated by her nephews, putting her sister's boyfriend down, extravagant in her outlook despite having to come to terms with her having no money. She tries to learn computer. She works, not very effectively, as a dentist's secretary and is upset at his advances.

But, after urging her sister to seek other men and Ginger's finding an agreeable dancing partner at the party, played by Louis C.K., she encounters a charming, reserved diplomat with political ambitions, played by Peter Sarsgaard, who is attracted to her. But, putting on a fantasy front, she prepares her own fate by her lies.

This is Woody Allen drawing on his talent for seriousness seen in such films as *Interiors*, *Hannah and her Sisters* or *Crimes and Misdemeanours*. He does have some comic touches but this is not a film that is meant to be funny in the expected Woody Allen sense. He has written an intense screenplay, a portrait of a disturbed woman, supported by a portrait of a happy-go-lucky woman in Sally Hawkins' fine performance as Ginger.

In the past, screenplay and performances would have readily received Oscar nominations. It is hoped that they do with *Blue Jasmine*.

ELYSIUM

US, 2013, 109 minutes, Colour.

Matt Damon, Jodie Foster, Alice Braga, Sharlto Copley, Diego Luna.

Directed by Neil Blomkamp.



Elysium was once a mythical paradise for the Greeks. In 2154 it is a satellite, circling earth, a place reserved for the wealthy so that they can live in comfort, far away from the wreckage of planet earth. An interesting idea for a science-fiction film, especially contrasting the squalor of Los Angeles, the devastated buildings, the pollution, the totalitarian rule of the Robocop police force, smiling factory owners who are accountable to the authorities on Elysium. One of the advantages of Elysium is a bed and a scan which can detect instantly illness and fractures in a body and, simply by scanning, heal them.

Despite its impressive look, the film doesn't deliver as much as we might hope for.

Writer-director, Neal Blomkamp, achieved popular and critical success with his first feature film, District 9, an allegory about life in South Africa, from where the director comes, and apartheid. He used an aliens-on-earth story to illustrate his theme. Blomkamp has had long experience in special effects and that was

very evident in District 9. It is even more evident in Elysium where the producers seem to have given him unlimited funds for his special effects and action.

The trouble is that the plot is not always easy to follow, and the central characters are not all that engaging. This is not the fault of Matt Damon who does his best in the role of the Max, an orphan who has grown up, got into trouble, gone to prison, and now works in a factory. He has to become the very muscular hero who takes on the establishment of Elysium as well as a fiercely mad mercenary, Sharlto Copley (the lead in District 9). Max and most of the others on earth are fairly embittered about their lot.

However, there is a sympathetic character, Frey, who was an orphan with Max and looked after by a very benign nun at the orphanage. She is now a nurse but with a little daughter who has terminal leukemia. Max is bashed by one of the police and breaks his wrist, is exposed to radiation in the factory and given five days to live. A distraction during the film is that many criticised The Passion of the Christ for the amount of torture that Jesus seem to be able to endure. Max, given his only five days to live, has to endure much, much more and, at times, scarcely shows the ill effect on him.

Max wants to get to Elysium and joins a group who are trying to sabotage the authorities there, abducting the owner of the plant and transferring secret documentation which is stored in his brain into Max's brain.

Which, of course, leads to a huge climax on Elysium itself.

In fact, we see very little of Elysium itself, some nice suburban homes and pools, gardens, but mainly vistas the huge circle rotating in space. However, we do see one of the ministers who is plotting against the president, cold and ruthless as she orders the destruction of several unlawful space vehicles which are filled with refugees in search of a home and cures for illnesses. She is

played with quite cold calculation by Jodie Foster, a contrast to the very nice Frey, Alice Braga.

While the visuals are impressive, but a lot of the language is aggressively tiresome, we watch with a certain detachment and observation, rather than a deep involvement which would have made the film more interesting and enjoyable.

GAMBIT

US, 2012, 89 minutes, Colour.

Colin Firth, Cameron Diaz, Alan Rickman, Tom Courteney, Cloris Leachman.

Directed by Michael Hoffman.



This is a brief, light, comic story of art forgery and theft. It is humorous and easy entertainment. And then we discover that the screenplay was written by the Coen Brothers (who directed the rather dire re-make of Ealing Studios' The

Lady Killers, so perhaps it was better that they did not direct this one at the 21st century Ealing Studios.)

In 1967, *Gambit* was released starring Michael Caine and Shirley MacLaine. It was a frothy comedy caper of the period. Not the kind of film that would come to mind for a re-make. However, audiences who catch up with it will be pleased that they did. In fact, anyone who saw it on its first release will turn 60 next year! So one could say that there is an audience for a re-make.

This time the stars are Colin Firth and Cameron Diaz. Firth plays a rather more upper- class bespectacled version of Michael Caine in his day. He is an art adviser, resentful of his rather lowly status and the treatment by his boss. He devises a scheme to swindle his boss out of one of his favourite Monet paintings. He is more than aided and abetted by an old military veteran, played with aplomb by Tom Courtney. We see them in Texas, looking for the granddaughter of a veteran who may or may not have acquired the Monet during World War Two when it had been taken by Goering.

Instead of a dancer, as Shirley MacLaine was in the original, Cameron Diaz is a rodeo expert and can tie up a calf within seconds, something very useful in a really unexpected way later in the film.

The main twist is at the beginning of the film rather than at the end which makes it more entertaining.

While Colin Firth is expert at the uptight Englishman, Cameron Diaz is delightfully exuberant as the Texas cowgal. She is clearly enjoying herself in this kind of lively performance.

The target of the robbery is the proprietor of a whole range of magazines. He treats people in a detestable way, as only Alan Rickman can. He spurns Firth

but then relies on him for expert art of advice, especially on Monet. However, there is a German expert in the wings who may get the job. He appears only twice, but does so amusingly in the form of Stanley Tucci.

While the plan may seem foolproof, it definitely isn't. There are all kinds of mix ups in the hotel, with some PG-rated sex farce. There is the lavish party with a whole range of intoxicated and hungry Japanese who are to do a deal with Rickman but get sidetracked into karaoke.

In the meantime, Firth has to substitute the forgery for the real painting and encounters a form of security that he never dreamt of. It looks as though the whole plan will fall through.

Needless to say, the whole thing does work out to the satisfaction of everyone, including Rickman who is seen at the end contemplating his acquired forgery.

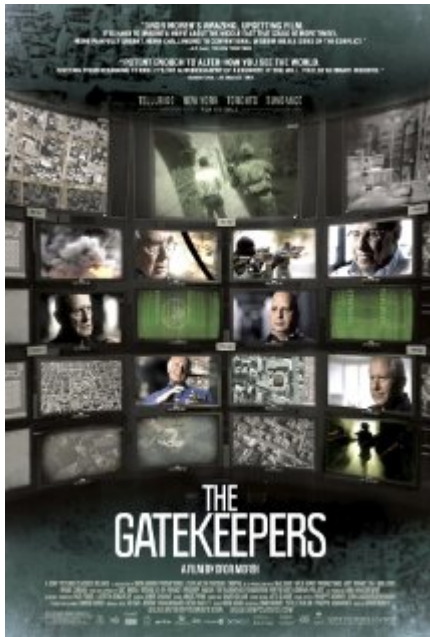
This is a soufflé of a movie, but fans of Colin Firth will admire his serious portrayal and his laughing at the end. Fans of Cameron Diaz will also enjoy her vivacious screen presence.

THE GATEKEEPERS

Israel, 2012, 105 minutes, Colour.

Heads of Shin Bet.

Directed by Dror Moreh.



The gatekeepers of the title of this film are of the heads of the Israeli security organization, Shin Bet.

Any documentary which studies contemporary Israel and its history of the last half century is of significance. Audiences, whatever their political stances, will be interested in Israel and its policies, especially towards Palestine, Palestinians and a Palestinian State. This film is of more than topical interest.

The director of the film, Dror Moreh, had the idea - it may have seemed quite improbable on paper - to do interviews with six of the directors of Shin Bet, from the 1980s to the present. The improbability was that they would agree to be filmed let alone be interviewed and express their personal as well as political points of view. But they did.

Were the film simply to consist of a succession of talking heads, it would be of paramount interest and importance. The six men are quite frank in expressing their views, their following orders, the influence on policy, the sometimes violent processes that they used for the security of Israel. But, also of importance, is the fact that each of them is in favour of a Palestinian State, and that they are critical of the views of the extreme right in Israel.

While the film has the interviews intercut each other, not just simply putting them in chronological order, the film also supplies a great deal of their background, as persons, as officials, as committed to the state. The film also incorporates a great deal of historical footage, especially of television coverage of the six day war, the Intifada, the surveillance of Palestinians, the assassination attempts instigated by Shin Bet as well as the rise of the right wing during the 1990s, the response to the Oslo agreement and the assassination of prime minister Rabin.

This background material provides the chronological development of the state of Israel, especially after the 1960s, the enlargement of its territory, the incorporation of the Palestinian Territories and the occupation.

This gives the audience quite an amount of information about which they may have very strong ideas. The presentation does offer an opportunity for challenging ideas and perspectives. One of the motif throughout the film is a focus on surveillance cameras and indication of the growing sophistication of the ability for authorities to focus on groups and individuals, even to the targeting of bombs and missiles. While this is interesting, yet it is frightening, focus on the leaders of Palestinian groups, getting information, infiltrating, putting explosives in telephones... There is also a tense presentation of the possibility of killing the hierarchy of Hamas but the difficulties in making life and death decisions with the issues of collateral damage for innocent people.

The presentation of the role of the political right and their religious views is important, especially in the events of the 1990s, the sudden assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, the prevention of political and violent action by these groups for the greater good, as well as the freeing by the Knesset of some of those involved in Israeli terrorist attempts on buses and passengers, an unexpected angle on security issues in Israel.

While the film has been made by Israeli Group, it has alarmed and been condemned by some Jewish groups around the world. It was nominated for the Oscar for Best Documentary in 2012.

A HIJACKING/KAPRINGEN

Denmark, 2013, 106 minutes, Colour.

Pikou Asbaek, Soren Malling, Dar Salim.

Directed by Tobias Lindholm.



This is a very well-made, very well-written and acted, and an engrossing drama.

While the title may indicate that we will be privy to the intricate details of a pirate boarding-party on a ship in the Indian Ocean, the actual hijacking is described only in words. What is important for this film is the focus on members of the crew and their response to the hijacking as well as the

negotiations between a translator on the ship and the heads of the shipping company in Denmark.

The film moves from one location to the other, actually using a ship that had been the subject to a hijacking by Somali pirates. It should be noted that the Somali pirates, quite a substantial gun-toting number of them, are shown as a group but we never see their leader has a distinctive character. Rather, the negotiator, who claims not to be one of the pirates, is more of the central terrorist character, exercising both charm and ruthlessness – bargaining with psychological know-how. There is also one of the minor pirates, Rashid, who features more prominently, especially in his dealings with the cook and a final dramatic moment.

The film opens with a focus on the cook, in close up with a phone call to his wife and daughter back home. He fills in some of the background of the ship and its journey towards Mumbai. We have some glimpses of the captain as well as another member of the crew, Jan. These three are separated from the other four members of the crew and held incommunicado for months. Pilou Asbaek is convincing as the cook, Mikkel, who is the anchor for the audience for the plight of the crew.

The scene moves to Denmark, a serious negotiation between a shipping company and a Japanese firm, the second-in-charge unable to do a deal and relying on the quiet toughness of the CEO. The negotiations are interrupted by news that their ship has been hijacked. The film presents an interesting character portrait of the CEO (Soren Malling) who agrees that there should be an outsider professional adviser about dealing with the pirates but who wants to take the responsibility for the negotiations on himself. The detail of the contacts between Denmark and the ship, growing intense over several months is interesting: the Pirates' lowering their demands, the company trying to keep the crew alive as well as minimize the payment, and keeping a level head and controlling the emotional impact.

The film takes a very object of look at the situations, despite the emotions of the prisoners, the captain ill, the cook becoming depressed - with a moment of respite, quite exhilarating in its way, when the cork is able to land a fish and crew and pirates enjoy a meal together. The build-up of the negotiations and the effect on the CEO is also a powerfully portrayed.

There is discussion material, especially amongst the negotiators, about giving in to demands too easily and the consequences on the future daring of the pirates.

Audience hopes are always for the survival of the crew. The film also gives insight into the process is and the psychology of negotiating on each side, as well as the details of how the ransom delivery is made and the consequences for the crew. As regards the ending, A Hijacking does not have the full happy ending of, say, an American version of this story. There is satisfaction, but there are some grim dimensions to the satisfaction. (Hollywood has made a film about hijacking, *Captain Phillips* (Tom Hanks), directed by Paul Greengrass.)

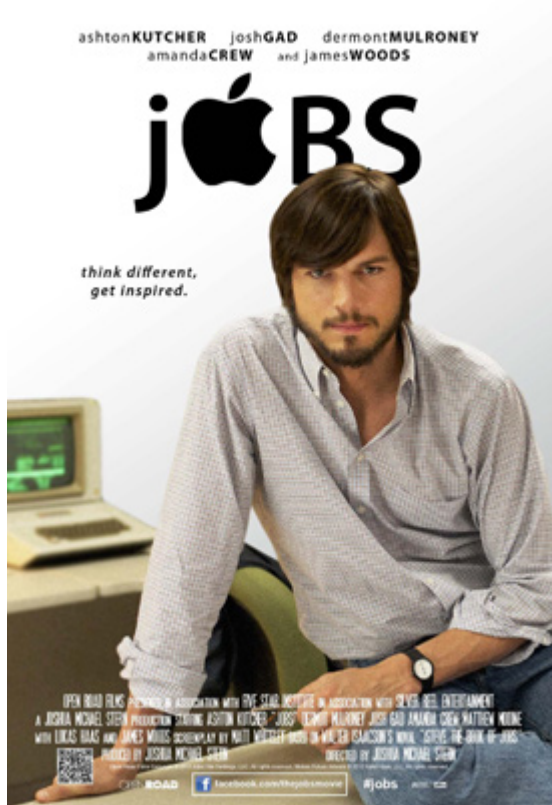
Some audiences may find the film too intense and hard going-but it is worth it.

JOBS

US, 2013, 127 minutes, Colour.

Ashton Kutcher, Dermot Mulroney, Josh Gad, Lukas Haas, J.K. Simmons, Mattheys Modine, Lesley Ann Warren, Ron Eldard, James Woods, John Getz, Victor Rasuk, Eldon Henson.

Directed by Joshua Michael Stern.



Jobs is a very interesting film to watch. But, this is particularly because of its portrayal of the development and history of Apple. It is also interesting, in a negative kind of way, in its portrayal of the character of Steve Jobs himself. He was a very significant figure of the 20th century, the film having the courage to simply entitle itself, Jobs, rather than Steve Jobs. Everyone is expected to know who Jobs was and something of what he achieved.

The film opens at an Apple staff meeting in 2001. Steve Jobs shuffles in in his characteristic, slightly Neanderthal, stooped way of walking. He addresses his troops, challenges them, promises them something creative and new, the iPod, and energises their enthusiasm by giving statistics about how many items were sold, millions of them, in that year. By the end, we realise that this is something of a thumbnail sketch of Job's biography.

But then the film goes back to the mid-1970s, Jobs as a young man, inventive and managerial, but unable to settle down to his formal studies. With his good friend, Daniel, he travels to India. Though we don't quite see how, it has something of a transforming effect on the young Jobs. He returns and knuckles

down to hard work. It seems he has found himself, at home in the developing information technology world.

At this stage, the review should include some praise for its star, Ashton Kutcher. Most audiences would see Kutcher as a lightweight, a performer in romantic comedies or some thrillers, as well as on television in *Two and a half Men*. However, in that opening sequence, made up to look like Jobs and giving his speech, we realise that this is a much better Kutcher performance. But then we go back to the young man and see the Kutcher with whom we are familiar. But, as the film progresses, he immerses himself in the role and we appreciate that we are looking at an excellent portrayal of Steve Jobs.

It is legend that he set up the Apple Company in his father's garage. He befriends Steve Wozniak, computer whiz who saw something of the future in developing the personal computer and the computer screen and data storage. Along with other friends, including Daniel, they start working to fulfil an order from a local store. With the order somewhat incomplete, we begin to see that Jobs is something of a wheeler dealer in his words and in his performance. At this stage, a businessman decides to invest some thousands in Apple and the company is on the way.

Daniel is played by Lukas Haas. Steve Wozniak is played by Josh Gad. The investor is played by Dermot Mulroney.

The prospects for Steve Jobs seemed limitless. However, on a personal level, he becomes more and of more a repellent human being. He discards his friends easily. When offering stock options, he doesn't include them because he considers that they have not worked up to the standard for deserving them. A young woman claims that a child is his and he rejects her with chilling nonchalance. Later, he will take care of this daughter. But, although we see scenes of his domestic life, a wife and a child, women did not play a very large part in his life.

Of course, it is rather exhilarating to see Jobs and his success, immersing himself more and more in the American capitalist dream, and achieving. With Steve Wozniak and an increasingly large number of proteges, he is continually inventive, developing the Macintosh for instance. But, in his personality, he is a perfectionist and ruthlessly intolerant of those who do not measure up to his expectations. They can just get out – and at once. He is able to hire and fire without a grimace.

But in the nineties, members of the board became more and more hostile to his perfectionism, experiments, huge investments in development, and he is ousted from the board.

While he seems to mellow outside the board and his company, he spends some time at home. However, he is requested to come back to the company and, by a series of manoeuvres, and his old demanding style, he is reinstated.

There is an interesting cast members for characters during this period, J.K. Simmons as head of the board, Matthew Modine as the Pepsi Cola marketing expert called in to save Apple in the 1990s.

The film is significant in its presentation of the history of IT developments in the United States and the establishing of Apple. However, on a personal level, like Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook in The Social Network, the central character, though a supreme achiever, is a very difficult human being.

KICKASS 2

US, 2013, 109 minutes, Colour.

Aaron Taylor Johnson, Chloe Grace Moretz, Chris Platz, Jim Carrey, Morris Chestnut.

Directed by Jeff Medlow.

AARON
TAYLOR-JOHNSON

CHRISTOPHER
MINTZ-PLASSE

CHLOÉ GRACE
MORETZ

THE
JIM
CARREY

KICK-ASS2

UNIVERSAL PICTURES AND AARON FILMS PRESENT A MATTHEW VAUGHN FILM "KICK-ASS 2" AARON TAYLOR-JOHNSON CHRISTOPHER MINTZ-PLASSE
CHLOÉ GRACE MORETZ AND JIM CARREY WITH BEN WISDOM AND JEFF WOODMAN
CASTING BY EMILY HAMILTON COSTUME DESIGNER TONY DALLON EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS BENNY JACKMAN MATTHEW VAUGHN
PRODUCED BY CLAUDIO VAUGHN PERRE LAGARDE TREVOR YOUNG MORETZ PRODUCED BY MATTHEW VAUGHN
EDITED BY JEFF WOODMAN
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS MARK MILLAR JOHN S. ROMITA JR. STEPHEN WATKINS
PRODUCED BY JEFF WOODMAN
A UNIVERSAL RELEASE

M A R V

PLAN B

IN CINEMAS

AUGUST 14

#KickAss2movie

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There is no doubt that Kickass 2 lives up to its title. This reviewer was not a fan of the original Kickass, a blend of realistic violence with comic book violence, Nicholas Cage as a comic strip avenger, Mark Strong as a comic strip villain, Chloe Grace Moretz as a little girl action heroine, Hit-Girl, with a violent streak and a bad mouth.

Obviously, the film was popular, and did well in the box office, a sign that the film should become the beginning of a franchise. And now the sequel. This reviewer is not a fan of the sequel either.

With Nicholas Cage and Mark Strong gone from the film, though we see their photos in their children's homes, the film relies on Aaron Johnson Taylor as David, the bespectacled and mild-mannered young student who transforms himself into the heroic figure, Kickass, going out on the streets to defend the defenceless. However, Mindy (Chloe Grace Moretz) now aged 15, is confined to the care of her father's friend, Markus (Morris Chestnut), who insists she stay in school and not participate in any action. This gives her the opportunity to have some scenes straight out of a Mean Girls kind of film where she excels at her dance routine, imagining herself as Hit-Girl battling with her opponents, but then exercising a mean vengeance on the snobby girls with their loss of control of bodily functions.

Mark Strong's son, Christopher Mintz Plasse, inherits all his father's ill-gotten money, decides that he will be a villain incarnate, with a generally unprintable title, and decides to go after David to avenge his father. He gathers round him a truly oddball group, especially a gigantic wrestler woman called Mother Russia.

In the meantime, a born-again Christian, anti-swearing and anti-profanity captain gathers together the avengers. They go into action but soon he is disposed of. Waiting for Jim Carrey to appear, it dawns on us that he has already appeared as the captain but was, more or less, unrecognisable as the Jim Carrey of the past. In comments after the making of the film, Carrey has made some statements highly critical of the violence. He is not wrong.

The film veers into different moods every couple of minutes. At one stage it is realistic. At another, soon after, it is highly stylized. It goes into high school movie mode. It goes into domestic drama. It goes into fighting fantasy. But all the time it returns to confrontation and comic-book violence and killings while several times mentioning that this is not a comic-book but is real life. Well, not exactly.

MOOD INDIGO/ L'ECUME DES JOURS

France, 2013, 125 minutes, Colour.

Romain Duris, Audrey Tautou, Omar Sy, Gad Elmaleh, Aïssa Maïga.

Directed by Michel Gondry.



Mood Indigo is certainly an arresting title for a film. Those who go to the film out of curiosity about the title will either be enthralled and captivated by its

imagination or simply bewildered by the story, the behaviour for the characters, and the steady downward spiral to a mood that is even darker than indigo.

The film is based on a novel by Boris Vian has an amusing quote from him at the opening about the film being true because he made it up from beginning to end. The original title of his novel is *L'écume des Jours*. *Ecume* means froth, but the froth of these days is light while the sadness is deeper.

However, the film is very much the work of writer-director, Michel Gondry. A Frenchman, he is best remembered worldwide for his imaginative film, *The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, with Jim Carrey and Kate Winslet. This film played with ideas of identity, loss of identity, creation of a new identity, the role of memory. While *Mood Indigo* does not explore these themes so explicitly, they are there in the background of an unusual story. It might be noted that Gondry also directed *Human Nature*, *The Science of Sleep*, *Be Kind Rewind*.

Audiences know right from the beginning that this is going to be unusual and possibly exotic. The hero, Colin, Romain Duris, a popular star of many French films, is something of an inventor. His house is full of all kinds of mechanical wonders, some very helpful for maintenance, some for cooking, others toy-like inventions. He is assisted by his cook, Omar Sy, the assistant in *The Intouchables*. Colin would like to be something of a man about town, but is rather a loner and awkward in his manner. His cook, Nicolas, originally from Africa, is a model of urbane manners and hierarchical respect. He also has a talent for modern dancing! So far, so amusing and intelligible. With, of course, the touch of the oddball.

At a social, Colin, on the lookout for feminine company, encounters Chloe (Audrey Tautou as an older *Amelie*-type), sweet but a touch awkward, but Colin and Chloe fall in love. This brings in Duke Ellington's music as a theme, with Chloe and other songs. The love story is accompanied by humorous scenes, comic scenes, slapstick scenes, and the intervention of the inventions.

Also at hand is Colin's friend Chick (Gad Elmaleh) comes to visit, enjoying meals from Nicholas, and play Colin invention, the cocktail piano. Which produces different kinds of drinks according to the chords one plays. Chick is also in love with Nicolas' niece, Alice.

While the film is often in bright colour, the colour begins to fade somewhat as the film goes on. This is especially true when Chloe is diagnosed with a severe illness, and lily growing in her lung, which needs myriad flowers around her in order to strike the power of the lily. This has a terrible effect on Colin and his mood, desperately in love with Chloe, but spending all his money on doctors and medicines. And he has to find jobs to continue to support her, some really odd jobs, like lying on a mound of earth to give warmth for the growth of a range of bullets for rifles.

Gondry, though he has worked in Hollywood, obviously does not believe in Hollywood endings and the film loses most of its visual colour, moves into the darkness of black and white, and some final symbolic but bewildering images.

[Not all the film reviewers at the preview stayed the length of the film, either becoming bored or exasperated. This is certainly a possibility for many viewers who may be taken aback by the style and story and refuse to be tantalised by its clues. But for those caught up by Vian's and Gondry's imagination, they probably might decide to see it again and to put it all together.]

THE MORTAL INSTRUMENTS: CITY OF BONES

US, 2013, 130 minutes, Colour.

Lily Collins, Jamie Campbell Bower, Lena Headey, Jonathan Rhys Myers, CCH Pounder, Kevin Zegers, Jared Harris.

Directed by Harald Zwart.



Teen fantasy. That's the phrase we're looking for. The Mortal Instruments series is new teen fantasy. After the success of the Harry Potter films, with the introduction of the Twilight series, with the continued popularity of The Hunger Games (and more novels and films in the offing), there seems to be a hearty appetite amongst teenage audiences for this kind of fantasy. While it will appeal to teenagers, it may not appeal so much to their parents.

The Mortal Instrument series has been written by Cassandra Clare. Once again it is a female author who has been able to come up with this imaginative world. However, it is not very clear to those who have not read the books what the mortal instruments actually are and how they function. We are taken to a mysterious institute with a burial place for demon-hunters which is called the City of Bones. But not much more explanation of these themes, though lots of explanation of the background of the characters.

Taking a glance at some comments from the readers of the book, we find that the general impression is that the film is a good adaptation and a number of fan-readers recommending it.

So, what is this particular fantasy about? Somewhat disconcertingly for those not in the know, it opens in contemporary New York City, not a fantasy world. It looks as though it is going to be a domestic story. We have a concerned mother, a teenage daughter with the touch of rebellion, and geeky kind of

boyfriend, and a poetry reading from a pretentious young poet, a visit to a nightclub.

But, somehow, behind the surface of New York, there is a parallel world. Perhaps not quite so much parallel world. Rather, an alternate world, because, if you have the gift, you can see the alternate characters and interact with them. And, of course, there is deep evil in this alternate world.

The story is all about demon-hunters. The mother, it transpires, was one of the greatest but she is pursued by the demons themselves, wanting to protect her daughter, who we soon learn has the powers, and pretty potent powers at that. Enter a gallant young man, Jace, the hero demon-hunter for the film (Jamie Campbell Bower). He has a group of friends who fight with him. After rescuing our heroine, and Clary is her name, Lily Collins, he takes her to a vast supernatural institute which is masked from ordinary view but, again, is right there in New York City.

We have met the demons. We have met the demon-hunters. We find a sage older man in the institute (Jared Harris), who is able to reveal some of the secrets. In the meantime, at the rather suburban-looking home of Clary, there is a mysterious woman downstairs (CCH Pounder) who has tarot card powers.

The quest is to find a mysterious cup, which will help the demon race survive, when Valentine (Jonathan Rhys Meyers), has it in his power.

The film is longish, immersing us in this double world, puzzling about what the outcome ultimately will be, or how it will be worked out. And then the film pauses... because the sequel is in preparation!

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

US, 2013, 107 minutes, Black and white.
Amy Acker, Alexis Danishof, Clark Gregg.
Directed by Joss Whedon.



All the Shakespeare enthusiasts will have their own strong opinion on the quality of *Much Ado about Nothing*. By and large, the comic play is well received period. Fans of Shakespearean films will recall that one of Kenneth Branagh's earliest film versions of Shakespeare was the 1993 *Much Ado* with Emma Thompson had a very unusual cast including Denzel Washington and Keanu Reeves. It was colorful, bright and breezy, with its underlying battle of the sexes between Beatrice and Benedick.

This year there has been mixed anticipation of a new version of *Much Ado*. First of all, it was to be adapted for the screen and directed by Joss Whedon. He is the hero of the fanboys and fangirls who appreciate his imaginative television programs, the film *Serenity* and, the biggest Blockbuster of 2012, *The Avengers* (the one with Thor, Iron Man, The Hulk...). They were hoping that he was working on *The Avengers 2*. On the other hand, the news was that this version was in black and white, with an unknown cast, running under two hours.

Those who relish *Much Ado* will find quite some satisfaction in this version. It is light years away from a huge-budget extravaganza. Yes, it has been filmed in black and white. The cast is generally not known, at least by name. They are friends of Whedon, a group who meet in his California home to read Shakespeare. They decided that they would do a simple version of *Much Ado*,

in contemporary dress, with their own accents, and they filmed over a three week period. Whedon himself also composed the score.

One of the difficulties for Americans performing Shakespeare's plays is their accent and their recitation of the verse. Not all can speak iambic pentameter in a way that blends the speech rhythms with the blank verse. Sometimes they seem quite contrived in their efforts to be poetic. No need to be apprehensive here. The cast has a skilled for natural rhythms and ease with speaking the verse, not forcing it, but yet retaining the impact of Shakespeare's language and rhythms.

While the film is comic, it has many serious undertones and implications. While the film is also serious, it is played with some comic lightness.

We accept that we are in Messina, in Italy, even though the data and the sound is of California. And it is a contemporary California, to costumes, music and dance, and modern touches like I-pods and cell phones, sometimes providing music and, interestingly at the end, a plot development via images on a mobile phone.

The plots intrigue is not particularly modern but is at home in the Shakespearian era. However, we accept it because of the performances. There is excellent sparring between Beatrice and Benedick in performances by Ami Acker and Alexis Danishof. They project strong personalities so that even when the focus is not on them, we are conscious of their presence. But the basic plot concerns a father and his daughter, her being courted by an earnest young man, backed by the noble visitor, Don Pedro. However, Pedro's bastard-halfbrother plots against him, fabricates a sequence whereby the young man accepts false evidence that his fiancée is unfaithful to him. And in another Shakespearian tradition, the heroine, whose name is Hero, is made out to be dead - and comes to the life when the young man admits his errors.

The couple may not agree that in regard to their love and marriage, there has been much ado about nothing. But all agree that all's well that ends well.

PAIN & GAIN

US, 2013, 129 minutes, Colour.

Mark Wahlberg, Dwayne Johnson, Anthony Mackie, Tony Shalhoub, Ed Harris, Rob Corddry, Rebel Wilson, Michael Rispoli.

Directed by Michael Bay.



‘Finesse’ is used by one of the main characters in Pain & Gain. However, it is not a word that immediately springs to mind while watching the film.

Many audiences will be alerted by the name of the director, Michael Bay. With such films as Bad Boys, Pearl Harbor, The Island and The Transformer series, fans of these films will have no hesitation in rushing to the box office and will probably not be disappointed. Others who fear that Michael Bay films are too bombastic in style, and the volume too noisy to sit through, will probably be well advised to give this one a miss.

However, though it does go on and on a bit, it has its moments. But it also has its down moments.

It is probably best described as a black comedy, a parody of robberies and crimes. The characters are not at all likeable, though very well played, and there are quite a lot of nasty moments. And Bay has thrown in some gross-out moments which will have even well-spoken audiences exclaiming 'yuck', and some bits of violence that are more than in your face.

The idea behind the black comedy is in many ways amusing. We see Mark Wahlberg as a gym fitness trainer running away from a squad of police and then the film goes into flashback. A screenplay has the very good device of having each of the central characters explain themselves and their background to the audience, intercutting with the action and continuing throughout the film. Lots of explanations which are comic and ironic (not to the characters themselves). Danny goes on and on about the American dream and his wanting to achieve it, even going to a seminar conducted by a manic Ken Jeong urging people to be doers rather than donters. Trouble for Danny is that a number of his heroes fulfilling the American dream are the main characters from The Godfather trilogy. He resents many of his clients, especially a food restaurant king played with heroic patience point Tony Shaloub. If awards for film endurance under torture and attempted killings were to be given, it would surely be to Tony Shaloub for Pain & Gain.

Danny also has a hold over the manager of the gym, played with more than usual quiet comedy by Rob Corddry.

The first ally in his schemes to abduct Shaloub, get documents signed by a notary, Corddry, which will give him complete possession home and money from Shaloub is an ex-prisoner who has gotten religion and been born again, though not always practising, played by Dwayne Johnson. In a sense, OK so

far, but halfway through Johnson's character, Paul, starts to snort cocaine which seems in contradiction to his character up till then and the credibility of his character and part in the plot goes downhill. The third partner in crime is played by Anthony Mackie, a would-be musclebound character who suffers from impotence. Not the most likely group for high crime.

But the screenplay parodies their attempts at crime showing them for the really, really dumb characters that they are, despite their high estimation of themselves. Wahlberg is good at taking himself seriously while communicating his below-par intelligence. And his discovery of his mistakes. Dwayne Johnson has shown in several films that he is able to play characters who don't understand themselves and his timing for comedy is very good. Mackie, usually a serious actor, participates in the parody.

In the latter part of the film, Ed Harris turns up as a private detective, bringing at least some sense of seriousness to the proceedings.

One of the scene-stealers is Australian, Rebel Wilson, with much the same performance as she gives in every film, A Few Best Men, What to expect when you're expecting, Pitch Perfect, Bachelorette. And she doesn't change her accent. She can get away with all kind of outlandish remarks because of her comic and seemingly ingenuous presence.

So, a mixed experience, a macho show and not designed for a female audience. It's one of those shows that appeals to the blokes.

RED 2

US, 2013, 116 minutes, Colour.

Bruce Willis, John Malkovich, Mary-Louise Parker, Helen Mirren, Anthony Hopkins, Byung- Hun Lee, Catherine Zeta-Jones, Neal McDonough, Brian Cox, Tim Piggott-Smith.

Directed by Dean Parisot.



Red was an entertaining surprise of 2010. It was an action adventure with a number of retired secret agents emerging to collaborate and defend themselves from an enemy. The plot was in some way standard, except for the veterans not only going into action but prevailing. Bruce Willis was the leader, Morgan Freeman an associate as was John Malkovich. Helen Mirren surprised her fans by appearing as a very calm and cultured but deadly assassin. Mary-Louise Parker was drawn into the action despite herself. And Brian Cox was an enemy from the past who was still infatuated with Helen Mirren. There were lots of good lines and ironic situations.

Most of them are gathered together again. While the entertaining novelty is not there, most fans of the original film will be pleased to see the group reassemble for action. Bruce Willis is once again the leader. The film opens with him, quite domesticated, buying equipment in a supermarket accompanied by Mary-Louise Parker with whom he is living and whom he is continually trying to protect. Up pops John Malkovich with a warning that information about a crisis from the late seventies, a bomb entitled Nightshade, has appeared online with their names mentioned. Again they become targets.

Willis is picked up and interrogated but the interview is interrupted by a military attack led by a relentless Neal McDonough. Needless to say there is a battle, much of it in a library, and an escape.

In the meantime there is concern at MI 6 and the head phones Victoria, Helen Mirren, who has just completed some assassinations and is dissolving the bodies in an acid bath. She warns Willis and the team go into action, discovering a scientist who has been secluded for 32 years. He is the inventor of Nightshade.

And then the location shifts to Moscow, the search for Nightshade in the tunnels under the city. The one Harry Moscow, Victoria makes contact with Ivan, Brian Cox, who is too infatuated and there is an amusing scene of his lying back romantically commenting on her as she lets fly with a machine gun.

Needless to say, there are lots of complications, some twists, some betrayals, and plenty of explosions. There is a helicopter crash with the quotable line from Victoria, 'don't tell me that your'e about to crash with a weapon of mass destruction on board!'.

Perhaps the last place we would be expecting for the next location would be the Iranian embassy in London. But there are various shenanigans leading to a car chase through Central London, climaxes at an airport, and a, literally explosive, satisfactory ending.

Bruce Willis is rather the straight man in this film with John Malkovich having most of the one liners and ironic remarks. Which is not to downplay the dialogue and quips from Helen Mirren. Mary Louise Parker is much stronger this time, instructed by Malkovich in techniques and military jargon, and playing a substantial role in the climax.

There are some other substantial benefits, especially with Anthony Hopkins as the scientist, a mixture of your bubbly British grandfather and Hannibal Lecter.

Catherine Zeta-Jones is a Russian operative. And there is also an assassin from Hong Kong, past associate of the group but now commissioned to assassinate Willis. He is the striking Korean actor, Byung-hun Lee, who appeared in the GI Joe films and The Good, the Bad and the Weird..

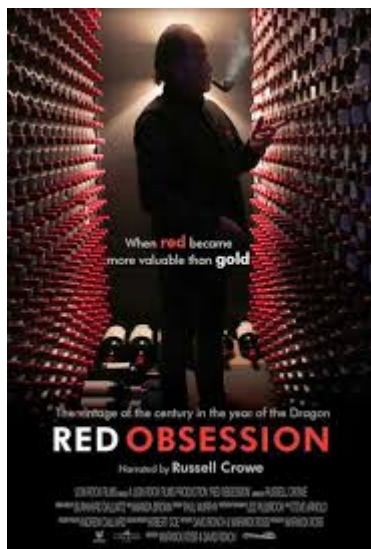
Probably a quite satisfying sequel for the fans of the original.

RED OBSESSION

Australia, 2013, 79 minutes, Colour.

Narrator: Russell Crowe.

Directed by David Roach and Warwick Ross.



When you see Russell Crowe's name on the poster for Red Obsession, you might think that it is an advertisement for a thriller. Possibly set in China. Actually, there is something in that, but it is really a documentary. And, older audiences remembering the connotations of red, might then expect it to be a documentary about communist China. And there is something that too.

However, the Red referred to in the title is red wine, from Bordeaux.

Some audiences who have not developed their noses and palettes for the finer tastes and bouquet of red wine might be tempted to give this film a miss. They may not want to be embarrassed and shamed in not being able to join a conversation about the merits of the French red wines from the area. At the beginning of the film, this seems to be the case. But soon, non-experts can sit back in their seats, as this reviewer did, and respond to the broader treatment and study of the wine industry.

In fact, this film is really an economics lesson rather than a primer for an amateur who wants to go into the wine tasting or wine critics business. There is a key line early enough in the film which indicates that ‘the wine might be too valuable to drink’.

So what is the obsession? And who is obsessed?

Before reviewing the film and its aims, it must be pointed out that this documentary is beautifully photographed. Either you will be satisfied with seeing the wonderful vistas of the city of Bordeaux, the surrounding countryside, and the views of the vines in the fields or you will be making resolutions that you must soon visit this part of France. And we see not only the countryside, we see the enormous cellars, the vast number of vats, the technology that makes the wine and stores it.

But the themes themselves...

Russell Crowe, in a rather sonorous Gladiator-style voice and accent, gives us a brief history of wine growing in the Bordeaux region, beginning with the Roman legions and their planting of vines. The 2000 years of vine-cultivating and wine-making is a considerable achievement. In the 19th century, the French government classified the vineyards nominating honours for the chief chateaux. Then we are introduced to a number of the contemporary winemakers, their love for their work, their achievements, hopes for the future. We are also introduced to a number of wine-tastings as well as to critics who write for magazines on wines and serve as judges for competitions. The film really seems to be a glorification of the of the wine produced, the range of Bordeaux reds.

And then we are told that vintage years are few and far between. There was one in 2003, another in 2009 when this film was being made, a great year. And then, unexpectedly, there was a great one in 2010, even better than the year before. Without spoiling the suspense for the ending, it can be revealed that 2011 was certainly not in the same class as the previous two years.

Amid all the jollity, the wine-tasting, the enormous socials and parties to promote the wine, the scenes of options, catalogues, and more information that most of us can deal with, enter the Chinese.

The bulk of the film is about the Chinese response to Bordeaux, the Asian entrepreneurs who come into France and buy up companies, the over-rich who have sometimes dismantled a chateau, stone by stone, transported it to China or Japan and rebuild it. We are treated to glimpses of French chateaux in the Chinese countryside.

Two principal Chinese interests have emerged. The first is the desire to buy up wine as an investment, some buyers never even opening their boxes or tasting the wine. The Chinese are shown as being a strong presence at marketing socials as well as at auctions.

The other interest is in wine production, principally for China, and the Chinese gaining a reputation throughout the world, even winning some of the top prizes for wine in 2011.

We are warned, however, and we may not have thought of this, as with other luxury goods, fake Bordeaux has become something of an industry.

At the end, some of the French company owners, acknowledging their desire for profits, and seeing the enormous increases in price in 2009 to 2011, have to admit that they made mistakes, that the bubble, so to speak, had burst and the world had to adjust to more realistic prices for wines.

So by the end of the 80 minutes, we have learned a great deal whether we are wine experts or not. The information is offered in quite an intelligible and interesting way, giving background for wine lovers and broaden their horizons for those for whom wine is not a passion.

THE ROCKET

Australia, 2013, 90 minutes, Colour.

Sitthiphon Dimasoe, Loungnam Kaosainam.

Directed by Kim Mordaunt.



The Rocket is a film well worth seeing.

It is a collaboration between Screen Australia and film producers in Laos. We do not see many, if any, films from Laos about Laotian people and their way of life. This film serves as a good introduction for outsiders to enter into Laos, experience the problems of village people, and see what is happening in this, for Australians and many other nations, remote country, part of Indochina, the but seemingly squeezed in between Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Burma and China.

The film was written and directed by Australian Kim Mordaunt. He shows a great familiarity with the people in the country and has found ways of introducing them to others. He had previously made a documentary, Bomb Harvest, in Laos in 2007, and draws on some elements for this story.

The central character is a young boy, Ahlo, played engagingly by Sitthiphon Disamoe. In the prologue to the film, we are introduced to animist type

religious behaviour with a grandmother carrying the head of an ox to a ritual shrine. It is for the safe birthing of the little boy. The process is complex and the mother delivers twins, one of whom is stillborn, which moves the grandmother to conceal his existence and decide that the living boy is cursed.

After some years, the boy and his family are living a quiet but poor existence in their village, he catching fish and selling them in the market. But fliers are handed out to indicate that a second dam is being built in the vicinity and that their valley will be flooded. This Laotian story is quite prominent in other countries of Asia, China having produced several films in recent years that show the repercussions of dam building on poor people and their having to relocate.

The people generally accept their fate and begin to move. During the film a tragedy occurs which has repercussions on the family. They try to settle, but are continually moved on. They encounter a strange and alcoholic man who has fought as a soldier in the wars of the 1970s. He looks like American singer James Brown and cultivates this impression, especially with his purple coat. He has a little niece and he protects her. Ahlo and the little niece, Kia, meet, become friends, collect flowers to sell in the market. However, Ahlo is also accident prone and causes many problems in the settlement and his family tent is destroyed by fire by the vengeful people.

On they go. On the way they are in danger of unexploded bombs and grenades left from the war era. But this explosive theme is continued because they reach a village where there is a rocket competition. The rockets are being fired into the air as a ritual praying for rain for their drought stricken region.

The rocket competition has its amusing side, especially as the young boy decides that he is going to build a rocket to beat all others, to get some money and some land so that the family will not hurt goes there to the city to work in factories back and stay in the land. The grandmother is a harsh and critical old woman – she could well have been in the rocket and fired into space!

This review will not spoil the ending but there will be no need for handkerchiefs and tears.

The location photography in Laos is most impressive, especially the strange-shaped high-reaching mountains. The film has an authentic feel with the local people performing. The plot is complex but designed to make its points in 90 minutes running time. However, it won over most audiences and persuaded them that they should pay more attention to Laos and its people.

STOKER

US, 2013, 99 minutes, Colour,

Mia Wasikowska, Matthew Goode, Nicole Kidman, Dermot Mulroney, Jacki Weaver.

Directed by Chan-wook Park.



Stoker has sinister overtones as a name. Audiences may well think of Bram Stoker and his vampire stories. All the central characters in this film have the family name, Stoker. However, the main focus is on an 18 year old girl, eerily and effectively played by Mia Wasikowska, India Stoker. The film begins with her voiceover, explaining herself, her powers of hearing and reading situations beyond the normal. We also see her standing on a hill - which becomes significant in the finale.

The film is the first English language film directed by Chan-wook Park, the Korean director, famous for *Old Boy* (there is an Americanised remake by Spike Lee) and *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*. He didn't speak English during the production but worked with the cast through a translator. While the setting is Connecticut, bright and shining, the screenplay with its sinister tones is more suitable for a Gothic tale told in a dark England. In fact, the film does not seem particularly American, except for the accents. With the director Korean, the main women characters in the film Australian and Uncle Charlie played by Matthew Goode, British.

The situation is the accidental death of the father of the family (Dermot Mulroney seen in flashbacks). India has been very attached to her father, more than to her mother, Eve, Nicole Kidman. Immediately tensions are evident as well as oddities in the character of India, searching in a tree for her birthday present, not mingling among the guests of the wake, suspicious of the sudden arrival of her father's brother, Uncle Charlie.

At this point, film buffs will be alerted by the name, Uncle Charlie. It was the name of Joseph Cotton's character in Alfred Hitchcock's 1943 film, *Shadow of a Doubt*. In fact, *Stoker* could be seen as a partial remake of *Shadow of a Doubt*.

India takes a dislike to Uncle Charlie. He flirts with his brother's wife who was somewhat alienated from her husband and is open to more flirtation, a superficial butterfly character. There is a brief moment when an aunt appears for a meal, wanting to talk urgently, raising suspicions, but soon disappearing from the film. She is played by Jacki Weaver in the role quite different from her usual roles, very effective even though her screen time is brief.

The film probes the mystery of Uncle Charlie and where he came from, making quite a difference for India as she discovers more about him. The film builds up

to confrontations between the three central characters - and not everybody survives.

Mia Wasikowska is an interesting young actress, already with a strong career in Australia and overseas. She makes India a tantalising character. Nicole Kidman is effective and believable as Eve. Matthew Goode is all boyish charm and consideration as Uncle Charlie.

An interestingly different portrait of family relationships.

THE TURNING

Australia, 2013, 180 minutes, Colour.

Rose Byrne, Cate Blanchett, Miranda Otto, Hugo Weaving, Robyn Nevin, Susie Porter, Wayne Blair.

17 different directors for the 17 short stories.



The Turning is an ambitious project from producer-director, Robert Connolly. Taking the collection of short stories by celebrated West Australian author, Tim Winton, Connolly sent the stories to a range of writers, directors, cinematographers, producers inviting them to choose a story that they liked. There were no limits on what the film-makers could do, each adapting their story, using the location, choosing their cast, and being allowed to portray characters who ran through many of the stories with different actors.

Movie-watchers may remember that Robert Altman did something similar with short stories by Raymond Carver in his film of 1993, Short Cuts. However, the stories were intertwined within the screenplay rather than presented as separate stories.

The Turning runs for 3 hours, screenings generally having an interval.

The film is introduced by an animation sequence from Marieka Walsh, using her quite distinctive colour wash style, with a text from T. S. Elliott's Ash Wednesday about turning, not turning, turning and hoping. It is recited by Colin Friels.

The whole film is the equivalent of the short stories, presented visually and aurally.

In the first narrative, directed by Warwick Thornton, the voiceover is by the central character actor in the story,, as well as by Winton himself. It introduces the West Australian location for the stories, themes of adolescence, hopes and ambitions, friendships and frustrations. These scenes pervade many of the other stories.

While about six of the stories are stand-alone, eight of them focus on a character, Vic, who is played by eight different actors, including a young aboriginal actor

when the character is first introduced in a small scene of the boy encountering a young girl on the beach and experiencing his first kiss. Many audiences will not pick up the link between the various stories of Vic until it has had time to reflect and discuss, especially with the aboriginal stories. There are three stories about two aboriginal brothers, Frank and Max. Max appears in the story, The Turning, where he is played by a white actor. In another story, Vic's father is played by an aboriginal actor.

So, Winton and the film-makers invite audiences to look at different facets of the characters.

We see Vic as the young boy, twice as an adolescent, as a young university student, as a middle aged man with his wife and mother, going to visit his father, and finally coming to terms with himself. In the stories about Vic, his wife Gail appears in three and his mother, Carol, in two of them.

In many ways, this would be more than enough for one film. However, the emotional stories of the two aboriginal brothers, one playing an almost-fatal trip on the other in one film, their reconciling while surfing, after the younger brother had walked off an Australian rules match at a critical moment.

Of the 17 directors, some of them are first time directors of films, coming from stage or from dance or from the visual arts. There are also the first time films from actors Mia Wasikowska and David Wenham.

The film also has a vast cast, many of them not well known names but who should have successful careers after their performances in this film. Well-known actors include Rose Byrne in one of the best performances in the film, Miranda Otto, Cate Blanchett working with Richard Roxburgh and Robyn Nevin for a short comic sketch which some reviewers thought too slight and light for such a film. However, they bring this short episode to vivid life. Hugo

Weaving is very good as Vic's father. And Susie Porter as Carol cleaning a house in one of the more straightforward stories.

Audiences will pick and choose amongst the 17 films as to what they like best, which films work best.

However, by ranging over a wide number of characters, and the different facets of the same character, Winton and the film writers and directors have explored, however briefly, many aspects of what it is to be Australian, indigenous or later comers to the land. The film shows nature, coast and beaches, mountains, more rugged landscapes. There are stories of both men and women trying to cope with life. There is a spirituality underlying many of the stories, some interestingly explicit themes in the title story, *The Turning*, directed by Claire McCarthy (*The Waiting City*).

There is good and evil, love and hatred, the friendship and betrayal, hardship and joy, and the experiences of a range of ordinary people.

UPSTREAM COLOR

US, 2013, 96 minutes, Colour.

Amy Seimetz, Shane Carruth.

Directed by Shane Carruth.



Upstream Color comes with much critical praise. However, it also comes with much bafflement from the popular audience. It is a work of Shane Carruth who has written and directed as well as photographed and edited the film – and acted in one of the central roles. It is his second film after the critically praised Primer in 2004.

The film is not easy to describe in narrative form. Rather, it relies on atmosphere, on suggestions, on the audience trying to understand what was going on, the experience of the central characters.

The film begins with the focus on a thief, concerned about earthworms, and two youngsters on bikes who are interested in the worms and the effect that they can have when placed in alcohol. There is a transition to a pig farmer who collaborates in something of a transplant process for a young woman who has become ill.

The film focuses on the woman, Kris, who goes through bewildering experiences, not sure of her identity, becoming physically ill, losing her job. She encounters a man who befriends her, supports her, falls in love with her, and is protective.

While this description might sound lucid (it is hoped), the elliptic narrative still requires a great deal of attention, empathy for the woman and what she is experiencing, exploring of the puzzlement about what has happened. There is a focus on the pigs, on the pig farmer and the experiments he was conducting which have dire consequences at times for the young woman.

Throughout the film there is a focus on Thoreau's Walden and its philosophy of life in the 19th century. At the end, a group of people read Walden and, perhaps, discover something about what has happened in their own lives, akin to that of Kris.

Upstream Color is the kind of film that generally does not appeal to a wide audience. Those for whom it makes an impact praise it, one to tease out its issues and questions.

V/H/S/2

US, 2013, 96 minutes, Colour.

FROM THE DIRECTORS OF
THE RAID, HOB0 WITH A SHOTGUN, YOU'RE NEXT & THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT

V/H/S/2

WHO'S TRACKING YOU?

PRODUCED BY JILL BLANK AND THE COLLECTIVE, A PRODUCTION WITH BLOCK PRODUCTIONS PRESENTS "V/H/S/2"
WRITTEN BY SHAWN BARRETT, SHAWN BARRETT, TRISTAN LARSEN, SHAWN BARRETT, JASON LINDSEY, JEFF LARSEN
EDITED BY SHAWN BARRETT, JASON LINDSEY, SHAWN BARRETT, JASON LINDSEY, JEFF LARSEN, JASON LINDSEY, JEFF LARSEN
CASTING BY SHAWN BARRETT, JASON LINDSEY, JASON LINDSEY, JASON LINDSEY, JASON LINDSEY, JASON LINDSEY, JASON LINDSEY
DIRECTED BY SHAWN BARRETT, JASON LINDSEY, JASON LINDSEY, JASON LINDSEY, JASON LINDSEY, JASON LINDSEY, JASON LINDSEY

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VHS2.COM

D/H/S/2 is certainly not quaint. It is a 2013 portmanteau collection of horror stories or, perhaps, gory stories. It is rather limited in its audience, to fans,

especially those who tend to relish extreme horror and gore. The film has been produced by The Collective but it also notes, at beginning and end, that it has been made with the company, Bloody Disgusting, and they definitely live up to the demands of that title.

The films also advertised as being in the Blair Witch tradition, with one of the directors of this film an original director of Blair Witch.

This is not a film for the average audience who may not last beyond the introduction. Those who settle in will surrender themselves to the horror conventions of the genre and can wallow in them. Cinema buffs will notice that one of the stories, with the Thai/Indonesian settings, has been written and directed by Gareth Huw Evans, the director of the Indonesian police thriller, very violent in its way, *The Raid*, which was popular with many audiences in cinema release. The second story is written and directed by Simon Barrett, director of the acclaimed horror film, *You're Next*.

Probably the only thing to add is to note that there is an introductory story of a private eye, *Tape 49*, and his blackmailing of a man for his infidelity with a girlfriend. His next job is to go to a house for clues to a missing student. He works with an assistant and, while he searches the house, his assistant looks at some VHS films, of the extreme snuff variety.

One is the story of a man who has an injured eye, *Phase I Clinical Trials*, and the doctor implants an experimental camera in the eye which then is able to record everything, especially the attacks on the man in close up.

The story, *A Ride in the Park*, begins innocently enough with... a ride in a park. But, suddenly a zombie attacks the rider, then two hikers are caught up, who then encounter families celebrating a children's party in the park and ... living dead mayhem in the now traditional manner.

There is also a film about an Asian cult leader, Safe Haven, a recluse, his setting up an institution, inviting parents to bring their children, with overtones about the leader's relationships with the children, controlling them, making them pure; a television crew comes to interview him, and there is a subplot about the pregnancy of one of the crew; however, the storytellers have hopped back to the Jim Jones and Jonestown massacre and given their own variation; the leader becomes berserk and this leads to some bloody martial arts encounters.

The final story is a familiar one of the massacre of a group of partying young people, Slumber Party Alien Abduction. Screenplay and the director do not make the characters really distinctive side it is very hard to follow, in the dark, just who is who and who is being destroyed - until it appears that it is a group of murderous aliens who have been let loose on the young people.

It might not surprises the audience to find that when the private eye comes downstairs from his search, he finds his assistant the dead, or possessed by the spirit of the horror films that she has been watching.

The audience probably needs to go out into the fresh air after watching this film lest they too be possessed by the spirit of what they have been watching.

WE'RE THE MILLERS

US, 2013, 110 minutes, Colour.

Jason Sudeikis, Jennifer Aniston, Emma Roberts, Will Poulter, Ed Helms, Ken Olferman, Kathryn Hahn.

Directed by Rawson Marshall Thurber.



We're the Millers follows that pattern of American raucous comedy which starts with behaviour which draws some disapproval, then a process and some demands which lead to changes and a more proper happy ending, with a better moral tone.

This story of smuggling drugs from Mexico across the border into the United States has something of the same plot as Snitch, released in the same year, with Dwayne Johnson trying to get his son out of prison by transporting drugs. However, this film has a mix-up gatherum of characters, much like the group in the comedy, The Joneses, where a group of people pretend to be a family in order to promote sales as they travel from town to town.

This time the group consists of a slacker drug dealer, played by Jason Sudeikis, who has an easy beat in the city. He is beholden to a friend from college days who is a big business executive. But, during a mugging, his money is stolen and he has no way of repaying the debt. It is suggested that he go to Mexico, pick up a van, collect the drugs and bring them across the border. He gets the brainwave of setting up fake family so that authorities would not be suspicious.

He lives in an apartment with a stripper, played by Jennifer Aniston trying to change her image more and more as she moves into middle age. Behind in her rent and her boyfriend leaving, she agrees to play the mother. There is a nice young adolescent in the building, very earnest, played by Will Poulter, who agrees to help out his friend. Then there is a runaway, played by Emma Roberts, tough on the street but agreeing to pose as the daughter. Most of them want payment for the job and do some bargaining, with the nice young man prepared to do it for free.

And the film relies on comedy where the family get themselves into impossible situations, ranging from sexual favours to a Mexican policeman to being stranded in the middle of nowhere to being pursued by the true drug lord. They are helped out occasions by another, real, family where the father is a DEA officer and the mother is a religious woman. They have a nice daughter and the nice young man is attracted to her but is completely inexperienced in dealing with the opposite sex.

There is quite a lot of raucous comedy, sexual innuendo, crass language... as might be expected in this kind of film. However, after some crises, and some really narrow escapes, all goes well and the family do the right thing.

There are some amusing outtakes in the final credits including a scene in the van where the rest of the family play the theme from Friends for Jennifer Aniston!

WHAT MAISIE KNEW

US, 2013, 99 minutes, Colour.

Julianne Moore, Steve Coogan, , Onata Aprile, Alexander Skarsgaard, Johanna Vanderham.

Directed by Scott McGehee and David Siegel.



Looking at *What Maisie Knew*, it seems very much a 21st century story of marriage and divorce, court decisions about custody of a child and the repercussions for the life of the child and bonding with parents and adults. In fact, it is quite an interesting and emotionally-testing picture of these issues.

However, it may come as a surprise to find that this film is based on a novel by American author Henry James. And that it was written in 1897. In the 1980s and 1990s there was a spate of rather elegant films based on Henry James novels: *The Europeans*, *The Bostonians*, *Portrait of a Lady*, *The Golden Bowl*. This adaptation, however, brings it into the present and reminds us that the issues have been significant for a long time.

The setting is New York City with quite some attention to detail of the locations. The Maisie of the title is a six year old girl, played with intelligence and screen presence by Onata Aprile. She has had a career in film and television before this, but *What Maisie Knew* should ensure her being signed for many more films.

Her parents are played by Julianne Moore and Steve Coogan. They are alienated, not shielding their hostility at all from their little daughter. They go to court and are allowed to have their daughter for custody, ten days at a time. Maisie is loving to both her parents. However, the audience can see very quickly that they are not particularly lovable, that they use their daughter as an anchor in the chaos of their own lives, and, when the chips are down, they will

choose their own life rather than that of their daughter. Julianne Moore is an ageing singer who does recordings and goes on tour. Steve Coogan is a businessman whose work takes him around the world, ensuring substantial absences. Then, whether for love or for convenience or a mixture of both, each of the parents gets married again. The father marries the nanny. The mother picks up a roadie who works as a barman.

The irony of the film is that Maisie is quite astute in picking up the vibes from her parents while still having the attitudes and behaviour of a six year old.

Initially, the audience may be critical of the nanny who has looked after Maisie and then marries her father. The audience may also be less than interested in the barman who seems just a convenient adjunct for his new wife.

The charm of the film, and relief and counterbalance to the behaviour of the parents, is the way that both nanny and barman care for Maisie and become her substitute parents. Joanna Olderham shows the nanny to be somewhat young and inexperienced, disillusioned by her marriage, but with a loving devotion to Maisie even in very difficult and complicated situations. Alexander Skarsgaard looks young and rather callow initially and audiences would naturally be suspicious of him. However, he is a man of charm, of integrity, of care for Maisie with an instinctive way of knowing how to relate to her. Maisie is very lucky in having these two care for her and show adult and parental love for her.

The film was written and directed by the team of Scott McGehee and David Siegel who have made several interesting and emotionally complex films like *The Deep End*, *The Bee Season* and *Uncertainty*.

In an age where child protection is of paramount concern and where alienated parents can go their own way and neglect their children, this is a film which shows the power of the presence of a mother figure and a father figure in a child's life.

WHITE HOUSE DOWN

US, 2013, 132 minutes, Colour.

Channing Tatum, Jamie Foxx, James Woods, Maggie Gyllenhaal, Joey King, Jason Clarke, Richard Jenkins.

Directed by Roland Emmerich.



Over the history of the cinema, there is the frequent phenomenon that makers will produce two films at the same time on the same theme. 2013 sees two films with attacks on the American government and on Washington, DC. The first was Olympus Has Fallen where there is an attack by north Koreans on the White House, the heroics of a single action man, played by Gerard Butler, and the nuclear threats and the dangers to the president, played by Aaron Eckhart, along with character actors like Morgan Freeman and Melissa Leo as advisers.

This time the attack is from hawkish government authorities' as well as disillusioned veterans. But, once again, the president is under threat, there is a single hero along with his lively daughter, and nuclear threats. Jamie Foxx is the president, with obvious references to president Obama. And the heroics are from Channing Tatum who was on a tour of the White House when the attack began with his young daughter, Joey King.

White House Down was directed by Roland Emmerich. He had destroyed the White House in Independence Day, 1996, and there is an enjoyable screenplay reference to this film. He also directed the end-of-the-world film, 2012. Along with Godzilla and The Day After Tomorrow, he has done a fair amount of disaster and destructive work on screen.

This screenplay takes American situations, government, peace attempts in the Middle East, arms sales to various countries of the Middle East, the possibility of withdrawing troops, and hawkish aims to retain military presence to defend American interests by staying in the Middle East. (This review written as decisions are to be made on strikes on Syria.) There is quite an amount of discussion on these issues. However, once the action starts, and the heroics accelerate, there are some rah-rah patriotic statements as well as some sentiment which is very American but may seem overblown to audiences outside the U.S..

The screenplay also makes good use of the clues that it offers early in the film including a painting of the burning of the White House in 1812, the little girl having photo capacities on her phone and being able to send them out, the indication early in the film of who the villain would be - but, still allowing for a twist at the end.

Channing Tatum seems very much at home in his role, a man not quite clever enough to be employed by the secret service, marrying too young and his marriage falling apart, yet devoted to his daughter and wanting to bond with her. Because he has served in Afghanistan and was in a security guard company, once the action starts, we're not surprised at his heroics. Jamie Foxx

is quite credible as the president. James Woods gets more than enough opportunity to chew the scenery in his familiar manner. Maggie Gyllenhaal is the security adviser. Richard Jenkins is the speaker of the house. Australian Jason Clarke is the vicious attack leader. And, once again, a lot of the action devolves on the young Joey King who acquits herself with some panache.

This is obviously a genre film, with its own conventions of dangers and heroics, betrayals and crises. It has to be judged on these criteria rather than assuming it is a highly serious-minded drama. The audience is invited to the joining in the puzzle about the situation, but they have the advantage of inside knowledge rather than the crowds who are seen milling outside the White House and the capital

This is a cheer the hero, hiss the villains kind of film. One of the intriguing aspects of both *Olympus Has Fallen* and *White House Down* is the presence of high technology as well as more ordinary, in-the-hand technology. There is computer hacking, getting access to Norad and the nuclear missiles and stopping government intervention as well as mobile phones, phone cameras, speakers, television coverage, often in close-up.

For audiences who enjoy this kind of action, drama and melodrama, allowing for some of the serious dialogue which could elicit giggles, while relishing the irony and humour of some of the rest of the dialogue, is an enjoyable action show.

THE WORLD'S END

UK, 2013, 109 minutes, Colour.

Simon Pegg, Nick Frost, Paddy Considine, Martin Freeman, Eddie Marsan, Rosamund Pike, Pierce Brosnan, David Bradley.

Directed by Edgar Wright.



The World's End was co-written by star, Simon Pegg, and director, Edgar Wright. They had previously collaborated to great critical and popular success with the parodies, Shaun of the Dead and Hot Fuzz. This is the final film in their so-called Cornetto trilogy. Many have thought this is their best. Others have favoured the previous two films. It probably depends on your interest in the genre that the film is using and the use of conventions for humour, parody, with some serious insights.

Shaun of the Dead was original with its focus on the living dead. Hot Fuzz was very funny because of its presentation of life in a country village as well as the zombie takeover. The World's End starts off in a realistic vein and only later in the film as the parody enters with the presentation of a variation of The Invasion of the Body Snatchers.

The film opens with five leads in 1990, finishing at school, wanting to achieve an ambition: travelling the golden mile of their town and drinking at each of its twelve pubs. In fact, some drop out and they don't achieve their goal. Their leader, telling the story, is Gary King, played by Simon Pegg with quite a manic

look on his face, weird grin, looking disturbingly like actor, Michael Sheen. And then we discover him in an institution, in a group recounting his story. When he is challenged by an inmate, he decides to relive his past and go to collect all his friends again, assuming that this was what they would want to do.

As he goes to meet each of the friends, we realise (but he doesn't), that 20 years have passed, that they have responded to being adults, with marriages and relationships, having responsible Jobs. The four friends are played by a generation of prominent British actors and comedians: Eddie Marsan as a car dealer working with his father, and married; Paddy Considine with a job but divorced; Martin Freeman as a real estate agent, rather proper; and Nick Frost (Pegg's partner in the previous films as well as the science fiction American story, Paul), as a teetotaler, injured in a car accident from which Gary walked away in the past, now married and working in a legal firm.

Despite the memories and Gary's hype, Gary persuades them to join him. They somewhat reluctantly assemble and go on the pub crawl. This all seems normal and audiences may be wondering when something different is going to emerge. It does. Most of the inhabitants of the town have been taken over by an alien power The Network (voiced by Bill Nighy), which sees itself as improving the way human beings live and interact - except when they get their way and begin to fight and brawl, lots of brawls in this film.

The aliens look normal, but can be decapitated and still fight, and ooze the equivalent of blue blood. So, the group is pursued until the last pub, some taken over, some still fighting. Into the mix comes Rosamund Pike as a girlfriend from the past. And there is Pierce Brosnan as their schoolteacher, presiding with great dignity as an alien in the pub.

Those on the wavelength will find the film highly entertaining. Those who preferred the other films, will enjoy the film in its way, but long for an even more outrageous parody of some horror films.

YOU'RE NEXT

US, 2013, 96 minutes, Colour.

Sharni Vinson, Nicholas Tucci.

Directed by Adam Wingard.



While it can be said that *You're Next* is very good of its kind, this does not mean a general recommendation. It is a violent thriller.

The film has a familiar enough plot. A group of people find themselves in a situation where they cannot escape and mysterious people are trying to kill them. And they are killed one by one. Agatha Christie used this kind of plot in such stories as *Ten Little Indians/And then there were none*. There've been stories of lost patrols, participants killed off one by one. And there have been innumerable horror thrillers over the last three decades in the vein of *Friday the 13th* or *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* where (uninteresting) young people have suffered ugly and violent fates.

While there are some violent deaths in this film, and touches of blood and gore, it is, mercifully, not a story about bland young people and their woes. It is a story about adults.

There is a prologue where two people, eventually seen as the neighbours of the central couple, are brutally murdered and the caption, You're Next, written in blood on their wall.

The main group who are under threat are a couple who have been married for 35 years and own a mansion in the countryside. It is a wedding anniversary and their children and their partners all come to the celebratory meal. All begins well, the family chattering, when a dispute breaks out between two of the brothers and there is heightened anger as well as a desire to restore calm. Then one of the guest guests is suddenly struck by a narrow beam fired from outside. And mayhem begins.

The film is structured well, the reactions of the various people, the succession of deaths, with some ugly and bloody touches, using wits to fend off the attackers, the attackers entering the house.

The cast is strong enough in creating individual characters and so audiences can identify, especially with the older couple, with their academic son who clashes with his shallow-talking brother, the academic's student-girlfriend who keeps her wits about her, as well as the youngest brother and his girlfriend. The attackers remain mysterious but are gradually revealed – not nice people at all. And for those who like a twist in the telling of the tale, there are some twists.

But it is Erin, the strong-minded girlfriend, who becomes the centre of the film. She is played by Australian, Sharni Vinson, previous star of Home and Away. The screenplay explains her accent by making her an Australian who grew up in

a survival community in the outback, brought to the United States of the age of 15. Australian audiences will definitely be on her side and pleased that she is the strong and determined one.

Most of the action takes place over a few hours, which heightens the tension. And audiences could be looking at themselves and wondering about their reactions as they identify with the characters, feel the desperation, puzzle about what they might do in a similar situation, also puzzle about the amount of violence that they might use in defending themselves and saving others - and what they would do in terms of vengeance for wrongs perceived.

Which means that, if the audience is drawn to ask questions, this terror thriller is a cut, more than a cut, above similar films of its kind.

SIGNIS REVIEWS SEPTEMBER 2013

2 GUNS

ABOUT TIME

ACT OF KILLING

BUTLER, The

EAST, The

DIANA

FALLOUT

FAMILY, The

GRAVITY

GROWNUPS 2

HUMAN CARGO, The

I AM A GIRL

I'M SO EXCITED

IN BOB WE TRUST

INTERVAL, The

LASSETER'S BONES

PARANOIA

PERCY JACKSON AND THE SEA OF MONSTERS

PLANES

PRISONERS

RED AND THE BLUE, The

RENOIR

RIDDICK

RIPD

RUNNER RUNNER

RUSH

STORIES WE TELL

THANKS FOR SHARING

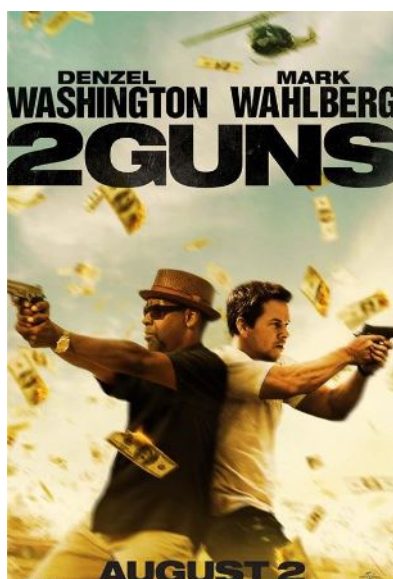
TURBO

2 GUNS

US, 2013, 109 minutes, Colour.

Denzel Washington, Mark Wahlberg, Bill Paxton, Edward James Olmos, Paula Patton, James Marsden.

Directed by Balthazar Kormakur.



There is no subterfuge about the title of this film. It is certainly an action show, with many of the touches of the popular thriller.

The two guns of the title are Denzel Washington and Mark Wahlberg. We see them at the opening in a diner, scouting out a bank in preparation for a robbery. Washington plays the cool sardonic type. Wahlberg is the cheeky comedian. In fact, the film is often funny, the two stars playing off each other very well, Washington more the straight man, Wahlberg with the cheeky one liners. And they keep up an amusing pace throughout the whole film.

This is one of those films where it is better to be tight-lipped about the plot developments. Perhaps, suffice it to say, that appearances are not what may seem, and there are quite some twists as the plot goes on. This involves Edward James Olmos as a fairly ruthless drug lord, with headquarters in Mexico and a nice quiet suburban home just across the border in the United States - where that bank-to-be-robbed is to be found. Then there is Bill Paxton, coming on strongly about the robbery, after the \$43,000,000 plus that was taken away, raises the expectation of the robbers who thought it would be three million dollars. Paxton can be very nasty in his dealings with and managers, vets who help people on the run, and the drug lords.

And then there is the director of the DEA, his assistant, Paula Patton, who controls operations but who does not come up with the help initially promised which leads, of course, to some sticky situations. There is also the naval officer, played by James Marsden, all smiles but ruthless.

All the review can do, while not revealing the plot details, is to whet the appetite of readers who may be attracted by this kind of action story, shootouts, as well as the stars. If they do see 2 Guns, they probably won't be disappointed.

ABOUT TIME

UK, 2013, 123 minutes, Colour.

Domhnall Gleeson, Rachel McAdams, Bill Nighy, Tom Hollander, Lindsay Duncan

Directed by Richard Curtis.



Best not to give up on this comedy because it gets better as it goes on - and on.

It has been written and directed by Richard Curtis, best known for his writing of such comic events as Blackadder and Mr. Bean, as well as writing films like Four Weddings and a Funeral and Notting Hill. He directed Love, Actually which was a hit. He directed The Boat that Rocks which drew no enthusiasm whatever from this reviewer! He is now back on track with romantic comedies.

The centre of the film is Domhnall Gleeson whom we first see at the age of 21, seemingly a born loser in personal relationships, a fiasco at a New Year's Eve party and the expected kiss. However, his father calls him in for a talk and explains that the men in the family have a capacity for time travel. This is a limited gift, mainly enabling the traveller to go back to a specific place and time and rectify a past mistake. This, of course, provides some humour as Tim does a fair amount of correcting and improving the past. Especially true of his choice of best men at his wedding and dealing with their successive speeches until he gets the right one.

Actually, for a lot of the film, Tim seems a real dill or, as another reviewer put it more politely, gormless. He leaves home in Cornwall, goes to work in a legal office, finds a room in the home of an acquaintance of his father, an extremely eccentric playwright, played with all stops out by Tom Hollander.

Seemingly hopeless in love, he goes with his best friend to a restaurant where the meal is served in darkness, people having conversations without knowing what the others look like. When he gets out into the light, he sees Mary, played by Rachel McAdams. It would be nice to say that Tim becomes less of a dill, falls in love with Mary and they live happily ever after. Without spoiling the end of the film, we know that actually they will be in love, marry and live happily ever after. But it is a difficult trek to get there as Tim keeps using his time travel

to rectify situations which often mean that he changes his story so that he has to keep re-introducing himself to Mary.

As mentioned earlier, the film goes on and on, not just finishing with the nice romance and marriage but proceeding to show Tim and Mary and their married life, the bonds with Tim's mother and father, Lindsay Duncan and Bill Nighy, his wayward sister getting her life in order, and the time when it will be necessary for Tim to give up his privilege. Throughout the film, Tim is very close to his father, but this theme is particularly strong in the latter part, Bill Nighy showing an unexpected warmth with his son.

Which means, again, the message of the film is that we don't need to rely on gimmicks to fix your life but to have confidence in yourself, rely on yourself, accept your responsibilities.

There are quite a number of Richard Curtis funny lines and eccentric situations, especially the fiasco of the wedding with so much rain beating down on the guests and the tent. And there is an eccentric old uncle who is charm itself but is not exactly with it and creates quite some humour with his offhand remarks and questions.

Not a particularly memorable film, pleasant in its way, what the publicists call a 'date movie'.

ACT OF KILLING

Indonesia, 2012, 159 minutes (Director's cut), Colour.

Directed by Joshua Oppenheimer.



This is one of the grimmest films you are likely to see.

Nevertheless, for those who can sit through it, it is a film to be recommended. It won an Ecumenical award at the Berlin film festival in 2013. Anyway, the title can act as a warning.

With the fall of the Soviet empire, one of the questions which lurked in people's minds was: whatever happened to the KGB officials, their prison guards, the torturers?

And the same question could be raised about ex-Stasi, or any of those police regimes where there was a sudden transition and those who were in power, with a capacity for violence, had to merge into a different kind of society.

This is the background to this film. It is an Indonesian story. It takes us back to the anti-communist massacres of that year of living dangerously, 1965. There were many killers during that time. Many of them are still alive, living ordinary lives at home.

The idea behind this film is for the director to make contact with some of the killers of that time, especially Anwar Congo, who seems more than willing to participate in a film. He prides himself on being a movie fan, working in cinemas in the past, and really liking Elvis Presley. The film-makers had a plan to interview some of the killers, find out what made them tick in the past, and what they think and feel in retrospect. Another idea was then for them to re-enact a number of the killings, in whatever dramatic way they decided and wanted to.

The director, Joshua Oppenheimer, stays behind the camera and does not intrude personally into the film. This gives some control to Anwar Congo and the friends and associates he brings into the film. One is a rather more controlling killer from that era. The other is a rather large and younger man, who remembers some of the events when he was a child, tags along with Congo, likes to cross-dress, especially for the film, and finally decides that he should stand for election in a campaign for local issues. God forbid, that he should win! A momentary spoiler: he doesn't. But he continues to hang around the film, participating in the re-enactments, giving audience plenty to think about when they encounter this kind of character in Indonesia today.

It seems best simply to say that Congo has no remorse. In fact, he has no reluctance to go back to the past, talking about the killings, the brutality of stabbings and bashings, moving to garroting for which he gets some associates to help him re-enact with quite some vividness. At other times he is content to discuss matters and compare notes with his old friend. And he's certainly not hesitating in talking to camera.

He takes for granted that the communists were the enemy and had to be eliminated. This was the period of the Vietnam war and American and allied antagonism towards the communists in Indochina. There were government implications in the hiring of these killers. With some nods to American movies, they saw themselves as gangsters. However, gangsters was not a slighting term. Rather, Congo explains several times, gangsters were those who really free – he says that is the main meaning of the word (with a touch of the 1965 song, Born Free to illustrate this. So, of course, this meant that the gangsters were the good guys and whatever they did, the massacres, were good.

There are many scenes in the latter part of the film where there are local elections, and some of the politicians in Sumatra give their views on the way elections work, especially in terms of bribes, special deals and promises. There also are some official scenes of banquets with these politicians who made no secret of their way of life. Then, it is something of a shock, to see Congo interviewed on local television where the role of the interviewer, a bright young woman, is to enable them to talk without any embarrassment about what they have done in the past - and receive her congratulations.

Part of the intrigue of the film is the different ways in which Congo and his friends decide to dramatize what they did. Sometimes there are very realistic, getting help from some of the local women and children to role play what I was like to be a communist and be arrested and tortured. At other times there are quite some surreal moments, especially at the opening with a strange kind of building, a cross between a Nissan hut and a giant tortoise, from which a group of dancing girls appear and in rather strange local dramas, especially with the larger man and his impersonating a cross-dresser, which make demands on the audience imagination of what they symbolize.

The director's cut runs for over 2 ½ hours, so the film is something of an endurance experience. However, it is a document about a particular era in Indonesia's history, the elimination of communist enemies of the state, the brutal massacres and the carefree attitudes of their murderers, even after almost half a century of from the events.

The film, harrowing as it is at times, represents not only the face of evil, but the faces of actual evil.

THE BUTLER

US, 2013, 132 minutes, Colour.

Forest Whitaker, Oprah Winfrey, David Oyelowo, Cuba Gooding Jr, Lennie Kravitz, Terrence Howard, Alex Pettyfer, Vanessa Redgrave, Clarence Williams III, Robin Williams, James Marsden, John Cusack, Leiv Schreiber, Jane Fonda, Alan Rickman.

Directed by Lee Daniels.



The Butler was very successful on its release in the U.S. in 2013. It is based on the story of Cecil Gaines, a butler at the White House serving under six presidents.

This is an interesting and entertaining film that can be dismissed by more serious film buffs and critics as being too popular and populist, obvious in its race message, and in its moralising. However, the action takes place over an 80 year period, crucial years in the change of attitudes towards African Americans in the United States.

It is a portrait of Cecil Gaines and his wife, Gloria – Gaines portrayed with great dignity by Forest Whitaker, a noble man yet a man of limitations and failings, especially with his wife and children. It is a portrait of Gloria, an ordinary woman who found herself married to the butler, proud of him, yet his not taking her to the White House, his working overtime and her feeling alienated, even to an affair, but reconciling with and supporting her husband. She is played with great strength by Oprah Winfrey.

The brief opening of the film is quite effective, taking place in Georgia in 1926, in the cotton fields where the black workers are still doing the equivalent of slave work. Cecil is a young boy. His mother is sexually assaulted by the son of the owner of the plantation, Alex Pettyfer, who shoots the boy's father. Vanessa Redgrave portrays the mother, kind, yet still racist in attitudes. It is a powerful reminder of race relationships in the early 20th century.

As bigotry continues it is dramatized by the protests in the American south in the late 1950s and the first half of the 1960s until the changes in legislation. This is personalized in the film when Cecil's and Gloria's older son, Louis, David Oleyo, chooses to be part of the protests in the south, experiencing the prejudice, the Ku Klux Klan, 16 times in prison, sympathy for the Black Panthers.

In the meantime Cecil is employed at the White House, one of the many black staff who were not paid the same wages as the white staff, even for decades. The history of America and its race issues is portrayed over the period 1957-1988. During that time there were six American presidents. Some of them are portrayed in cameos, quite effectively, a serious Robin Williams as Eisenhower, a young and eager James Marsden as John F. Kennedy, a rough and ready Lyndon B. Johnson by Liev Schreiber. Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter are seen only in archival footage. But Alan Rickman appears as Ronald Reagan, sometimes kind, sometimes stubborn, especially in the issue of the raising sanctions against South Africa. He is against the sanctions. Surprisingly in view of her political past, Jane Fonda appears as Nancy Reagan.

Then the film moves 20 years to the election of President Obama, including one of his speeches. Cecil Gaines has lived from being a virtual slave in the cotton fields to witnessing the election of a black American president.

The film was directed by Lee Daniels who made an impression with his film *Precious*, caused some controversy with his film *The Paperboy*, but received great acclaim for *The Butler*.

DIANA

UK, 2013, 109 minutes, Colour.

Naomi Watts, Naveen Andrews, Douglas Hodge, Geraldine James, Juliet Stevenson.

Directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel.

Diana, Princess of Wales, was always a controversial figure, especially during the last three years of her life. She had separated from Prince Charles and was trying to live her own life, bitter at her treatment by Charles and the royal family, desperate to have more contact with her children, needy in terms of relationships. She moved into the public arena with different charitable causes and her concern about issues of land mines. And she was hounded by the paparazzi.

She was beloved by many people, called the Princess of Hearts, the object of an outpouring of national grief at her death, the subject of conspiracy theories concerning the manner of her death.

The screenplay for this film is based on a book by Kate Snell and is really a speculation about Diana's relationship with the Pakistani heart surgeon, Hasnat Khan. He has remained silent about the relationship, so the material in this film is a story, imagined in detail, of love and frustration. Ultimately, Dodi Fayed is introduced but there is a strange ambiguity in the latter part of the film about Diana's relationship with him.

The film offers a sympathetic portrait of Diana, especially as played by Naomi Watts, who does not always look like Diana but is able to give an impersonation, with accent, body language, especially the flirtatious tilt of the head in speaking to people and in giving interviews. She seems to be asking to be loved.

For those devoted to Diana, the sympathetic portrait may please, but going behind the scenes as well as into scenes of her intimacy with the doctor may seem too intrusive.

For those not devoted to Diana or who are neutral about her, the film does offer a dramatisation of her loneliness and her need for a relationship. It also dramatises the relentless regimentation of her life and appointments, the continual scrutiny by royal officials of what she said and what she did (especially the famous interview with Martin Bashir), and the perennial hounding by reporters and paparazzi, the callous behaviour towards her, the impertinent questioning, the never ending need for yet another photo.

But what is mysterious is Diana's treatment of some special reporters and photographers after her separation from Hasnat Khan. She phones a reporter, allows him to take secret photographs of her, including kissing Dodi Fayed which then appear in the papers. How much was defiance? How much was a manipulation? How much was getting back at Hasnat Khan? In the great scheme of things does this really matter? How important is it have those who idolise Diana?

Naveen Andrews is particularly serious, even stolid, devoted to his work, as Dr. Khan. The credibility of his meeting Diana, the continued association, their attachment and falling in love is real enough. As is her meeting with Dr. Christian Barnard to arrange a job outside the country, something she really wanted to do, escape from England, while still seeing her children. She goes to Australia for a memorial for Dr. Victor Chang. She goes to Boston for heart foundation social. She goes to Angola to campaign about land mines.

There is also an interesting sequence where she goes to Pakistan to meet the doctor's family, happily received by many of them, feeling at home with the extended family and the children, listening to the complaints of the doctor's mother about the sad experiences of partition. Could living outside England have really been possible? But the doctor, with reluctance, opts for his own privacy as well as maintaining his practice.

Which means that the film serves as a biopic, but without the guarantees that the details and the insights are actual because Diana is long dead and the doctor silent. Much of the treatment is in the style of popular magazines or popular television programs. But it is not quite enough for a valid and useful study of Diana, not enough insights into her personality.

THE EAST

US, 2012, 116 minutes, Colour.

Brit Marling, Alexander Skarsgaard, Ellen Page, Shiloh Fernandez, Patricia Clarkson, Jamey Sheridan.

Directed by Zal Marmelstein.



The title does not immediately indicate where this film is set or what its themes are. There is a prologue to the film where we see oil pollution in the ocean and its consequences for the beaches and, especially, for the bird life. A CEO is attacked for his responsibility for the disaster and a group sabotage his house, introducing oil to destroy it. The CEO resigns and retires. This is the work of an eco-terrorist group. Their name is The East.

The film was written by actress Brit Marling who appeared in Another Earth and Arbitrage. Her co-writer was the director, Zal Marmelstein. They had worked together on the film about a sect and brain-washing, The Sound of my Voice. In fact, The East with its drop-outs as eco-terrorists, this film is also about some brain-washing and the life of a secular sect.

Brit Marling is cast as a corporate spy. She is ambitious and has interviews with the chief, Sharon, played by Patricia Clarkson. And her partner at home thinks she works for the FBI and is sent to countries like Dubai. However, she goes undercover locally, following known rebels and possible terrorists, photographing them, sending the data in for verification. But she is caught by railway officials when they are stowing away on a train. She slashes her arm which gives reason for one of the group to take her to the headquarters for the doctor to stitch arm wound. As Sarah, she is received into the group, tested at a meal where everyone wears a straitjacket but has to feed themselves. She is surprised when they use a spoon with their mouth to feed each other. This gives something of a motif for their collaborative world where they target those who have committed ecological crimes.

She manages undercover, joining in the rituals, the hard life in the woods, allowing herself to be bathed by the group. She also goes back to report to the boss and discovers information about members of the group.

The nominal leader, Benji, is played by Alexander Skarsgaard. However, many of the practical decisions are made by Izzy, played by Ellen Page.

Sarah participates in what the group call a 'jam'. This involves infiltrating a society party where the producers of pharmaceuticals are promoting a drug which the group thinks contains toxins and has affected members and their relatives. Sarah's role is to distract one of the hosts, a sex addict. During the toast after the speeches, the guests drink champagne which includes the pharmaceutical. The jam is a success.

Another is planned, this time involving the pollution of water which has killed a young boy in the town area. They watch a television commercial with an official from the corporation explaining that the water is perfectly safe. This jam is partially successful but has a divisive effect on the group.

Because of her attachment to Benji and her feelings about the issues with which they are involved, Sarah is put in crisis, confronting Sharon, getting information that Benji wants, and having to make a decision to leave the country with him or not.

The screenplay is particularly interesting in view of many of the revelations about American surveillance of ordinary citizens to. As well as by such organizations as the FBI. The other interesting aspect of the film is the eco-terrorism and the criminality of the large corporations. Audience

sympathy for Sarah, her work for the big companies and her undercover experience will depend on the attitude towards infiltration of protest groups and the guilty aspects of the companies which destroy the environment.

FALLOUT

Australia, 2013, 86 minutes, Colour/Black and white.

Directed by Lawrence Johnston.



What an interesting documentary!

Lawrence Johnston made a number of interesting short films in the 1990s, especially *Eternity*, his evocative and poetic documentary on Arthur Stace, the man who went around Sydney writing the word 'Eternity' on footpaths and walls. This time he turns his documentary attention to Melbourne. As the title indicates, there is a focus on the consequences of the dropping of a nuclear bomb. But the even more particular focus is on the dropping of the bomb and the end of the world in the novel and the film version of Neville Shute's *On the Beach*.

By the end, the audience is amazed at the amount of footage that Johnston has found and assembled, the film being a fine example of what one can do with archival material. It is always interesting and, very often, quite evocative. And, in just under 90 minutes, Johnston has really made the equivalent of four films in one, so full of information and insight is the film.

First of all there is the brief history of the development of the atomic bomb, the Manhattan Project, the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima, the visuals of destruction, the close-ups of people suffering from radiation, the information about the reality of the destruction and the radius of collapse and death from the centre point. There is the development of the cobalt bomb, the tests throughout the world and in Maralinga, South Australia, with the Menzies government interests in participating in nuclear development. And there are the American fears, the familiar scenes of that 'Duck and Cover' commercial to warn people for their safety. And the film opens

with a very sobering reflection about the future of the nuclear age and potential for destruction spoken by John F. Kennedy.

Then there is a biography of Neville Shute. Once again, this is particularly interesting, with commentary throughout the film by journalist and author Gideon Haigh, with intelligent insights, as well as from Shute's daughter, Heather, also articulate and intelligent on her father, his work, and *On the Beach*. Johnston uses footage of England at the beginning of the 20th century to illustrate Shute's origins, his work in the air industry, especially for the development of air ships, establishing his own company, his war service among the intelligence boffins, his disillusionment with England under Atlee, his decision to migrate to Australia, his settling in Frankston, the farm in Langwarren. And, all the time, his writing and his popularity and success.

Stanley Kramer, the producer of *On the Beach*, also gets a brief biography, glimpses of some of his social-minded films, including *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, scenes from a documentary about him, his acquiring the rights for *On the Beach*, the decision to film it in Melbourne, the rejection by the American navy for help and his appeal to Robert Menzies who agrees to contribute, and the marketing of his film and its ultimate success. His wife Karen also contributes a great deal of commentary to this documentary.

Fallout also serves as a mini-documentary about the making of *On the Beach*, the decisions about production, the arrival of the stars, scenes on the Mornington Peninsula, especially Canadian Bay, of the filming. There are interviews with Gregory Peck, Ava Gardner, Fred Astaire, many scenes with Anthony Perkins but no mention of him by name. Donna Anderson was introduced in the film and is one of the talking heads in *Fallout*. One gets quite an impression of the film, its plot, the drama about the nuclear destruction of humans, an empty San Francisco, the empty Melbourne streets, and the human drama of the romance, the submarine leaving Melbourne, the young couple and the challenge about their baby, having to kill her so that she may not linger after they both have died.

Neville Shute did not like the adaptation for the screen, was critical of Stanley Kramer in correspondence. He did not attend the premiere and died three weeks later, his daughter suggesting that the experience of the filmmaking caused his illness and led to his death.

The film is also something in a documentary about Melbourne in the late 1950s, many visuals, focus on the city, its use in the film, especially for the clearing of the streets for the aftermath of nuclear destruction. It also shows Melbourne's obsession with celebrities, the pursuit of Ava Gardner by the media, a cultural cringe to the United States, the contribution of the government to the making of the film.

As mentioned, the running time of this documentary is brief, but it incorporates a great deal of material, all of it interesting.

THE FAMILY

US/France, 2013, 112 minutes, Colour.

Robert de Niro, Tommy Lee Jones, Michelle Pfeiffer, Dianna Agron, John D'Leo.

Directed by Luc Besson.



The Family sounds like an innocuous title for a situation comedy. Actually, there are some touches of situation comedy, but the film is definitely not innocuous.

This is the story of a Mafia family, where all the members of the family can be callous and brutal, and there are such episodes for each of them throughout the film, even when they are in witness protection, with surveillance by FBI offices. They're a troublesome family, especially the head of the family, Giovanni Manzoni, ready to erupt in violence, causing the FBI to have the family continually on the move for their safety sake. An imprisoned Mafia chief in the US keeps sending killers to get them and to recover money stolen.

The film opens with a family being shot by hitmen. They resemble the family of the film, who, for their cover, are called the Blake family. At this time, despite their wishing to be on the Riviera, they have been relocated to a small town in Normandy. They arrive under cover of night. The accommodation is somewhat ramshackle, they find their possessions have been transferred, though they lack a television set. The FBI are not ultra-efficient. So far, so mysterious.

Father is played by Robert De Niro, just a variation (or only a little variation) on his usual performances, though he has an amusing opportunity later in the film to be invited to a local film screening to discuss *Some Came Running*. But the wrong film has turned up. It is *Goodfellas* and he has to make comments on the film and gives a speech about the Mafia. His character in this film is often close enough to that of his character in *Goodfellas*. He does not live peacefully in the town, claims that he is a writer and does begin some kind of

autobiography which is not appreciated by the FBI officer in charge, played by Tommy Lee Jones as his usual Tommy Lee Jones persona.

Mother is played by Michelle Pfeiffer. Impatient at the supermarkets' scorning of Americans and their liking for peanut butter, she sets up an explosion which destroys the supermarket. And that is just on the first day. She does encounter a priest while looking at stained glass windows in a church, eventually goes to confession pouring it all out, and turns up for a charity event to the utter dismay of the priest who forgets his seal of confession and vigorously denounces her and tries to get rid of her.

The 17 year old daughter becomes involved with a student teacher at her school, falling rapturously and love, having sexual experience, only to find that he says he is not ready. As she contemplates suicide on the top of a church, fortunately for her, the hitmen arrive and she has to go to save her family. The 14 year old boy is bashed by some of the school thugs, but is able to set up a kind of protection racket in the school.

A lot of this is intended to be funny. However, the family is so obnoxious with their behaviour that it is hard to have any sympathy for them. Admittedly, the Mafia head in prison is ruthless and wants to get rid of them and sends a very large squad to do the deed. It is not difficult to anticipate the body count at the end of the film - not the family, as they have to pack up and move again.

The film was directed by Luc Besson who began a successful career as a director in the 1980s with offbeat films like *The Big Blue*, then moving into action films like *Nikita* and *The Professional*. While he directed the fine biography of Burma's Aung San Suu Kyi, he has specialized in producing a great number of violent, even over-violent action shows like *The Transporter* series or the *Taken* series.

Despite the attempts to be funny, the film is often ugly and brutal.

GRAVITY

US, 2013, 91 minutes, Colour.

Sandra Bullock, George Clooney, voice of: Ed Harris.

Directed by Alfonso Cuarón.



Gravity was a critical and popular success on its first release. It seems that the public was interested in a more realistic space story.

The 1960s saw great interest in space both in cinema and on television. Star Trek began in that decade and has continued in popularity through many series as well as many cinema features, Star Trek into Darkness appearing only some months before Gravity. The 1960s also saw the release of Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey. This was an immense cosmic poem which included an evolutionary sequence, a space station in 2001 and a finale of a psychedelic journey through space beyond Jupiter as well as rediscovering a classical 18th century room setting. The symbol was a vast monolith which represented, if not God, then transcendence. And the film ended with hope and the image of the birth of a star child.

45 years later, and a world that has become accustomed to space journeys and star wars, Gravity seems to be a welcome visual look again at space, 21st century style. While there are elements of a cinema vision in the beauty of the photography of space, space vehicles and space stations, and the gravity-less movement in space which looks like mime and dance, this is a realistic film.

The plot, in fact, is quite slight in its way, the work of director Alfonso Cuarón and his son, Jonas. A spaceship is doing experimental work, one of the experts working on some technical design. There is an explosion, a storm of space debris, and the work and the expedition is imperilled.

With the members of the crew dead, there are only two survivors, Ryan, played by Sandra Bullock, and Matt, played by George Clooney. When Ryan seems to be drifting far from the craft, Matt rescues her. However, a number of difficulties ensue and it is up to Ryan to make a decision to bring the craft back to earth and to survive.

The film has many moments of tension and Sandra Bullock is fine as the strong-minded-astronaut in danger. George Clooney offers his usual pleasant and reassuring presence.

There are some moments when audiences may think that screenplay has become contrived, desperate for a happy ending. However, that is something of a hallucination - but it does provide some almost mystical-like moments, a sense of great solidarity, and reinforcement of the will to live.

The film was photographed in 3 D and the recommendation for the audience would be to see it in that format, giving great depth to the experience of outer space.

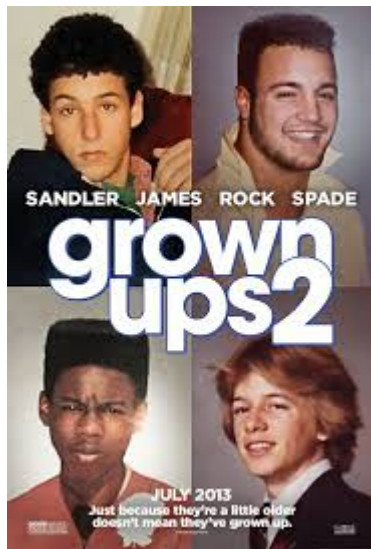
It is said that films can make a great impression on a person's life. This reviewer, having seen Gravity and been impressed, is determined never to go into space. On the other hand, the mysteries of space and its future may well entice younger audiences to look forward to the future - out there.

GROWNUPS 2

US, 2013, 91 minutes, Colour.

Adam Sandler, Kevin James, Chris Rock, David Spade, Salma Hayak, Maria Bello, Maya Rudolph, Taylor Lautner.

Directed by Dennis Dugan.



Puerile. That is as good a word as might be found to describe this sequel to Grownups, which was not so good in itself but certainly quite a deal better than this sequel.

This story takes place over one day. It seems to be a collection of skits and episodes dreamed up by Adam Sandler and his co-writers, the continuing story of the family which has come back from Hollywood to their hometown in Connecticut, has settled in even though some of the inhabitants have bad memories from the past. And it is an opportunity for Adam Sandler to hang out with his buddies. Kevin James, Chris Rock are much the same as they were in the first film.

There are a whole lot of pratfall jokes, especially for David Spade, the slightest of the group, who led the beginning of the day by discovering that he has a son he knew nothing off, a huge lug of a boy, rebelling against his father, seeming to indicate some tension in the family. However, once the group of men are confronted by a group of self-important frat boys from a college, the son takes the side of his father and his friends and no family conflict.

Speaking of the frat boys, they are having a holiday on the cliff overlooking the river where everyone in the past jumped into the deep water. This is a lead in for the boys to challenge the men not only to dive, but to dive naked. They do. Later, the men with friends from the town go to the cliff to confront the frat boys and there is an all-in melee.

The film give some attention to each of the characters, relying on the audience friendliness to accept them. However, not much attention is given to their wives who are critical of their husbands though loving them, join together for some chat and gossip, but, it seems, that their role in the film is more of female decoration.

That may seem a little mean-minded, but mean-minded is one of the characteristics of the film: the men are continually slinging off at each other, one-upping each other or associates from the past, wanting to win in any argie-bargie. This gives something of an unpleasant edge to the proceedings.

Grownups! Puerile! While Adam Sandler can be entertaining and clever when he wants to be, especially in a film like Funny People, he is not particularly funny in performance or screenplay this time. That Chris rock does say when confronted by the students, 'isn't any one afraid of a black man in America anymore?... Damn you, Obama!' is a high point. Though that line could have come out of one of his stand-up comic routines rather than just for the film.

THE HUMAN CARGO/ LA NAVE DOLCE

Italy, 2012, 90 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Daniele Vicari.



Stop the boats! Turn back the boats!

No, this film is not about current Australian asylum seeker policy. It is a documentary about events in Italy and Albania in 1991. Already this episode about Albanian refugees has been the subject of a feature film, *L'America*, directed by Gianni Amelio in 1994, winner of the Catholic Film Office award.

This time, a documentary has been made utilizing footage shot at the time, home movie, film material, television footage. It is a striking compilation and tells the very interesting story of thousands of Albanians who took the opportunity to storm a cargo boat and sail to Italy. There are quite a number of talking head interviews from men, women and boys who made the trip as well as from the captain and local Italian authorities.

The film gives background to Albanian history in the later 20th century, especially under communist rule. When the Berlin wall came down, there was a sense of relief in many Soviet empire countries, including the very strict Albania. Protests began, people wanted to move away from the somewhat impoverished country.

In August 1991, a cargo ship which had travelled around the world and had brought back a load of sugar to Albania, was mobbed by, possibly, 20,000 citizens. It was a sunny day, people were at the beach, the word got around, and men and women and children headed for the boat, climbing aboard en masse. The visuals of the thousands on the boat are quite striking, prow to stern people.

While the ship needed some repairs, the captain decided to move out with his human cargo. They sailed to the port of Brindisi but were refused entry to the port. They sailed along the coast to the port of Bari which they entered. The mayor responded favourably but the government in Rome was far more cautious and ultimately critical of the behaviour of the mayor, condemning him as unpatriotic.

However, what the mass of people as well as the authorities in Italy did not take immediately into account the need for food and water as well as hygiene. On arriving in Bari, many of the men leapt from the ship and authorities contained them on the docks. Others were bussed into the local stadium, food being thrown in by helicopter, gangs set up in order to commandeer the food, and there were riots on the wharves.

Ultimately, the people were returned to Albania.

The value of this kind of documentary is to present the visuals within the space of 100 minutes, reflection on what happened in Italy and the 1990s, but a challenge to what is happening in Italy, with refugees from North Africa, at the present, let alone the migrations of asylum seekers and refugees from the Middle East. The film is a sobering experience for Australians to watch, considering the comparatively few refugees who come by boat from Indonesia, the demands that it makes on government, on the detention centres as well as all that logistics of processing, housing, education.

The English version of the title, *The Human Cargo*, gives a particular emphasis compared with the Italian original, *La Nave Dolce*, *The Sweet Ship*.

I AM A GIRL

Australia, 2013, 88 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Rebecca Barry.



I Am a Girl is a brief documentary focusing on six young women in different countries around the world. The director, Rebecca Barry went with her team photographing the different countries and the countrysides with great beauty, but sometimes they are sometimes sinister as in Cambodia, sometimes, as in Sydney, very ordinary.

The six girls chosen came from the United States, Afghanistan, Australia, Cameroon, Cambodia and Papua New Guinea. Some of the girls are still at school. Some did not have the opportunity to study, although the girl from Afghanistan is making a somewhat defiant stance in pursuing her education. For several of the girls the issue of self-confidence is very important, the African American girl from New York City moving out into the world, the young girl in Sydney still at school but having suffered from bipolar disorder and depression.

Sexual issues are important for three of the girls. The young girl from Papua New Guinea, from a village, talks frankly about sexual relationships and permissiveness as well as the severity of her father in disapproving of her behaviour, getting pregnant. Ousted from the house, she goes to the city, marries the young man, gives birth in a long sequence and lives for a happy future. It is the same in the Cameroon except that the girl is Muslim, is a virgin at her marriage, receives instructions, quite severe, especially in subservience to the husband, in preparation for marriage. The ceremonies themselves are very colourful and the girl wants to stay married 'till death do us part'.

The hardest life is that of the girl in Cambodia. At age 12, her virginity was put on sale and sold for \$400 with the man raping her, then offering \$100 a month for her to be his mistress. Her mother agrees but asks for an extra \$10.00 per month. The mother is poor, dependent on her daughter, not preventing her from living as a prostitute. The young girl herself has a daughter, continually clashes with her mother and her father. With her only prospects being to remain at home as a prostitute or to leave home, she leaves to find a new life.

The film does not aim to find definite conclusions. Rather, it is a series of portraits, a cinema essay focusing on six young women to highlight some of the problems for women in the 21st century, some of the oppression, many of the hopes.

I'M SO EXCITED

Spain, 2013, 91 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Pedro Almodovar.



For many fans of the films of Pedro Almodovar, Spain's leading director for more than a quarter of a century, with some great cinematic achievements, they might wish they were able to say with some conviction, 'I'm so excited'. The characters in the film are over-excited, many of the audience much less so.

When Almodovar first began directing films in the 1980s, he had small budgets, but he had very good casts and plenty of imagination. In the post-Franco era, there was plenty of room for opening up dramas as well as humour, especially with satire. And that is what Almodovar did. Cheeky. He was cheeky. He was rude, capitalising on sending up sexual behaviour and attitudes and capitalising on his own gay sensibility.

With I'm So Excited, he seems to be returning to the style of 30 years earlier. For those who are happy to indulge in it, there will be plenty of enjoyment. For those who find the characters in the film overly over-excited, it becomes a bit tiresome, not as funny as all that.

He does start brightly, literally with all the pastel colours during the credits, then with cameo performances from Antonio Banderas and Penelope Cruz. Then they vanish from the film and we go aboard a flight to Mexico which, in the circumstances, has to circle around Spain and finally try to land at the La Mancha airport, something of a white elephant airport in the film as in real life.

It is important to say at this moment that many of the commentators have pointed out that the broad parody and satire is at the expense of Spanish society today, of the government, of people's responses, of attitudes towards communication, towards crime, both financial and violent, about clairvoyants and drug dealers. Audiences who know Spain well and can make the connections will probably find that there is deeper comedy and meaning in the characters and events. Others might be at a loss and be surprised when such connections are made.

It is also a very gay film. The three male flight attendants are as camp as a row of tents. This is in their demeanor, their way of speaking, interests, relationships, the jokes with more than a touch of crassness at times, and the miming to the Pointer Sisters singing Cole Porter's 'I'm so excited'. The two pilots are bisexual, leading to a lot of discussions about their relationships, a married man having to accept his preferences and the other being forced to acknowledge his preferences.

The stewards have drugged everybody in economy class as well as the flight attendants. Is this meant to portray Spanish society asleep and authorities keeping them asleep?

Then there are the half dozen passengers in first class who have not been drugged. One is a naive and over-eager clairvoyant, a middle-aged woman who is anxious to lose her virginity, and achieves her ambition with an unconscious economy passenger. She has a sense of death around the plane and around one or other of the passengers. There it is the ageing film star who, it emerges, is really a madame and has made porn films. Next to her is a tall, dark handsome man to whom she's attracted, only to find that there is more to his sinister character than she might have dreamed. There is a businessman who wants to contact his mistress who is being taken away to an institution and contacts another who relates to him what has happened and meets him at the airport when they land. There is another businessman, looking mightily suspicious, as well he might because of the reports of a bank going bust with the double dealings of this manager. Then there is a young couple, allegedly on a honeymoon, the groom keeping the woman unconscious by slipping her drugs throughout the flight.

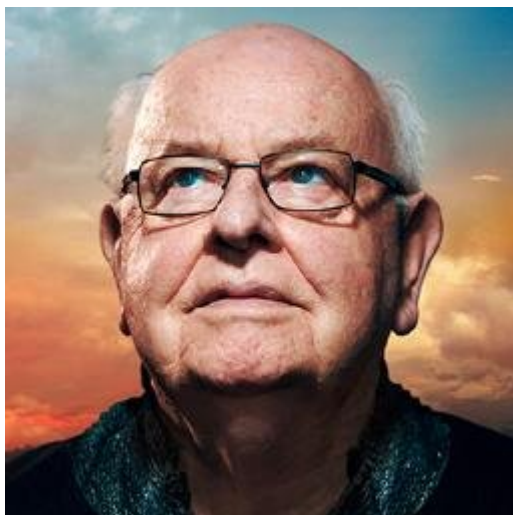
Lots of goings on, lots of sexual behaviour, lots of jokes, but all at a very, one might say, superficial level, no matter what the satiric levels underneath. Perhaps this is Almodovar relaxing before he makes his next serious film.

IN BOB WE TRUST

Australia, 2013, 104 minutes, Colour.

Fr Bob Maguire, John Saffran.

Directed by Lynn- Maree Milburn.



With a title like that, there is an air of divinity attributed to the larger-than-life subject of this very well-made documentary, Fr Bob Maguire of the archdiocese of Melbourne.

The context of the film is the requirement of all parish priests and bishops to offer their resignation from the position at the age of 75. It is low-key to say that Bob was not willing to go from his parish, Sts Peter and Paul, in South Melbourne. At the top of the poster is a statement that this is a conflict of biblical proportions, a David and Goliath struggle. With the towering presence of Bob throughout the film, one suspects at times that Archbishop Hart, the definite villain of the piece, might be the David!

‘Who will rid us of this troublesome priest?’ – Henry II on St Thomas a’Beckett.

This is a partisan documentary. It is Bob Maguire’s campaign against his removal from the parish, the film-makers and photographers following Bob around for quite some time, shooting footage in the church, in his presbytery (and with his dog), in the streets, outside the James Good Building where the Archbishop has his office. There is lots of Bob to camera – not hesitating to give his opinions of the archbishop, sometimes muttering the word ‘fascist’ to camera.

A note at the end says that both Denis Hart and George Pell (shown at the end going into the Victorian Inquiry into sexual abuse) were offered the opportunity to be interviewed but declined.

Bob is nothing if not articulate – though very extroverted in manner, in the vein of ‘how do I know what I think until I’ve said it!’ This makes for a lot of repartee which can be quite amusing, though making an audience laugh does not necessarily mean that you are right. Over the years, Bob has developed, even cultivated, a persona which many audiences, even outside of Melbourne or Victoria, will have heard on many radio interviews (excerpts here from studio interviews with John Saffran and with Neil Mitchell – the film also includes Neil Mitchell questioning Denis Hart about the resignation issue) and on television, especially on the ABC and SBS. He is the bluff, rough and ready priest, something of an ecclesiastical ‘shock jock’, glad to be a bloody stirrer, ever ready to speak out about bullshit, with an accent that favours a slangy approach and a larrikin tone and a blokey dropping of g’s at the ends of words.

On the other hand, he has lots of Shakespeare references, Churchill quotes and mention of theology books which belie the bluff exterior and voice. Often advising those near him, if they have not got the reference, to look it up or Google it.

One of the clever devices for the film is the framing of the story as a benign spoof of the scene from Ingmar Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal*, where Death plays chess with the Knight and they discuss life and fate, with John Saffran, bespectacled as Death and Bob dressed as the Knight, reminding us that his battle is a crusade. The film goes back to this black and white seaside chess joust throughout the film.

Another device is a long collage at the beginning of the film, incorporating a great deal of classic art pieces of Jesus Christ, intercut with an impressive number of brief clips from biblical films, including De Mille’s *The King of Kings*, *The Ten Commandments*, *King of Kings*, *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, Pasolini’s *Gospel According to St Matthew* (although the commentary on St Paul is accompanied by Finlay Currie as St Peter in *Quo Vadis*). And, all the while there is Bob’s voiceover history of the Church, very larrikin-style in vocab and observations, comic but not designed to stand up to close

scrutiny for accuracy.

After we have settled into the dimensions of the Crusade, with interventions by ardent supporters from South Melbourne parish, we move back to Bob's ardent charity work on the streets of Melbourne, and get some glimpses of his growing up and his family story. There are some moving examples shown of people he helped from the streets to survive and find some dignity.

It is entertaining to listen to and watch Bob's primary school teacher, Sister Maria Kavanagh, at the end of the film recounting the story of Bob's autobiographical stories and imaginings when he was at school and at the seminary in Weribee (where, in a final story, he finishes up becoming a bishop, dying and lying in state).

What we finish up getting out of the film is a portrait of Bob and his vision of his priesthood and his life in the Catholic Church, more at the edges than in the centre. Yet, for many in Melbourne he has become the face of the Church, something that this film reinforces. With his blunt remarks and criticisms, and his jocoseness and his ironies, he makes it easier to be critical of authorities. A pity they didn't take part in the film. It would have been interesting to listen to a to-and-fro between Denis Hart and Bob and discover that, perhaps, the archbishop might have had a point or two in his favour.

But, Bob, age 79 at the time of the release of the film, is still battling on, working for his charities, and that the Capuchins moved into the South Melbourne presbytery – their superior makes a sympathetic appearance.

However one responds to the on-screen Bob Maguire, we can say that Lynn- Maree Milburn knows how to put a film together and tell a story.

THE INTERVAL/ L'INTERVALLO

Italy, 2012, 89 minutes, Colour.

Salvatore Rucco, Francesca Risi.

Directed by Leonardo di Costanzo.



The Interval is a brief drama, more for a specialist audience than for a popular audience. It is set in Naples, with a background atmosphere of the mafia. However, it focuses on a small amount of time, a couple of hours, where a young woman who has fallen foul of a boss is guarded in a warehouse by a young man who sells ice creams with his father. The woman, obviously, does not want to be there. The young man does not want to be there either and does not know exactly truth about the woman.

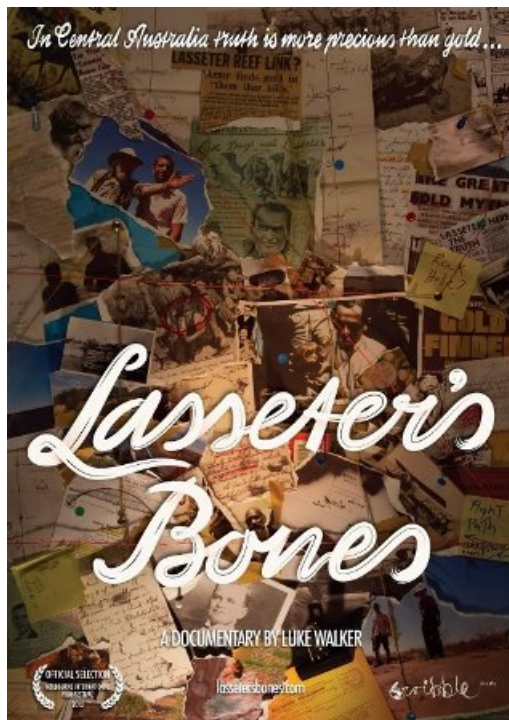
At first, the woman is sullen, taunting the young man. He is patient, putting up with her tantrums. However, as time goes by, they begin to talk, begin to share their stories and a friendship is underway. This is important when the thug who has put the woman there returns with subsequent clashes.

The film moves at a leisurely place pace, the indicating the slow passage of time for each of the two protagonists. The performances are convincing and we can believe that this kind of low-burning drama could happen on any afternoon in Naples. The Interval won six awards at the Venice Film Festival and Best Film at the Italian Golden Globes awards.

LASSETER'S BONES

Australia, 2012, 101 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Luke Walker.



Perhaps, the legend of Lasseter and his reef of gold is not so well known these days. Back in the 1930s and the succeeding decades, probably everyone knew about Lasseter and his search for gold. It was dramatised for eager readers by Ion L. Idriess in *Lasseter's Last Reef*. We all read it in those days.

The reef has never been found again. Was it a real? Was Lasseter's account and his diary telling the truth? Was the man who allegedly found him and buried him telling the truth? Or was Lasseter a con man and a fraud? Did he really die in the desert? Did he actually flee the country and go to the United States? Many people have answered 'yes' to all these questions?

Documentary filmmaker, Luke Walker, not only became interested in the story and wanting to find out the truth, he became deeply obsessed. This is his story, his own personal compulsion to search out the truth, his going to the different locations, his tracking down anybody connected with Lasseter and his story, the interviewing them, raising all kinds of questions.

This makes for a very interesting documentary. Walker is very much at the centre of the film, on screen a great deal of the time, inviting the audience to share his experience.

However, he really does search out quite a number of characters to interview. The most prominent is Lasseter's son, Bob, who is still searching for the reef. He discusses the story with great enthusiasm, reveals that he has been searching the years – he is 85 at the time of the film being made. There is a striking scene with him standing on a ladder with binoculars searching for significant mountain landmarks, and the camera pulling back to show that the ladder is standing on the roof of his vehicle. There is an image of him at the end, sitting in front of his father's memorial statue, outside Alice Springs.

Walker has done a lot of research about Lasseter, his early years in Northern New South Wales near the Clarence River, his having many brain waves about developing the town, submitting to the government all kinds of intuitions about contributions to the World War I effort. Then there is his diary, claiming that there was a relief. And then his death.

Walker also tracks down relatives of Lasseter's partner, relatives of the man who found Lasseter and buried him, relatives of those who researched Lasseter's claims at the time as well as those who accused him of fraud. The film also includes footage from American Lowell Thomas' television documentary of 1957 in search of Lassiter. Walker goes to libraries, to archives, getting a variety of opinions about what happened.

There was also talk of the reef being near an aboriginal sacred site. Walker goes out into the desert, interviews a group of aboriginal women who offer memories of Lasseter's last days, feeding him, caring for him. There is also an extended interview as Walker goes out with an elderly aboriginal man near a sacred site and the aborigine reluctant to tell the story, threatening spears if Walk were to go to the site, and his being tired of giving the interview.

With all this information, the different perspectives, Walkers and supporters and critics, it is still up to the audience to make up its mind about what really happened to Lassiter and whether there really was a reef.

PARANOIA

US, 2013, 106 minutes, Colour.

Liam Hemsworth, Gary Oldman, Harrison Ford, Richard Dreyfuss, Amber Heard, Embeth Davidtz, Julian McMahon, Lukas Till.



Directed by Robert Luketic.

The title sounds far more dramatic than what is seen in the film itself. Suggestions are that it is a psychological drama - or even a horror drama. However, this is a film about industrial espionage in New York City.

The film is an adaptation of a very interesting novel by Joseph Finder, an author of thrillers which explore the developments of technology, how they are used and abused, marketed and exploited. Perhaps one of the difficulties with *Paranoia* is that it intends to be a thriller but takes a lot of time out for the romance. In fact, at times it seems more like a romance with elements of espionage added in. But, as it progresses, there are some moments of tension and a couple of twists, not entirely unpredictable, which make the plot more interesting.

The film has a very good cast which does give it some strength. The central character, Adam Cassidy, is played by Liam Hemsworth who can capitalise on romantic comedy good looks but with the serious plot, he is more serviceable than dramatic, a role which demands showing the audience his moral dilemmas more tellingly.

There are two quite a ruthless company owners. Gary Oldman, with a flattish British accent, is a powerful CEO. He had worked with a mentor but moved out and established his own company. It has fallen on hard times, and he is interested in stealing information about an invention, a computerised wallet full of personal information and apps, from his former boss. He is cruelly ambitious but also quite weaseling in his dealings. Harrison Ford is the former mentor-boss, charming surface, but icily manipulative. There are some moments of satisfaction for audiences as each squares off and then receives his comeuppance.

Adam Cassidy has humble origins but wants to succeed in the world of technology, gathering a young team around himself, making a play to the CEO but seemingly rejected, then employed to insinuate himself into the rival company. He had already encountered one of their marketing stars, Emma (Amber Heard), and he uses her while falling in love with her. There is also a sinister presence with Embeth Davidtz as Gary Oldman's main adviser and fixer. Julian McMahon turns up frequently, also a fixer, but in a brutal and murderous sense.

There is some relief in the very affable presence of Richard Dreyfuss as Adam's father, a retired security guard with emphysema, but still smoking.

The screenplay is something of a Reader's Digest paring down of Finder's novel. Which means that it is an OK time-passing thriller entertainment with romance but not a story or a film that remains in the memory.

PARKER

US, 2013, 118 minutes, Colour.

Jason Statham, Jennifer Lopez, Michael Chicklis, Nick Nolte, Clifton Collins Jr, Wendell Pierce, Bobby Cannavale, Patti Lupone, Emma Booth.

Directed by Taylor Hackford.



Parker is a criminal character created by Donald E. Westlake writing under the name of Richard Stark. There have been several films featuring Parker. This film was based on the novel, Flashfire.

The film was directed by Taylor Hackford, who for more than 30 years has directed a wide range of films with such high points as *Ray*. This film was not particularly successful commercially, appealing to Westlake's fans but not generally, in some areas going straight to DVD.

However, it is a higher profile role for Jason Statham, the diving athlete from England who made an impression in gangster films in the UK and, with the help of some French-financed films, especially the *Transporter* series, he became something of an action icon. For more than a decade he made at least two films a year, reaching a wider public with the *Expendables* films.

In a first, he appears at the Ohio State fair disguised as a priest, doing some priestly work comforting a panic-stricken security guard. However tough he might be, he falls foul of the group with whom he was doing the robbery and as they try to kill him, they assume that they have. This leads, of course, to a vengeance film as he tracks down criminals with the help of his contact, played by Nick Nolte, whose daughter, Emma Booth, he is in love with. In his plans to find where the gang is holed up to prepare another heist, he encounters a real estate agent, played by Jennifer Lopez, who finds that she has bitten off more than she can chew in getting this particular job.

For those who like this kind of thriller, and who like Jason Statham, this should be a satisfyingly entertaining film.

PERCY JACKSON: SEA OF MONSTERS

US, 2013, 106 minutes, Colour.

Logan Lerman, Alexandra Daddario, Douglas Smith, Brandon T. Jackson, Stanley Tucci, Anthony Head, Nathan Fillion.

Directed by Thor Freudenthal.



Percy Jackson: Sea of Monsters is a sequel to Percy Jackson: Lightning Thief, from 2009. The two films are based on a series of novels by Rick Riordan, very popular, serving as a possible substitute for Harry Potter stories. However, the films did not have the success anticipated though they were popular.

Logan Lerman is Percy Jackson, the hero, the son of Poseidon and a human. Along with other half-bloods, he goes to a park where they are sheltered from interaction with humans. In the first film he was given a quest. In this film he has another quest.

While in the first film, actors appeared as the gods, they do not appear in this film, only Hermes as an American businessman (Nathan Fillion) and Kronos as a computer-generated Titan.

Percy is a modest young man, with a sense of destiny which he does not want to pursue, rather plagued by self-doubt. However, he is encouraged by the managers of the park, Stanley Tucci and Anthony Head, playing Chiron the Centaur, to pursue that destiny, especially after he has defeated a monstrous special-effects bull which has invaded the park.

The quest takes him and his friends into New York City with three strange Fates and a taxi, to Hermes and his factory, to Washington, DC, to a boat going to the Caribbean, to the discovery of a Civil War submarine, to a strange destination in the Bermuda Triangle which appears as an entertainment park, complete with a roller coaster. He has to confront Luke, who has betrayed his half-blood heritage and the gigantic god Kronos. He is accompanied in his quest by the athletic champion, Clarisse, as well as Annabeth who has a crush on Percy and Grover, his centaur friend. Also along is a young Cyclops, Tyson, who turns out to be a half-brother of Percy.

Quite some action at the end, Percy achieving the quest, the return home and the celebration and the possibility of another film in the series.

PLANES

US, 2013, 91 minutes, Colour.

Dane Cook, Stacey Keach, Brad Garrett, Teri Hatcher, Julia Louis-Dreyfuss, John Cleese, Cedric the Entertainer, Val Kilmer, Anthony Edwards.

Directed by Klay Hall.



Planes comes from the Pixar Studios. It is not one of their outstanding films but is more entertaining, better than their two ventures into the world of Cars.

This time they have a very simple plot: a small crop-dusting plane with Walter Mitty-like imagination and heroics, wants to break free from ordinary life and the routine of crop-dusting. His old boss plane he is wary. The repair machine is positive that Dusty will have no success. However, he does enter the competition, just missing out on a spot with his timing and flight but finally being accepted when another plane is accused of cheating.

In the meantime he makes contact with a World War II veteran plane who has not flown for decades. The old captain tests out Dusty and decides to support him, helping with his training for the competition, because Dusty finds that he has a fear of Heights.

The animation for the flying sequences is quite spectacular, one of the best features of the film – also the locations for the different stops along the way. The voices are also good with Dane Cook as Dusty, Stacey Keach as the old captain and, very recognizable, John Cleese as very British plane, Bulldog. There is also a Mexican plane who has fallen in love with the Australian entrant, but is rejected by her until he serenades her romantically.

The main part of the film consists of the various stages of the competition, the stops around the world in the air race, (though confined to the northern hemisphere): Iceland, Germany, through the Himalayas where dusty go through a tunnel instead of flying over them and gains time, China, Mexico and the final stage to New York City.

Obviously there has to be a villain, a vain and cheating competitor, who falls foul of his vanity and his playing to the media.

There is also a subplot about the captain and his World War II activities leading to Dusty's disappointment.

It is the story of the little plane, looked down on, but drawing on energy and self-confidence and winning in the end.

PRISONERS

US, 2013, 156 minutes, Colour.

Hugh Jackman, Jake Gyllenhaal, Paul Dano, Maria Bello, Viola Davis, Terrence Howard, Melissa Leo, Len Cariou.

Directed by Denis Villeneuve.



Prisoners is one of the strongest dramas of 2013. It has been directed by Canadian Denis Villeneuve, who made a great impact with his Oscar-nominated film, Incendies. He has not failed in his follow-up film.

There are many prisoners in this film, some held in abduction and detention, some trapped in their own personalities.

On paper, the plot about the abduction of two little girls might seem fairly straightforward. The police investigate. The fathers become involved. The mothers share in the grief. The search goes on over many days and the audience is always unsure of the outcome.

The film opens with two hunters stalking a deer in a wintry November setting. The soundtrack has a recitation of the Lord's Prayer. There will be themes of hunting during the film. There will be some Christian themes.

Two families celebrate Thanksgiving together, the Dovers and the Birches. Keller Dover is played by Hugh Jackman in one of his best roles and Maria Bello is his wife. The Birches are played by Terrence Howard and Viola Davis. Before the meal the two little girls go for a walk and want to play on a camper van parked in the street. After the dinner, they disappear as does the camper van.

The film is very powerful showing the desperation of Dover. An intense man, a carpenter and builder, he is a reformed alcoholic and a devout Christian, listening to tapes in his car. Angered by the seeming lack of effort by the police, he takes the search into his own hands with brutal and devastating results. He persuades his friend Franklin Birch to join him to find out where the girls have been him.

In the meantime, it is Jake Gyllenhaal as the local detective who has never lost a case using police methods to try to track down the lost girls. It is one of Jake Gyllenhaal's best performances also, a loner, serious, with several tattoos, and no back story. It is inevitable that the two men will clash.

There has been controversy about the torture sequences in the film, whether they are too brutal, or if they bring home to the audience what is truly happening in the interrogation. Many have seen this plot line as echoing Americans taking people captive, interning them, torturing them, the superior Americans, righteous, against those they perceive as enemies, right or wrong. And the possibility is always there that they are wrong.

Central to the film is the man accused of abducting the girls. An accident in his early life has meant that he has an IQ of the boy about 10 years old. Played by Paul Dano, a versatile actor who does not always take on sympathetic roles, the audience is puzzled about his role in the taking of the girls because there seems no real evidence against him. Which makes the interrogation more brutal.

Another suspect enters the picture and is pursued by the detective, interrogated, his house searched, but the connection is not what the audience expects. In fact, by the time the film has ended, we realise that there were many clues given as to what had happened, especially in the subplot of an alcoholic priest and a dead body in his basement and his story of a man wanting to make a confession about abductions. One of the difficulties in investigations is the credibility of the witnesses, and a presumption that they will be telling the truth. Here, vicious lies are told.

There is a strong supporting cast with Len Cariou as the priest and, especially the very versatile actress, Melissa Leo, who appears in a great many films, several in 2013, very different roles and characters. But it is the focus on Hugh Jackman's strong character and the counterbalance of Jake Gyllenhaal's detective which makes this a very strong drama, even to the final moments, which incorporate yet another clue and create an uneasy sense of what is to follow.

A dark exploration of human nature, evil choices begetting evil consequences. Sombre but strong.

THE RED AND THE BLUE

Italy, 2012, 98 minutes, Colour.

Margherita Buy, Riccardo Scarmaccio, Roberto Herlitzka.

Directed by Giuseppe Piccioni.



The Red and the Blue is the story of a teacher, a substitute who comes into an average school in Rome, with its own difficulties, especially in staffing, in financial management, in accepting students who are not interested in education.

The film opens with a voiceover by an old teacher, Professor Fioretti, looking rather ancient, played with effective cynicism by Roberto Herlitzka. He sounds as if he despises the students, sees them as failures, unable to respond to his course in art history. He is aloof and alone in the staff room. He is critical of substitute teachers and behaves that way towards the latest teacher, Prezioso, played by Riccardo Scarmaccio. After this introduction, the film shows the journey of Prezioso and his encounters with staff and students.

The film has the usual group of teenage students, familiar from many American films. They are not particularly interested in the course, Italian literature, and tend to misbehave in a nonchalantly dismissive manner.

There are several subplots, including Professor Fioretti's being contacted by a past student, who did not pay attention in class but has affectionate memories of the Professor. Is it possible for him to change, come out of himself?

Another subplot involves the Principal, Margharita Buy, whose main preoccupation in managing the school is to avoid potential lawsuits. When she has to take care of a boy whose mother seems to have abandoned him, she takes him to hospital, and something of an attachment develops, her bringing him pyjamas and some Manga comics, and she even considers adopting him.

Prezioso teaches literature, eliciting some gradual responses from the students, especially from a young Romanian student, attached to a girl who is his exact extroverted opposite and who wants to act out her frustrations, with the boy helping her, even to finding a gun and an episode in which brings him back to reality.

Prezioso becomes attached to a rather sullen and insolent girl, trying to help her, especially when she says her mother has just died. In his encounters with her, with cautions from the Principal, he thinks she has been lying and gives up on her. But there is something of a twist towards the end in his encounters with her.

To this extent, the film is episodic, building up its portrayal of life in a school, especially in the classroom, and the consequences for the students.

It is a small story for this part of Prezioso's life and career. We might hope that he will become a substantial teacher and that this will have an effect on his life - or he could become cynical and become a Professor Fioretti of the future.

RENOIR

France, 2012, 111 minutes, Colour.

Michel Bouquet, Christa Theret, Vincent Rottiers.

Directed by Gilles Bourdos.



Renoir is a celebrated name in French history, especially of the arts. For those who appreciate the paintings of the older Renoir as well as the films of the younger Renoir, this partial biography will be of interest and aspects of it, fascinating.

This is a leisurely film, capturing the mood of rural France in 1915. There are references to the war and the realisation that it is being waged not far away. In fact, two of the painter's sons, including the later director, Jean, have served on the front line. But, for the film and its plot, we are in a beautiful French village, a lovely French countryside, a world of visual beauty.

Beauty is an important theme for the film. The artist is surrounded by nature, but is drawn more to portraying the human form, of painting women, and, as he says, his appreciation of flesh. By 1915 Renoir had painted a great number of pictures, and some of them are seen hanging on his wall. There is also the reminder that he painted scenes of 'lunch on the grass', with a sequence in the film where the family are at the river, he is painting, and gusts of wind come up tossing cloths and other aspects of the picnic into the water. We also see the artist painting in his studio, especially with his models.

The models have always been important. Renoir has memories of Gabrielle who chose to leave him - but does reappear and joins the family at the end. Renoir has also many

memories and paintings of his late wife, the mother of his children, the model to whom he was most devoted.

As the film opens, we see a young girl, Andree cycling towards the Renoir villa. The artist's wife had recommended her to apply for modelling. She does. She is accepted. Renoir delights in painting her. It is a happy existence except that the rather snobbish staff have a contempt for her.

And then Jean, wounded in the leg, comes back from the war. He is played by the young and versatile actor, Vincent Rottiers years. A patriot, he wants to go back to the front when his wound begins to heal. His father certainly does not want this. Dede (Andree) has fallen in love with him, and he with her, which complicates his emotional life, and the discovery of the possibilities in a relationship with a woman. This leads to some difficulties in the household, the father wanting Dede to return after she has left the house. Jean goes to find her.

This means that for the audience it is principally a portrait of father and son. But it is also a cinema essay in exploration of French art, impressionism, the artist driven to paint.

The family watches cinema, especially *Intolerance*, released in 1915. The audience is caught up with the magic of cinema and we are given glimpses of the response of Jean who does finally make up his mind that he wants to work in film.

The performances are very strong. 86 year-old Michel Bouquet certainly conveys the character, the genius, aspects of the tortured life of an artist. Vincent Rottiers portrays Jean before he discovers his vocation in life.

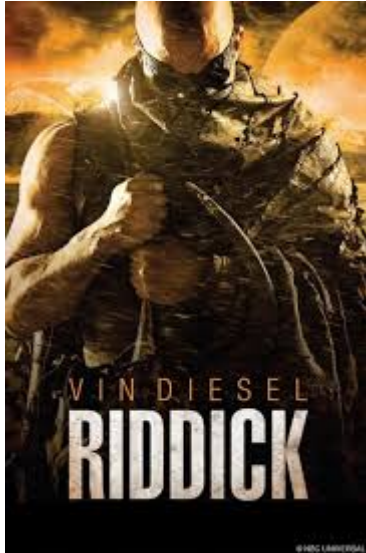
There are notes at the end of the film indicating that within four years the older Renoir had died. Jean worked with Dede in film until they parted in 1931. But from the 1930s, with such films as *La Marseillaise*, *The Rules of the Game*, the great war, and into the forties when he went to Hollywood and made a number of specialised features, then into the fifties when he returned to France and continued to make masterpieces including his *Lola Montez*, *The Golden Coach* and *The River*. He was to die, celebrated as one of the 20th century's great directors, in 1979.

RIDDICK

US, 2013, 119 minutes, Colour.

Vin Diesel, Jordi Molla, Matt Nable, Bokeem Woodbine, Karl Urban.

Directed by David Twohey.



You have to be a strong Vin Diesel fan to sit through Riddick. And, of course, Diesel does have his fans who will relish this film. Box-office returns for this film and for the Fast and Furious franchise, seem to indicate that his fan base is growing. He has a particular screen presence, physically tough which belies the shrewdness of intelligence that the screenplay spells out for his character.

It is thirteen years since Riddick first appeared on screen, in a science fiction film set on an alien planet, Pitch Black. It made quite an impact on his fans at the time and a sequel went into production, the Chronicles of Riddick where Diesel had as a co-star, Judi Dench. Now, with Diesel having proven himself as fast and furious, he is back as Riddick.

You know whether you are going to enjoy the film or not during the first fifteen minutes and whether you pay attention or find that your mind is wandering. It is totally Riddick. Well, that is not perhaps entirely true, because on this alien planet where he has been banished, there are a number of deadly prehistoric-looking creatures, sinister dingo-like dogs and even more sinister large eel-like reptiles in the pools. Riddick has to spend a long, long time fighting them, suffering grievous wounds and enduring an enormous amount of pain. There is a flashback interlude going back to his previous career and the accusations of murder as well as his being exiled. However, that first half hour or more indicates that this is definitely a film about Riddick.

But this is well calculated by the screenplay because Riddick virtually goes off screen for act two, when space ships arrive on the planet to bring him back, dead or alive. One team is a group of bounty hunters led by Jordi Molla, a really unpleasant type, with equally unpleasant henchmen, and a relentless determination to get Riddick and put his head in a box cage. The other group a more organized, led Boss Johns (Australian Matt Nable) who believes that Riddick has murdered his young son and is out to find the truth and some justice or vengeance.

The group spent a lot of time bickering amongst each other, many flashpoints with the only female in the team, presented as butch as the men. Riddick is able to pin the group down, tantalising them by infiltrating their centre and then disappearing. Which makes them all the more determined.

But, by the third act, Riddick is back with the two teams, even trapped by them. But also returning are some of the creatures. They loudly attack the headquarters, terrifying everyone and killing of some of the unwary. It all builds up to a desperate cycle ride through the desert, pursued by the creatures, Riddick disempowered and almost destroyed... But...

The alien planet is a desert and mountain place, little vegetation, and with a yellow streaked sky. There is a thumping score. There are lots of action bouts and confrontations - lots and lots. There are the computer-generated creatures to contribute to the eerie atmosphere. And there is always Riddick, Vin Diesel older, bigger, more muscles, more capacity for endurance, laconic, but with a redeeming characteristic that he has tamed one of the ferocious dogs who has become fiercely loyal to him.

David Twohey as written the screenplay. He has written some interesting screenplays like Perfect Getaway and Secret Window. But with this one, he has some less than literary dialogue, peppered with four-letter 'what the...', 'shut the...', which seem like those word-bubbles in panels of comic strips.

And, at the end, Riddick is in a spacecraft flying off into a possible sequel.

RIPD

US, 2013, 96 minutes, Colour.

Jeff Bridges, Ryan Reynolds, Mary Louise Parker, Kevin Bacon.

Directed by Robert Schwenke.



What film would have its leading man shot to death within the first ten minutes? Well, RIPD. But this is not to spoil a plot, because right from the beginning we learn that the hero is dead. Then we get an instant flashback to the situation where he dies. While the film is about action on earth, the plot also takes us into a very bureaucratic version of the afterlife, at least in the police department, RIPD, the Rest in Peace Department.

Nick Walker (Ryan Reynolds) dies and time stands still, action is frozen. He finds himself in a tornado-like whirlwind and sucked up into the skies and suddenly sitting at a desk opposite Miss Proctor who is the administrator for the RIPD. She does a quick explanation, which is helpful for the audience, and informs us all that the squad is to go back to earth and bring 'deados' - evil types who have died but have remained hidden on earth - back to the office or eliminate them. So far, so odd.

While Nick is ordered to go back to earth, he is also given a partner. This turns out to be Jeff Bridges, looking like Buffalo Bill or Wild Bill Hickock or some other characters from the 19th century west, which is, in fact, when he came from when he arrived at the RIPD. Bridges must have enjoyed his role as Rooster Cogburn in the remake of True Grit and he does quite a similar role here, boisterous, loud and strident at times, with a touch of humor.

By this stage, or earlier, most movie fans will be thinking that this is Men in Black RIPD-off. This time the men are not in black. In fact, on earth they have different appearances so that they are unable to communicate with their loved ones. Nick looks like an old Chinese gentleman. Roy is a more than glamorous young woman. The audience principally sees the two agents as they are, with some humorous moments when we see how the characters are perceiving them in their disguise, with appropriate and inappropriate responses.

Nick had a loving wife, Julia, but deceived her by burying some gold that had fallen into his and his partner's hands. The partner is played slimily (literally at the end) by Kevin Bacon. We see him shoot Nick, play the sympathetic friend before he reveals his true self.

In between pursuing ‘deados’ with all kinds of special effects, climbing buildings, car chases, and exploding monstrous ‘deados’, as well as returns to Miss Proctor and her reprimands, they uncover a plot to gather together gold pieces to make an ancient column of gold which, when completed, would return all the dead back to earth where they could live forever.

Needless to say, this is not an entirely plausible plot! It is based on a comic novel and so feels free to do what it likes with life and death, police work from the afterlife, and mayhem in downtown Boston...

While the leads do their best, they don’t have such screen presence as Will Smith and Tommy Lee Jones, so there may not be RIPD 2. However, as an amusing pastime, it will entertain an undemanding audience.

RUNNER RUNNER

US, 2013, 90 minutes, Colour.

Justin Timberlake, Ben Affleck, Gemma Arterton, Anthony Mackie, John Heard.

Directed by Brad Furman.



This is one of those thrillers which might have sounded well worthwhile on paper but that somehow doesn’t quite deliver on screen.

While the setting is gambling, casinos, and the gambling culture in the US and in Costa Rica, it is once again the story of the young man, ambitious, who overestimates his capacities and becomes the victim of someone he admires and then discovers is devious and an exploiter. Memories of such stories as the Grisham's *The Firm*.

This time the young man is played by Justin Timberlake, a student who has a father with gambling addiction, who organizes online play at his college campus. Warned by the head of the college, he decides to go to Costa Rica to meet the man whom he considers the top of online and international gambling. He is played with suitable aplomb and ever-growing sinister behaviour by Ben Affleck. Also in the picture is Gemma Arteton who does become involved in the plot but seems to be there more for conventional decoration, and she doesn't give a very lively or credible performance.

Anthony Mackie appears as one of the more ruthless FBI agents on screen in recent times, relentless in his pressuring of American young men who become involved with the boss and gambling types, who would be arrested as soon as they set foot on American Territory. Also in the mix is John Heard as the hero's father, being set up to pressurize his son to do whatever the boss asks.

Our hero learns the way of the world in being smart and outsmarting opponents. Having been bashed, he then calls on the help of those who were his opponents but now want the opportunity to get back on the boss.

There are some dramatic moments at the end of the film, reinforcing the cleverness of the hero, especially in his outwitting the boss.

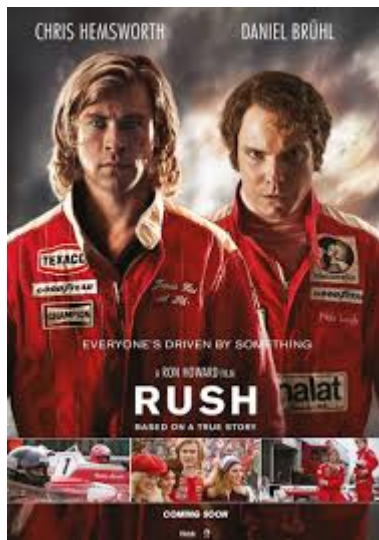
Just OK and watchable while it is on the screen, then out of mind and memory.

RUSH

US, 2013, 132 minutes, Colour.

Chris Hemsworth, Daniel Bruehl, Alexandra Maria Lara, Olivia Wilde.

Directed by Ron Howard.



Any fan of Formula One will not want to miss Rush.

And for those who are not so keen or dislike it intensely, there is a human drama here amongst all the races and competitiveness which is of more than ordinary interest.

The focus of the film is on the Formula One races of 1976. The film has established both the characters of British James Hunt and Austrian Nicky Lauda. They both come from wealthy families and have fathers who disapprove of their choices of racing driving. However, they are independent-minded, stand up to their parent and decide that this is their vocation. James Hunt is the very British public school student who lives a privileged life - and rather exploits it in his partying and womanising. He has a group of friends who finance him in his move up the rungs towards Formula One. Lauda, on the other hand, invests money in racing companies and makes himself indispensable to them, especially with his engineering skills and his ability to work on cars to make them go faster.

Both coming on the scene at the same time brings an almost inevitable move towards the competitiveness - although it appears that they shared rooms initially, something omitted from the film to highlight the rivalry.

Chris Hemsworth who has proven himself a very reliable Thor in both the original film as well as The Avengers and the soon-to-follow new adventures of Thor. This time he has a fine opportunity to create a character and he does so with great aplomb. Daniel Bruehl is a very reliable screen presence in many films from Germany and Spain (he has parents from both countries) as well as in a number of English-language films. Hunt is handsome and debonair, Lauda is a driven and disciplined man in a severely Teutonic way, has some protruding teeth which, he acknowledges, makes him look rather rodent-like. However, whenever he looks like, he is a champion driver and absolutely determined.

The film then settles down to show the races of 1976. They are filmed with a pounding musical score as well as the inevitable noise volume of the cars, heightened by the sound engineering, so that fans will feel (and hear) that they are actually watching races in real life. The filming and editing of the racing sequences is expert, capturing all the excitement not only for an observer but with shots from inside the cars, the drivers' take on the speed, the dangers, evading other cars, finding the gaps, as might be facetiously said, from their vroom with a view

Then comes the gruesome accident where Lauda is severely injured, especially in his face, which required some reconstructing. The film shows the pain he put up with in the process of healing, urged on by his watching Hunt on television beginning to catch up on point scores for world champion. Within weeks, the relentless Lauda is back on the track, determined to preserve his championship status from the previous year.

The film makes many points about the dangerous nature of Formula One at that time, Lauda organising a meeting of fellow drivers to ask them not to race because of the dangers. He is not a persuasive negotiator and they refuse.

Once back on the track, in the Formula One race in Japan, Lauda decides that the rain and wet track is too dangerous and withdraws from the race. Hunt perseveres in the very difficult circumstances and is able to achieve 1976 world champion status, by one point.

The film has an interesting gallery of supporting characters, especially from the different companies, and sponsors, indicating the background of finance needed to race Formula One cars. There is also some attention given to the human interest stories in the relationships of the two men. Profligate in his relationships with women, Hunt meets Susie Miller and impulsively decides to marry her. He is involved in his sport and partying life. She works in New York. The marriage is doomed, especially when she meets Richard Burton who leaves Elizabeth Taylor for the second time and marries her. The relationship between Nicky Lauda and his wife is much more serious, beginning with a humorous episode where she doesn't believe he is a racing driver. When her car breaks down and two men give them a lift and are overawed that Lauda is driving their car. She is a strong-minded woman, allowing Lauda his passion for driving, not intrusive but very supportive.

We are informed at the end that James Hunt died at the age of 45 of a heart attack, and probably from very hard living. Nicky Lauda went into flight company work and established his own airline.

Two years ago there was a documentary on Ayrton Senna and his rivalry with Alain Prost, an intriguing and well-regarded film. But here is biography, semi-documentary, with a screenplay written by Peter Morgan (The Queen, The Last King of Scotland, The Audience, Frost/Nixon) and directed by Ron Howard, an expert in making films which are very popular, well-crafted. Howard is one of the best Hollywood story-tellers (though no studio would finance this film and he made it with independent companies – with Lauda-like tenacity).

STORIES WE TELL

Canada, 2012, 108 minutes, Colour.

Michael Polley, Sarah Polley, John Buchan, Harry

Directed by Sarah Polley.



There is an ambiguous tone in the title of this film. We tell stories because we enjoy storytelling. However, some of the stories we tell are not always true or accurate. This underlies this film about the actress-director, Sarah Polley.

Sarah Polley has a very fine reputation. She is a Canadian, born in 1979, in films and on television during her childhood. She made the transition successfully to adult actress and to film director: Away From Her and Take This Waltz. She is also the director of this ambitious documentary.

Sarah Polley was close to her father, Michael, especially after the death of her mother, Diane, a very lively, very extroverted actress. In home movie material and re-creations of events, Diane Polley makes quite some impact on the screen. After her death, the young Sarah spent her years at home with her father. She has some brothers and sisters, some from her mother's previous marriage.

Randomly during meals, some of the brothers and sisters would comment on how she did not resemble her father. This suggested the question of whether Michael actually was her father. This leads to some searching, asking an actor from Toronto if, in fact, he was her father. Another candidate emerged, a producer, also from Toronto. In an important scene, Sarah discovers who her father really was. And experiences the effect that it had on Michael, who had cared for her as her father.

Sarah Polley herself does not intrude into the film even though it is about her. She assembles a group of relatives and friends and they agree, some of them rather nervously, to be interviewed. This includes the actor and the producer from Toronto. But it also includes her father who has written a text about his life and experiences and he records them as she photographs him doing so, sometimes asking him to re-read a line. His text, his investment in reading the text, and the revelation of what it means to him is a very moving part of the film.

There are many funny moments as her brothers and sisters reminisce. There are very many serious moments, of course, as they remember Diane, her personality, the impact she made, her death from cancer, the theatricality of her funeral.

The film is well-constructed, the inter-cutting of the interviews makes for interesting commentary and cross-commentary, different angles on revelations and memories, and all the time focusing on Diane and what all this means to Sarah.

For audiences who do not know Sarah Polley or her career, the film is strong enough in terms of creating characters, spotlighting their self-revelations, inviting the audience to share the experiences of this family, to identify with the experiences or, as observers, to be amazed at some of the repercussions. It is always interesting and affecting.

TURBO

US, 2013, 96 minutes, Colour.

Voices of Ryan Reynolds, Paul Giamatti, Michael Pena, Samuel L. Jackson.

Directed by David Soren.



Turbo, like Planes which was released the same time, is a film about an unlikely hero. While in Planes, the young crop duster is in a race around the world, Turbo's ambition is to participate in the Indianapolis 500. And he does. And, like Dusty, he wins. Of course!

The film, however, gives new meaning to the phrase, snail's pace.

Turbo is a snail. He is voiced by Ryan Reynolds. And he has a very cautious brother, Chet, voiced by Paul Giamatti. He doesn't encourage his brother to follow his powers for racing (until the finale!).

However, Turbo finds a whole lot of friends who have all kinds of ultra-snail powers. When he comes to Indianapolis, they are there to support him, especially at the pit stops. Needless to say,

there is a villain, a human car driver from Canada who gives very pleasant television interviews but, underneath, is a relentless opponent and does dastardly things to Turbo during the race.

Turbo also gets a great deal of support from a young Hispanic man, who also has a reluctant brother, who joins with the group at the pits. He is voiced by Michael Pena and, amongst other snails, there is Samuel L. Jackson.

The animation for the races in Indianapolis is very effective. And, for Turbo, there is a great deal of stunt work. The race is dramatic, has some very exciting moments, has an ending with gridlock on the course, a relentless attempt to win by the villain and Turbo having to rely on his snail nature to get himself to the finishing line. An inspiration for us all to be a true selves when we are in competition!.

Not one of the great animation films, but should attract boys' attention, as well as girls who are fans, and those who will find Turbo very cute.

THANKS FOR SHARING

US, 2012, 117 minutes, Colour.

Mark Ruffalo, Tim Robbins, Josh Gad, Gwyneth Paltrow, Joely Richardson, Patrick Fugit, Carol Kane.

Directed by Stuart Blumberg.



A film from Hollywood about self-control? Not likely. About self-control and sex? Even less likely. But, here it is, *Thanks for Sharing*. And a good film too. About sex addiction.

2011 saw Michael Fassbinder locked into sexual addiction in the deadly serious *Shameless*. *Thanks for sharing* alerts audiences to AA and 12-step programs. The central characters here are in such a program for sexual addiction.

Director and co-writer, Stuart Blumberg, takes a less deadly approach than *Shameless*. It has a lot of humour in it and its characters display greater humanity. It is well-written, taking us into the minds and feelings of its characters which leads to some sympathy, if not empathy, and some insight about the experience of sexual addiction. It takes us into meetings with the self-consciousness, the desperation, the listening, the support. It also shows us the demands made on sponsors: phone calls at low points, being direct with each other, and the strains when the sponsor is also an addict.

There are three central characters, very well played. The main focus is Adam, a business executive who appears competent and charming but has been wracked by past excessive behaviour and the constant temptations. He shows how self-control can be maintained but how fragile this can be. It is interesting to note that he and the others use the word 'sober' to describe how long they have been fall-free. Adam is played by Mark Ruffalo, sometimes intense, at other times mastering his situation. Some redemption appears in the form of Phoebe. Both are attracted to each other, enjoy each other's company. She reveals she has had breast cancer. He cannot reveal the truth. Much of the drama of the film comes from his avoiding the situation and how each confronts the situation when it is revealed. Phoebe is played by Gwyneth Paltrow in a welcome return to the screen.

Adam's sponsor, Mike, is played by Tim Robbins, with 15 years sobriety. A builder, he gives job opportunities to addicts to build up confidence but has to take responsibility when they crash. Joely Richardson plays his

long-suffering wife. Particularly telling is the sub-plot with Mike's son (a good performance by Patrick Fugit), alienated, some time in prison, returning to reconcile but falling foul of Mike's dominance despite efforts to bond with his son. The scene where the son asks for an apology from his father for the treatment he received while Mike was so drunk is quite powerful, a reminder of an alcoholic parents responsibility for the damage to a child.

The third character is a young doctor, Neil (Josh Gad, Steve Wozniak in Jobs). His story begins somewhat farcically, being a boorish, overweight hitter on women. Mike doesn't like him. Adam has difficulty in being his sponsor. He has the disadvantage of an overbearing Jewish mother (Carol Kane). However, his struggles and falls, his attempts to find self-control become more interesting, especially when he interacts with another addict, Dede (Alecia Moore/Pink), puts himself out to come to her help and she enables him to be better.

Most people know of sexual addiction from headlines where celebrities have gone into rehab. Thanks for sharing is an opportunity to get to know people and their addictions through their lives rather than through theory. These are middle-class people, to that extent ordinary. The tough struggle (illustrated more graphically towards the end of the film than earlier) dramatizes for outsiders to addiction what the experience, illness, can be like.

All bows are not neatly tied at the end, but the perspective is definitely one of help for others – and some hope.

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ADORATION

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CLOSED CIRCUIT

COUNSELLOR, The

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ENOUGH SAID

ESCAPE PLAN

FIFTH ESTATE, The

FRUITVALE STATION

HUNGER GAMES: CATCHING FIRE

INSIDIOUS CHAPTER 2

JACKASS PRESENTS: BAD GRANDPA

KILL YOUR DARLINGS

MAGIC MAGIC

MACHETE KILLS

MARY MEETS MOHAMMAD

MR PIP

MYSTERY ROAD

PATRICK

SPECTACULAR NOW

THOR: THE DARK WORLD

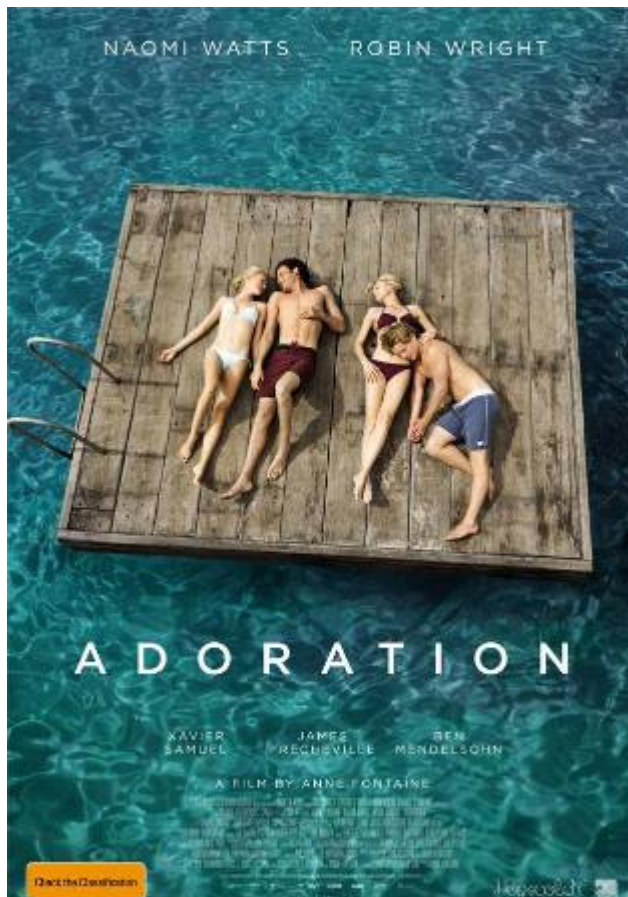
WALESA – MAN OF HOPE

ADORATION

France/Australia, 2013, minutes, Colour.

Naomi Watts, Robin Wright, Xavier Samuel, James Frecheville, Ben Mendelsohn, Gary Sweet, Jessica Tovey, Sophie Lowe.

Directed by Anne Fontaine.



It was too good a phrase not to use: a reviewer-friend remarked at the end of *Adoration*, “a film of vexatious morality”.

Indeed, the film is a story which raises moral issues. It is too easy and glib simply to note the tagline of two women falling in love with each other’s teenage sons. This is something of what the film is about but does not indicate anything of how the subject is treated. A number of audiences have found the film very romantic. Others have worried about the relationships, the effect on each of the characters, and some have worried about the closeness of the friendships and relationships, even suggesting overtones of incest.

The title of the film, *Adoration* (previously, *Adore*) is suggestive of how, during the relationships, each partner sees the other. However, the original title of the film was *To Mothers* and, indeed, the original title of Doris Lessing’s story is *To Grandmothers*. Doris Lessing, in her stories, often set in Africa, and was not afraid to tackle troubling situations. Hence, the interest in exploring the characters, friendship, affairs of the two grandmothers.

While the director is French, Anne Fontaine, the adaptation of Doris Lessing’s novel comes from noted British playwright and screen-writer, Christopher Hampton (*Dangerous Liaisons*). And the

setting has been adapted for Australia, the central coast of New South Wales, filmed at Seal Rocks, a beautiful ocean location with beaches and cliffs, the atmosphere of a small town.

We are introduced to the two mothers when they are children, playing in the bush and on the beach, on the verge of puberty. We are made aware of the strong bonds between the two, sharing everything, the best of friends. As they look at each other, there is a visual transition to them as grown-up, as mothers, attending the funeral of the husband of one of them. As with the mothers, their two sons formed strong friendships and bonds, the best of friends. And, the same visual change is used to bring the boys to their late teenage years. Still best friends, surfing, in and out of each other's houses, ordinary situations. But, there is some tension in one household as a marriage seems to have gone cold, the husband wanting to move to Sydney, to teach at Sydney University, his wife seemingly willing, but this being the last bond being cut, he moves away.

It seems best to mention here the strength of the performances. Naomi Watts, perhaps a bit more subdued than in her other performances, is Lil, whose son is Ian (Xavier Samuel). Robin Wright is Roz whose son is Tom (James Frecheville). Ben Mendelsohn is Roz's husband who moves out. While the performances are strong, Robin Wright's portrayal of Roz stands out, a complex portrait of a middle-aged woman and her profound emotions.

It is in this context that Ian makes an approach to Roz, Tom resentful when he finds out what has happened, approaches Lil. It is here that many audiences become uncomfortable, though some are asking would the audience be so questioning had the genders been reversed, the younger women approaching the older men. It is still rather unusual to have the younger men approach the older women and to want a relationship rather than merely an affair.

But the film makes a move to two years after the beginnings of the affairs. Which gives the film some more substance, on how each of the couples handles the situation, well or not well. There are further complications when Tom goes to Sydney, to work with his father, meets an aspiring actress and all four have to take stock of their situation.

And the complications do not stop there because each of the young men does marry, and has to face whether the marriage is substantial or the initial love is still all-pervasive.

Stories are able to take us into areas which may not be familiar, to characters faced with moral dilemmas, who do not look to the consequences at the time but are capable of being particularly hurtful. And, Adoration leaves us with these questions.

AIN'T THEM BODIES SAINTS

US, 2013, 96 minutes, Colour.

Casey Affleck, Rooney Mara, Ben Foster, Keith Carradine, Nate Parker.

Directed by David Lowery.



That's quite a question in the title. But whether it is answered is a moot question. The first inclination is to say that the bodies are not saints. This is a film where there are quite a number of bodies, in the context of crime, prison escapes, vengeance.

The film announces that this is a Texas story. The picture of Texas is almost like that of painting, vistas of open fields, sometimes drab landscapes, nothing special. And, maybe, this is the kind of context for the central characters, drab in their way, seemingly nothing special. We are introduced to them as Ruth (Rooney Mara) walks away from home and from her husband, Bob (Casey Affleck). He pleads with her and they go home. She is pregnant. However, they have little time to settle back home when there is a police siege and some shootings, the upshot being Bob sentenced to prison.

The years pass. Ruth's daughter, Silvie, is now a little girl. She and her mother live in a house provided by Bob's father (Keith Carradine) who runs a local store. She also receives the attention of one of the local police, Patrick (Ben Foster). But she keeps her mind on Bob, hoping against hope.

Then Bob is able to escape from prison, describing the experience in somewhat mystical terms to his friend, Sweetie (Nate Parker). He is able to dig up money from past robberies and wants to find Ruth and settle down with her and his daughter. Needless to say, this is not going to happen. The mood is pensive and the audience senses that the film is something of an elegy.

The climax comes with a group seeking vengeance on Bob, some shootings, and Ruth left bereft. Perhaps the audience feels a little of the same as this is a film which is character-driven, but also dialogue-driven, with plenty of silences as well, so that while there is some action, there is an overall sombre and reflective tone. One of the regrets is that Casey Affleck has a somewhat inarticulate way of speaking his lines which means that many of them are muffled and the audience does not really know what he is saying.

The film, with its title which, on reflection, sounds more than a little pretentious, aspires to be something of a Texas classic, in the tradition of the early films of, say, Terence Malick.

ALAN PARTRIDGE: ALPHA PAPA

UK, 2013, 90 minutes, Colour.

Steve Coogan, Colm Meaney.

Directed by Declan Lowney.



For British television watchers, Alan Partridge could be a household name. But, beyond the shores of Britain and beyond his favoured Norfolk, he is not so well-known. And this provides a difficulty for a feature film based on a successful television program. Because it has run for so long, the writers and actors are so familiar with the character that they take many things for granted which an audience new to the show may well find strange. And this seems to be the case with Alan Partridge.

For a long time, Steve Coogan's creation has appeared in many television series. Partridge has been a lively, not admirable, media personality but, in this film, he is now in his mid fifties, co-hosting a radio program in Norfolk. Which means that the film is also a satire on commercial television.

The radio station has fallen on hard times and is being taken over by an aggressively commercial company. Old DJs must go and the choice comes down to Alan Partridge or his friend, Irishman, Pat Farrell, played with vigour by Colm Meaney.

Partridge's style is immediately communicated in his attitude towards his fellow-host, always silencing him, and blithely carrying on as if the program were completely his own. He is supportive of his friend, Pat Farrell who does the late night shift, and goes in to the new director and board to plead his cause for staying on. When he notices that the alternative to be sacked is himself, he immediately urges them to sack Pat. Which they do.

And Partridge manages to ignore the forlorn Farrell.

But Farrell is not quite so forlorn, taking the board members as hostages during a party and not wanting to communicate with the police except through Alan. This gives Alan an extraordinary new platform, not only a hero in the public's eyes, but liaison with the police despite his initial fears and touches of cowardice, but going on air to co-host a program with Pat, siege and all, playing popular music, taking phone-in calls, frustrating the police.

This means that the audience is far more on Pat's side than Alan's, especially as he continues through the siege, hiding in a room for a liaison with one of the staff, ingratiating himself with the police who become frustrated with his lack of cooperation, double-dealing with Pat all the time, and drawing on the advice of his personal assistant and then turning on her when she is interviewed on television.

In fact, there are some funny and ironic lines, and Alan Partridge gets itself into precarious situations, especially trying to get in a window and having his trousers caught so he gets more

media exposure than he anticipated. Of course, he is found out, and that means Pat pursuing him with a rifle and a crisis on the pier.

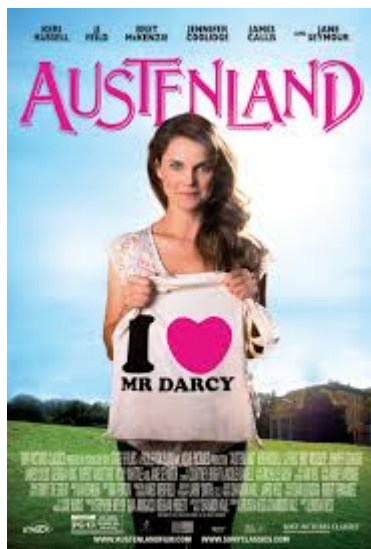
It may be that in the series, Alan Partridge became a lovable rogue even when people raised their eyebrows at his behaviour. But, an audience plunged into his story without preparation, sees him as more rogue than lovable, despite the comedy, and so it does not sympathise with him as might have been expected.

AUSTENLAND

UK, 2013, 97 minutes, Colour.

Keri Russell, JJ Feild, Jennifer Coolidge, Jane Seymour, Bret McKenzie, James Callis, Georgia King, Ricky Whittle.

Directed by Jerusha Hess.



2013 sees the bicentenary of the publication of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, one of the great classic novels. However, Jane Austen, with her acute observation of daily life in the Regency period, was not without a satirical eye and a wry comment. Would she have approved of *Austenland*? Perhaps a bit too broad in its comedy for her general taste, but she may have made allowances for the eccentricities of the Americans coming to England as well as the pretensions of some of her fellow-countrymen and countrywomen.

Austenland is not an exploration of Jane Austen's novels but a bit of a visit to her world, a British theme park devoted to Jane Austen and offering visitors the opportunity to dress up, speak, behave like 18th-century characters, perhaps find a little romance themselves. At least this something of a

hope of the main character, called Jane, rather than Elisabeth, (Keri Russell), a young American who is enthralled by Jane Austen's novels, a longing look across the Atlantic to 18th-century Britain, and in need of some romance in her life having experienced disappointment with some ex-boyfriends.

Off she goes, only to find that her investment entitles her to the copper tour rather than the platinum tour. Dressed in costume at the airport, she is transported to Austenland along with another American tourist who was given the name Miss Charming, whereas Jane becomes Miss Erstwhile and finds herself lodged in equivalent of the servant's quarters.

One of the joys of the film is that Miss Charming is played by Jennifer Coolidge, well-known in comedy circles for her role as Stifler's mother in the American Pie series but also for her satirical performances in the films of Christopher Guest, like Best in Show. She sends up American ignorance delightfully, making all kinds of odd and sometimes bizarre remarks, with some funny one-liners as well as setting her cap on one of the performers at Austenland.

And they are performers, led by the rather prim and demanding Mrs Wattlesbrook (Jane Seymour). Everything is in costume, manners are to be observed, there is crocheting, games of whist, a performance of a rather silly romantic play composed by Mrs Wattlesbrook as well as hunting and a proper ball. Jane is treated with some disdain by some of the guests and is partly disillusioned with her visit. However, she is attracted to one of the stable hands, thinking that he was not one of the group of actors who were there to portray the 18th century types. She is also wary of Mr Nobley (J.J. Feild), the nephew of the proprietor, an obvious Mr Darcy equivalent. There follows a slight plot of unrequited love which echoes Jane Austen's novels.

There are some laugh out loud sequences, amusement at much of the dialogue, the film offering some giggles and some smiles throughout. Of course, it is a slightly moralising film, Jane having to learn the difference between fantasy and reality, romance and real-life personal love and commitment. It does not spoil the ending to say that she learns lessons and finds romance. No matter what the external manner, even coldness, it is, ultimately, the Mr Darcys who will prevail.

BIG ASS SPIDER

US, 2013, 80 minutes, Colour.

Greg Grunberg, Lomabardo Boyar, Clare Kramer, Ray Wise, Lin Shaye, Patrick Bauchau.

Directed by Mike Mendez.



You may not want to be seen walking into Big Ass Spider. Apart from the use of the word, Ass, who wants to be seen going into one of those old-fashioned animal menace, spider-menace, films from the 1950s and 60s? Well, rest assured that if you are a fan of this kind of film, you won't be disappointed. Of its kind, it is very enjoyable and rather well done.

The film is something of a homage to those old movies like Tarantula... But, it is also something of a spoof, a pleasing parody of the conventions of this kind of film. And, it is blessed with dialogue which is a good blend of the witty and the deadpan, as well as conventional characters who are cardboard in their way, but do have a bit more life than the usual. Some have complained of the artificiality of the special effects – however, these are done quite well, and what do you expect in this kind of B-budget spoof?

The central character is a good-natured post-exterminator (Greg Grunberg) whom we see in action, helping literally clinging old lady to get rid of her mouse and paid, as always, with fruitcake! But he is bitten by a spider and goes to hospital where he encounters a dire situation, a morgue attendant bitten by a spider and physically deteriorating. Our hero volunteers to examine the situation and gets the help of the Hispanic security guard (Lombardo Boyar), who provides a lot of the verbal humour and deadpan reactions. They are a kind of odd couple, a contemporary B-budget movie Don Quixote and Sancho Panza.

Then the army arrives, ultra-serious. An experiment (as always!) has gone wrong. The scientist is there to help out but with his wordy explanations, he gets in the way and is ousted. There is also a very efficient woman officer who seems, at the beginning, an unlikely romantic contact – but, of course,...

The film is not particularly gory, but has enough jumps, shocks, grimace-making sequences that are not overly disturbing for any audience. The spider keeps on quadrupling itself and eventually finishes up, like King Kong in New York, straddling a skyscraper in Los Angeles.

The film has received distribution in horror festivals and Monsterfest screenings. As far as it goes, it is a pretty good example of this kind of enjoyably exploitative creature film.

BLANCANIEVES

Spain, 2013, 106 minutes, Black and white.

Maribel Verdu,

Directed by Pablo Burger.



Blancanieves, the Spanish for Snow White.

This film would be interesting enough if it were just a re-telling of the Snow White tale. But, it is the manner of its telling that is arresting. It is set from the 1890s until the late 1920s. And it has been filmed in the silent movie styles of the period, though there is, of course, a musical accompaniment and some sound effects added.

The question is, of course, whether 21st century audiences want to see a black and white silent film these days. It is certainly different from what we are used to seeing and that makes it novel, 'everything old is new again'! But, some critics, who know their silent films, bemoan *Blancanieves* as an anachronism, which lacks the impact now of the freshness and originality of those long-gone times.

Anachronism or not, this telling of the old story is original and that keeps the interest.

A famous bullfighter in Seville of the 1890s is the darling of the arena. He is a 19th century superstar, ready to face any bull. When a photographer's flash causes him to be gored, he is hospitalised and his pregnant, loving wife dies in childbirth. As might be expected, the father has a disdain for his daughter, Carmencita, and leaves her in the control of his new wife, the nurse who tended him and sees fortune in a marriage which she engineers. Maribel Verdu seems to relish the hiss-the-villain role of the wicked stepmother.

CAPTAIN PHILLIPS

US, 2013, 134 minutes, Colour.

Tom Hanks, Catherine Keener.

Directed by Paul Greengrass.



The Red Sea, the Horn of Africa and the Somali Coast probably seem a long way from most countries unless you live in the Middle East or in the countries of north east Africa. They are often in the headlines, especially with news about pirates.

We are fortunate in 2013 to have two good and solid films about Somali piracy: the Danish film, *A Hijacking* and the American film, *Captain Phillips*.

A Hijacking took a storyline of the pirates attacking, taking hold of the ship, keeping the crew hostage over some months while negotiations were conducted between the CEO of the Danish shipping company and a mediator. It was a long haul story. By contrast, *Captain Phillips* is based on a true story, an act of piracy gone wrong, the captain taken hostage followed by intervention by the American coastguard. Negotiations were minimal.

The trouble with piracy, especially in the popular mentality, is that it takes us back to *Treasure Island* and Long John Silver or Blackbeard or any of those swashbuckling stories with a kind of Saturday matinee mentality. We could watch the swordfights and the body count lost in another time and place.

21st century pirates are not so romantic in their stories. Rather, we see Somali fishermen, Somali thugs motivated by a mixture of poverty and greed, controlled by the demands of warlords, taking it for granted that they can take up their automatics, board a ship, take over and demands millions of dollars in ransom.

Captain Richard Phillips commanded the first American ship to be attacked by pirates in 200 years. A container ship, with food for deprived peoples of Africa in its cargo, it was boarded by a small group of men. The Captain had protocols in place for such contingencies. There are scenes of tension as the ship is searched and the crew hides. There is a lot of roughhouse with the captors as if they had been watching too many American films.

The Captain deceives the pirates to a certain extent but is taken by them in the ship's small vehicle and a pursuit begins. The cat and mouse with the pursuers and the pirates comes to a head. Captain Phillips tries to use his wits, not always successfully.

The cast portraying the pirates are convincing, young men with mixed motives, abilities, and attitudes towards the ransom, trying to make do with their botched tactics. But, it is Tom Hanks at the centre of the film, who gives it its focus. Over the decades we have come to expect that Tom Hanks can effortlessly play this kind of role. He has to undergo a lot of physical hardship in this film – and it is interesting that the film goes on after the resolution but spends some time on the Captain's physical and mental condition and Hanks is persuasive as a courageous person in shock.

Director Paul Greengrass has made three Bourne films as well as on the 9/11 situation with United 93. He adds here to his list of intelligently written action films.

CLOSED CIRCUIT

UK, 2013, 96 minutes, Colour.

Eric Bana, Rebecca Hall, Jim Broadbent, Ciaran Hinds, Kenneth Cranham, Julia Styles, Ann Marie Duff.

Directed by John Crowley.



Here is one for conspiracy theory fans, not a great film, but both interesting and entertaining – until a fellow reviewer revealed that he did not find it very interesting at all, that this kind of film he could take or leave. Enjoyment will also depend on one's perspective on politics, on government, on secrecy and cover-ups. If you are suspicious or cynical, then this one, involving terrorism and investigations and political double-dealing, should be on your list.

The film lives up to its title in the opening minutes, surveillance of the Borough Market in London, first one camera looking at shoppers, then split screen and gradually splitting until there is overall coverage. A truck, then an explosion, chaos, rubble and dead victims.

A suspect is arrested and the case is to be prosecuted. But audience attention is drawn to the defence, a successful lawyer picked out by the government. English law has a requisite that there be a special consultant for the defence who examines documentation, but is to have no professional contact with the defence lawyer. There may be some sense in this, but it is not made clear to the audience. And it is further complicated by the fact that the two have been in a sexual relationship, though now finished, and the dilemma as to whether they let this be known to the powers that be.

The powers that be take a great interest in the case and the lawyers, especially the Attorney General, an urbane, rather silver-tongued politician, played by Jim Broadbent. The lawyer is played by Eric Bana and the consultant played by Rebecca Hall.

We see visits to the accused and are puzzled by his seeming fatalistic attitude towards his trial. We see visits to his family and focus on his son who has a key to the whole proceedings. Things become messy when the lawyer discovers that his predecessor has died and that the circumstances, formerly not suspicious, become highly suspicious. An official, a Muslim (Riz Ahmed) recruited by the spy agencies after the bombings in London of July 2005, pays sinister visits to the consultant, not

without threats of violence. An American journalist (Julia Styles) who seems to have significant contacts gives information to the lawyer. And there is a government worker (Ann Marie Duff) who is not as she seems and becomes the determined face of MI5.

So, put this all together, add some court scenes, so killing attempts and a twist that explains how things can go wrong and information suppressed – the public does not need to know. Oh, and in case you did not guess, the affair is back on!

The stuff of airport novels, perhaps. But airport novels, especially about spying and terrorism, can be very entertaining.

THE COUNSELLOR

US, 2013, 117 minutes, Colour,

Michael Fassbender, Penelope Cruz, Javier Bardem, Brad Pitt, Cameron Diaz, Ruben Blades, Goran Visnick, Dean Norris, Edgar Ramirez, Natalie Dormer, Bruno Ganz, John Leguizamo.

Directed by Ridley Scott.



Divided opinions on this one. Those who are interested in the novels and films of Cormac Mc Carthy have shown interest in it. However, many have been very disappointed by the convoluted plot as well as the time taken out from action for elaborate monologues, the kind of dialogue that nobody uses in real life, plus, at times, a specialised vocabulary.

The film is quite unpleasant in its way, with characters who are in no way sympathetic, even though the screenplay seems to be asking for the audience to have an interest in and warm to the central character, The Councillor (never given a specific name), played by Michael Fassbender, who worked with Ridley Scott in *Prometheus*. He plays a lawyer who for greedy motivations, to give his wife a comfortable way of living, becomes involved in drug trafficking from Juarez, Mexico, and becomes mixed up with a number of wealthy criminals as well as many of those who usually described as low-lives.

The film is something of a fable, especially on the gospel theme of “what does it profit a man...?”. We soon realise that this is going to be true of the counsellor himself. However, another character does gain the whole world, but by the end of the film we are wondering whether this character ever had a soul to lose in the first place.

Michael Fassbender plays his role in a rather subdued way, although he has to express desperation by the end of the film and sadness at the fate of his wife. She is played by Penelope Cruz with a touch of glamour and a touch of shrewdness. There is a strange couple played by Javier Bardem and Cameron Diaz, he unashamed about his Greed, his ambitions for building a club, with something of a carefree attitude towards life and issues until he has to meet them face-to-face; she is all glamour, a blonde femme fatale, unscrupulous in her dealings, manipulative. There is also Brad Pitt, seemingly a middle-man in the drug trade. He manages to have quite a spectacular exit scene.

While a lot of the convolutions of the plot are just presented rather than explained, especially the counsellor’s involvement, if we pay attention, it all works out in the end. And, there are all those monologues about the meaning of life, the meaning of greed, the nature of the world we live in, the choices which we make which create a world different from the one we are living in... They are spoken by quite a number of the characters, especially the main characters, but also a barman, a lawyer, the head of the cartels.

Some have accused Cormac Mc Carthy of a kind of misogyny. However, he is very interested in sex and its different and sometimes extreme variations. Some of the sequences, especially the opening sequence, highlights the sexuality and continues to give a tone to the film, more than especially a scene involving Cameron Diaz in the car as well as her wanting to confess to a priest who is quite disturbed by her approach. At age 80, Mc Carthy, along with director, Ridley Scott who is 77, they could be called dirty old men.

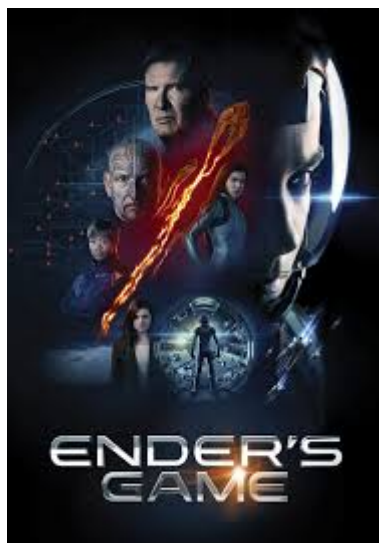
After this exploration of crime, sin and the wages of sin, Ridley Scott is directing a film version of the book of capital Exodus. (Though there is a lot of sin and wages of sin in that book as well!)

ENDER'S GAME

US, 2013, 106 minutes, Colour.

Asa Butterfield, Harrison Ford, Ben Kingsley, Viola Davis, Hailee Steinfeld, Abigail Spenser.

Directed by Gavin Hood.



All the publicity suggests 'Harry Potter meets Star Wars'. There is something in this insofar as the hero of this film, Ender, is something of a child intellectual wiz, if not a wizard, and his mentor is Harrison Ford, older and more grizzled than Han Solo. The film will have an appeal to younger audiences, especially those who enjoy playing computer games.

In fact, the film has been planned for several decades. Based on a novel by Card, it defied screen writers and producers for some time. But now, with its computer graphics and all kinds of special effects, it is a film of this time.

The film focuses on Ender, bullied in school, disappointing his father because of his seeming lack of success, but actually, one of the most intelligent and shrewd children at the training school. There is need for a training school. Fifty years earlier, the Formics (ant-like creatures) had invaded the earth and almost destroyed it. The heroic leader who destroyed the invading forces has become the legend for the earthly warriors, the film of his attack being watched by the students many times. The plan for earth is to be always ready for an invasion.

Ender is under perpetual surveillance by Graf, Harrison Ford, and Dr. Anderson, Viola Davis, who are on the lookout for the champion who will save the world. Ender looks like the most able candidate. He is taken into space for further training, clashing initially with his team, befriending hanks, Hailee Steinfeld, who supports and encourages him.

Asa Butterfield who was successful in *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* and Martin Scorsese's *Hugo*, is an effective Ender, tall and gangly, with a tendency to be abrupt, earnest in his training, yet strong in character to stand up to the authorities. He is finally ready to do a simulation of an attack on the world of the Formics. He is disturbed, however, by the appearance of his sister in some dreams, especially in the landscape of the Formic planet. Ender stands in front of a vast cosmic vista, almost conducting like a symphony, this war of the worlds.

This battle and Ender's control of it plays like a computer game, of Ender playing a computer game- but something more sinister is revealed at the end, Ender being a warrior not bent on destruction but on relationships and peace.

Harrison Ford plays his role with some grim intensity. Ben Kingsley, the national hero, has Maori paint on him and speaks with a New Zealand accent. Viola Davis, as always, offers a strong performance.

Card has written a number of Ender novels since the 1980s, so there is plenty of potential for sequels if this film is a box-office success. And that will depend on the younger audiences rather than older audiences.

ENOUGH SAID

US, 2013, 92 minutes, Colour.

Julia Louis-Dreyfus, James Gandolfini, Catherine Keener, Toni Collette, Ben Falcone.

Directed by Nicole Holofcener.



A film of great feeling – and feelings. This is a film for middle-aged and older audiences, characters they can be interested in, identify with in some ways, puzzle about their relationships, their handling of situations and crises. It may also be interesting for young adults who are sympathetic with their parents, perhaps puzzling over decisions they make, wondering what it is like to be 50 plus or minus.

The film has an inbuilt sympathy factor for those who know the actor James Gandolfini and his work, especially his central role in *The Sopranos*. He died unexpectedly of a heart attack at the age of 51 in 2013. This is his second last film.

The focus of the film is on Eva, a woman divorced for 10 years, with a daughter who is about to leave home for college. She works as a masseuse and we are introduced to her as she goes on her rounds, working with a cross-section of people, with their personal oddities, like bad breath, incessant chattering, a young man to whom it doesn't occur to help the masseuse up the staircase with her table. At a party, she meets a woman to whom she gives a card and who later rings her for an appointment. She also meets a middle-aged man, overweight, pleasantly genial, who rings her to make a date.

Eva, the masseuse, is played by Julia Louis-Dreyfus, best remembered by older audiences for her role in the long-running television series *Seinfeld* and the current series, *Veep*. She may not be the brightest star in the firmament, but she is a sympathetic woman, doing her work, helping people, reaching out to a daughter, to her daughter's best friend (which leads to some envy), making do with life as well as being disappointed in the failure of her marriage.

Albert, who begins to date her, is played with great sympathy by James Gandolfini, perhaps unexpected because of his best-known gangster role. However, he is a genial man, slightly

embittered by the rejection of him and the constant criticism by his ex-wife (Catherine Keener). The ex-wife is the woman to whom Eva gave her card at the party. Which means some complications for Eva, especially when she becomes aware of who Albert is.

There are some amusing situations, some humorous lines, but above all, a strong rapport between Julia Louis-Dreyfus and James Gandolfini. There are also some telling sequences as each couple has a daughter going to college.

In the background is Eva's great friend, Sarah (Toni Collette with her Australian accent!) And her husband, played by Ben Falcone, with whom she is constantly sparring. Is this what marriage is really like!

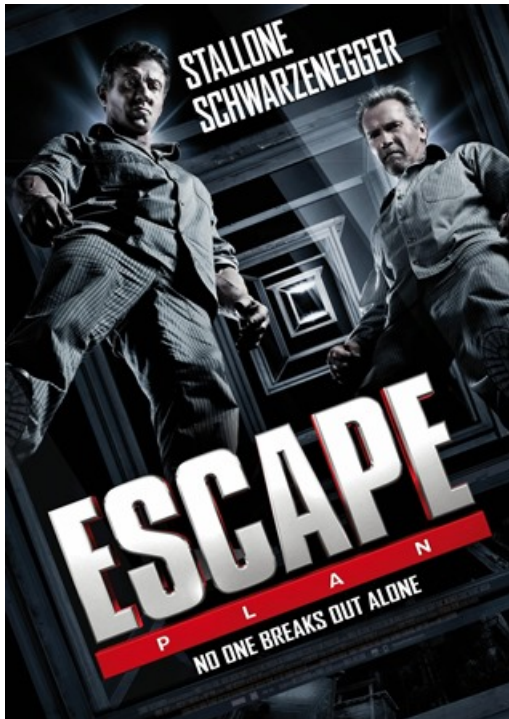
There is gentleness and warmth in the treatment by writer-director, Nicole Holofcener, who, over the years, has made a number of brief and gentle films about relationships and, especially, about women and their lives and issues (Friends with Money, Please Give).

ESCAPE PLAN

US, 2013, 115 minutes, Colour.

Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jim Caviezel, Sam Neill, Amy Ryan, Curtis Jackson, Vincent D'Onofrio.

Directed by Mikael Hafstrom.



All those going into see *Escape Plan* will have presumptions about Sylvester Stallone co-starring with Arnold Schwarzenegger: it's probably going to be just a variation on the brawn and brawn action series, *The Expendables*. It isn't. In fact, it is far more interesting, combining brains with brawn.

Sylvester Stallone plays a prisoner who organizes an escape from a Colorado prison. At least, that's what we think for the first few minutes. In fact, he is the top expert in the United States, and probably in the world, of discovering how prisoners could escape from the most maximum of prisons. He is invited to go into a beyond-maximum security facility and advise how escape-proof it is.

There used to be those films in the 1990s about isolated prisons with Ray Liotta or Christopher Lambert, films with titles like *No Escape* or *Fortress*. *Escape Plan* becomes a variation on that theme, except that the prison has used all kind of devices to become absolutely escape-proof - and there are several interesting revelations throughout the film. But Stallone, as Ray Breslin, is determined to escape and is helped in his quest by a fellow prisoner, played by Arnold Schwarzenegger in a more subdued manner than usual, though not with some bruising battles. With a beard, Schwarzenegger seems rather different, and even more benign – and speaks some German.

While the film does offer the opportunity for audiences to see Stallone and Schwarzenegger together, hostile at first, becoming friends, doing battle together in order to facilitate a daring escape plot and plan, there are quite a few other character actors in the cast which bring it to a higher dramatic level. And that is despite the presence of Vinnie Jones, always a brutal presence in

violent shows, and not blessed with the gift of acting. He gets the chance to throw his weight around, mostly a caricature of this type of prison guard.

On the other hand, there is Jim Caviezel, dapper and deadly sinister as the sadistic warden of the prison, not against brutality, but never soiling his hands in this; his approach is psychological threats and clash. Also on hand is Sam Neill as the prison doctor. And, in charge of the security company, there is Vincent D'Onofrio as well as Curtis 50 Cent Jackson and Amy Ryan.

Our heroes do get that chance to show their capacity for brawn and action, but with the ingenuity of the prison security schemes and the sometimes ingenious plans for escape, they have to use their brains as well. Which makes the screenplay much more interesting, -with a couple of twists at the end.

It seems as though the action fans have been pleased with the pairing of the two super-heroes. Those who come across Escape Plan looking for a more thinking thriller than might be expected, will also be pleased with watching the plans go into action.

THE FIFTH ESTATE

UK/US, 2013, 128 minutes, Colour.

Benedict Cumberbatch, Daniel Brühl, Morris Bleibtreu, Carice van Houten, Stanley Tucci, Laura Linney, David Thewlis, Dan Stevens, Peter Capaldi, Anthony Mackie.

Directed by Bill Condon.



A film about Julian Assange. It is presumed that everybody knows who he is and what he has done.

Some key quotes from the film: “a mad prophet who needs boundaries”, “a manipulative asshole”, “a media empire that is accountable to no one”, and Assange himself says at one stage “I dangle at the edge of autism”. They are useful in helping the audience to assess Assange as a person, his personal relationships, his relationship with those who worked with him, his technical skills, the work of WikiLeaks, and the changes in attitude from 2007 to 2009. There is also a mention of “ego”.

Already in 2012-2013, there were two films made about Assange. One was a television film, *Underground*, made in Australia by Robert Connolly, about Assange and his family life, and the initial hacking into official American sites. It ended when he was about 20. Then there was the extensive documentary by Alex Gibney, *We Steal Secrets: The Story of WikiLeaks*. *The Fifth Estate* runs parallel to the Gibney documentary in its presentation of Assange.

The film opens in 2009 with the release of extensive documents which embarrassed many governments around the world, especially the United States, but also officials in such countries as Kenya, with stories of corruption and killings. The film then moves back to 2007, Assange and the beginnings of WikiLeaks, his attempts to make his work public, his finding Daniel Schmitt (in fact, Daniel Berg) who shared his idealism, worked constantly with him at great personal cost and financial cost in the early years of WikiLeaks.

Benedict Cumberbatch bears a significant resemblance to Assange and is made up accordingly, especially his white hair, which he makes something of in passing but which emerges as something the children in the sect to which he belonged as a child had to do. He is imperious in his manner, brooking no position opposition. He severely lacks interpersonal skills, riding roughshod over people in word and manner. But he does persuade people to share his vision, to become volunteers, to staff the sites, to protect them, and so not reveal sources for WikiLeaks and the whistleblowing.

Daniel Bruehl is very good as Schmitt, serving as Assange’s anchor and checking fact and fiction. Moritz Bleibtreu is Marcus, friend of Schmitt, a hacking expert who is able to protect WikiLeaks. However, it is well known that Assange fell out with Schmitt, dismissing him, accusing him of disloyalty. Then, it was his Schmitt’s decision, along with his hacking friend, to close down WikiLeaks.

Audiences will be on side with Assange in the early years, especially as he reveals the conspiracies and atrocities in Kenya, and, especially, as he reveals the footage of helicopter pilots in Iraq gunning down innocent civilians as well as a Reuters correspondent. This brings him to the notice of the

American State Department and the CIA, officials in the film played by Stanley Tucci, Laura Linney, Anthony Mackie.

With the extraordinary documents coming through, thousands of them, about American activity in Afghanistan, supplied by Bradley Manning who is briefly seen in newspaper photographs in the film, the newspapers become involved, especially Germany's Der Spiegel, the United States New York Times, the British Guardian.

This brings to a head the conflict with some of Assange's friends and himself, his principle of publishing everything, while others urged a redaction of the documents, removing personal names for the safety of informers. There is a scene to illustrate this with a contact from Libya whose name is published and who has to escape to Egypt and to the US with his family.

The film raises issues of ethics in publication, the need for truth, for honest expression, but with more nuances than Assange wants to think about. This brings him into conflict, not only with governments, but with some of the editors of the newspapers. He is warned that there will be publicity against him, all kinds of rumours circulated, and audiences are familiar with the accusations of sexual misconduct in Sweden.

The film ends with some discussion by the British about Assange, his ambitions, and the availability of all news instantly online, the new fifth estate. This is a film which will divide audiences, upset those who favour Assange (and this was true of Assange himself who contacted Benedict Cumberbatch urging him not to do the film) and those who might have favoured him initially but who, like his associates, found him to autocratic, an extraordinary controller of every aspect of WikiLeaks, and, one is tempted to use the word, a narcissist.

But, in his work is in the public domain, he is a celebrity-figure of his own making, a crusader who did a lot of good, and ambitious man who, as the film ends, and at the time of the film's release, is still resident in the Ecuadorian embassy in London. While the story will be continued, it has been stalled a long time inside that embassy.

FRUITVALE STATION

US, 87 minutes, 2013, 87 minutes, Colour.

Michael B.Jordan, Melonie Diaz, Octavia Spencer, Kevin Durand, Chad Michael Murray.

Directed Ryan Googler.



This film is based on actual events. They took place in the early hours of New Year's Day, 2009, the location, Fruitvale Station, on San Francisco/Oakland's Bay Area Rail Transit, BART. The men involved were African-American, the victims. The perpetrators, the Fruitvale Station BART Police. The events were captured by eye-witnesses on their phones, and the footage later used in evidence in the case against the police.

However, the film opens in darkness, just with voices talking about their hopes for the future. A sad irony as they were not to be fulfilled.

The main protagonist in these events was Oscar Julius Grant III, a young man of 22. The film opens on New Year's Eve, 2008, a time when Oscar had decided that he needed to get his life in order. We see him at home, reconciling with his partner, Sophina, sorry for his infidelities. We see him with his four year old daughter, Tatiana, at breakfast, dropping her at school, picking up later in the day. Sophina goes to her work.

There are a number of episodes we see as the day goes by. Oscar phones his mother whose birthday it is and promises to get some food for a dinner. His sister phones him about the birthday, but also wanting to get money from him to pay her rent – but the calendar shows that Oscar's rent is also due. He goes to the market where he used to work, talking to his brother, encountering a young white woman who is puzzled about the fish she should buy to fry. There is an irony when she is also on the train at Fruitvale and photographs the events. Oscar phones his grandmother and puts her on the line to the woman to give hints for the recipe. But Oscar also wants to get his job back, lost because of his arriving late at work, but the manager cannot give him his job because it would mean sacking someone more reliable.

Oscar phones a drug dealer and arranges to meet him by the Bay. This gives him time to reflect, to remember a year earlier, also his mother's birthday, when she visited him in prison. While they talk, a fellow-prisoner taunts him and Oscar becomes very aggressive, his mother leaving. Clearly, he wants this year to be better than last. He breaks off contact with the dealer and gets rid of the marijuana he is carrying.

Despite the financial difficulties, things should have improved, especially with the dinner, and as he and Sophina and some of the family and friends go in to San Francisco for the celebrations. It is on the way home in the train that a scuffle breaks out when somebody recognises Oscar and begins a fight. When the train arrives at Fruitvale Station, the police are ready, summoning four young men, not involved with the fighting, to come off the train where they

verbal them and treat them roughly. They also demand that Oscar come out of the train and they treat him in the same way, ready with guns and lasers, there is a shot and Oscar is wounded.

Michael B. Jordan is persuasive in his portrayal of Oscar. A man of limited background, with prison records, we still see an inherent goodness in him. Melonie Diaz is Sophina, his Hispanic partner. There is great strength in the performance of Academy Award-winner (The Help) Octavia Spencer as Oscar's quite indomitable mother, powerful, especially in the hospital sequences where she gathers the family and urges them to prayer, as well as her last look at her son.

The credit sequences give information about what happened to the police – and there is a visual epilogue as people gather in memory at Fruitvale Station in January 2013.

A sad film, reminding audiences of racism in the United States and incidents like that of the confrontation with Rodney King in Los Angeles in the early 1990s. Fruitvale Station won the audience award at the 2013 Sundance Film Festival. It clearly touches the American conscience and an American nerve.

THE HUNGER GAMES: CATCHING FIRE

US, 2013, 145 minutes, Colour.

Jennifer Lawrence, Josh Hutcherson, Donald Sutherland, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Woody Harrelson, Elizabeth Banks, Stanley Tucci, Liam Hemsworth, Jena Malone, Jeffrey Wright, Amanda Plummer.

Directed by Francis Lawrence.



It is important to advise audiences intending to see *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* that it won't have much impact if they have not seen the initial film. This sequel, the second in the series, takes for granted the characters and actions from the first film.

Audiences familiar with Suzanne Collins' books were pleased with the film version of *The Hunger Games*. And many audiences, and critics, were surprised to find how well done the film was and how interesting and entertaining. They won't be disappointed with *Catching Fire*.

Although this film runs for almost 2 ½ hours, the filmmakers have relied on audience memory. For instance, there was huge fanfare to introduce the contestants, the tributes from the 12 districts, who would fight in the hunger games, television interviews, lavish costumes, dramatic introductions with spectacle. There is something of this in *Catching Fire*, but we remember the first film and supply the atmosphere which means that, for the budget, there is only a small presentation of the contestants this time. It is the same with showing the television audience with its costumes, make up, and intense reaction to the contestants.

The familiar characters are back, the opening with Katniss and Gale Hawthorne back in district 12, with the prospect of a victory tour around the districts for the victors of the games. She and Peeta are unwilling. But, there is unease in the districts, the oppressed populations signalling possibilities of revolution. The President, Donald Sutherland, is also scheming to use Katniss to promote popularity for himself and for the capital. He wants her to foster her public relationship with Peeta, the populace identifying with her in her (alleged and publicised) romance.

The previous organiser of the games has been executed because of his failure to produce an outcome. The new organiser is played by Philip Seymour Hoffman. He collaborates with the President in new games, especially designed for the 75th anniversary of the uprising, with the smart idea that there be no new tributes to fight but rather the previous victors from the various districts participate again.

Which means that for the second part of the film, we have a repeat of Hunger Games, but in quite a different format, dangers, deaths, interesting but a greater spirit of collaboration between some of the contestants. There are some interesting special effects for the dangers and the threats during the games.

Jennifer Lawrence, who, between the two films, won an Academy Award for her performance in *The Silver Linings Playbook*, is still a strong presence as Katniss. Challenged in her ability for personal relationships, she nevertheless is a sympathetic warrior. Josh Hutcherson is back as Peter, sharing the victory to with Caithness, and showing some smartness in his dealings with the manoeuvres of the President. Liam Hemsworth has a few more appearances this time as the man from the district who loves Katniss. It is a great pleasure to see Woody Harrelson back as the former victor and coach, Haymitch and Elizabeth Banks as the fey and fashion-conscious, Effie Trinket, still managing the victors. And Stanley Tucci once again relishes his role as the hyper-enthusiastic manipulative television compere.

As with the second films in most trilogies, this is a bridging story, anticipating the revolution that must come in the third film, *Mockingjay*.

Hunger Games Was Very Successful in Novel Form. The Hunger Games was very successful in novel form. It is very successful in film form. Audiences will be looking forward to the completion of the trilogy.

INSIDIOUS CHAPTER 2

US, 2013, 104 minutes, Colour.

Patrick Wilson, Rose Byrne, Ty Simpkins, Lynne Shay, Leigh Whanell, Angus Sampson, Barbara Hershey.

Directed by James Wan.



Insidious was very popular with audiences on its first release, exceeding box-office expectations. After all, there have been many haunted house thrillers and many ghost horror stories. Here was another one. But it had a good cast, was well written, created its eerie atmosphere, invented a few alternatives to going into the land of forgiveness and the afterlife, called The Further.

What can filmmakers do except to make a sequel! They have capitalised on what was successful in the first film and offered some variations and similar repetitions. And this film has been successful as well.

Insidious: Chapter 2 was written by Australian Leigh Whannel who wrote the first film (and wrote the first in the Saw series) as well as the first Insidious. The film was directed by James Wan who directed Saw and Insidious – and had great success, critical and box-office, in 2013 with his exorcism film, The Conjuring. And the star also comes from Australia, Rose Byrne.

However, this is a very American film, a film about a family, with grandmother (Barbara Hershey), parents (Patrick Wilson and Rose Byrne) and three children, capitalising on the bonds between them all. It is also haunted house story, the audience being taken back at the opening to 1986 and some experts trying to help a mother who has a haunted child. This was the house of the grandmother and the proceedings had an influence on the father of the family who, in the initial film, was taken into The Further. This time we wonder whether he actually returned or whether he was possessed by a sinister Bride in Black from the past. This sets up the new hauntings, bizarre behaviour by the father, and the self-sacrifice of the son, who previously saved his father, to do it again.

Entertaining in its way, not one of the classics, but a respectable contribution to the genre.

JACKASS PRESENTS: BAD GRANDPA

US, 2013, 92 minutes, Colour.

Johnny Knoxville, Jackson Nicoll.

Directed by Jeffrey Tremaine.



When a movie announces Jackass Presents, it is either a hearty welcome or a dreaded beware!

With the television series and with three movies, the last one in 3-D, diehard Jackass fans know what to expect. The unwary stumbling upon Jackass movies may well be very wary the next time.

What the Jackass movies present is a collection of what might at best be called “pranks” or, at worst, “idiotic death-wish stunts”.

However, what we have here, is closer to pranks than the accustomed stunts, though there are a few of these with the warning at the end, as always, that they have been contrived for the film and should not be tried at home.

Also this time is a semblance of a plot, a young woman is about to go to jail and leaves her eight-year-old son with her father, with the instructions to take him across the country and give him to his father. Actually, underlying all the pranks and the stupidities, there is a strong vein of sentiment – although grandpa is certainly hard to warm to and his grandson seems far too knowing and precocious, entering into all the pranks wholeheartedly.

Grandpa is played by Johnny Knoxville who is the foundation for the Jackass movies. Billy is played by Jackson Nicoll whom Knoxville met when they were acting together in the rather unfunny, Fun Size (where Nicoll played a rather creepy character).

As the couple across the country, they encounter all kinds of people, and test their reactions to some outrageous comments and behaviour. Then we realise that what the film is is really a Candid Camera kind of movie, setting up people in situations so that they react for the hidden camera. To be fair to the film and the victims, there are closing credits sequences where the audience sees how the cameras are set up and how people react – and all those who unwittingly participated are all listed as appearing as themselves.

Most of the jackass movies are “no holds barred”. But this film does not go to those extremes. Yet there are some very tacky and crass situations, some gross-out bodily function sequences and a lengthy one with (how can one put it?), genital prosthetics.

There is a huge audience for this kind of jokey film, a blokey kind of audience, a very extroverted kind of audience who relish this kind of humorous embarrassment. And it made \$90 million at the American box office in its first two weeks!

KILL YOUR DARLINGS

US, 2013, 104 minutes, Colour.

Daniel Radcliffe, Dane de Haan, Ben Foster, Michael C. Hall, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Kyra Sedgwick, David Rasche, John Callum.

Directed by John Krokidas.



In recent years there has been a greater interest, at least in films, with the members of the so-called Beat Generation: Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs. While there had been a film about Kerouac in 1980 with Nick Nolte and Sissy Spacek and there was a 90s version of William Burroughs' *The Naked Lunch*, within a year we have had Kerouac again in *On the Road*, Ginsberg in *Howl* and the three named above now in *Kill Your Darlings*.

Younger audiences may not be aware of them and their influence in the 1950s and 1960s and the recent films may be something of a revelation, a discovery of a group who wanted to challenge conventional values. Some older audiences might resonate and see them as a precursor of the hippy generation, even though they lived beyond that period. Older audiences might see them as nuisances, full of themselves and their concerns, enjoying ideas and moments of anarchy and needing to grow up which, sometimes, they did.

The focus of *Kill Your Darlings* is the killing of a gay man, David Kammerer, by his young protégé, Lucian Carr in 1944. The prologue of the film shows something of the killing, Carr in gaol and his friendship and relationship with the young Allen Ginsberg. The film then goes back to offer a portrait of Ginsberg, his studies at Columbia, which ended in expulsion, his being introduced to the Carr, Burroughs' word, his self-discoveries, including unconventionality, his poetic talent and his sexual orientation.

The film is aimed more at an arthouse audience than audiences in the multiplexes. The first twenty minutes or so with its emphasis on poetry and quotation from poets, the formulation of a New Vision (and anti-censorship stances), may be somewhat alienating. However, the screenplay is literate and has interesting lines, like that of the conservative professor of literature who announces 'no creation without imitation'.

The story and the characters get tangled in protest stunts at Columbia, family difficulties, emotional dependence, and issues of World War II and the war in the Pacific. Then we are back at the killing of David Kammerer and the consequences.

The casting is certainly of interest. Daniel Radcliffe, looking considerably older, is Ginsberg. However, it is Dane de Haan as Lucian Carr who gives a more striking performance, sometimes a more dominant performance. Dexter's Michael C. Hall is Kammerer, devoted, sometimes desperate, sometimes pathetic. The usually wildly sinister Ben Foster is surprisingly calm in an effective portrayal of the young William Burroughs. Jack Huston is an enigma (even to himself, sportsman, married, yet caught up with this Beat group leading to his subsequent career). Times move on and Jennifer Jason Leigh and Kyra Sedgwick portray Mrs Ginsberg and Mrs Carr.

The film brings to life these characters, their behaviour and their times.

MACHETE KILLS

US, 2013, 107 minutes, Colour.

Danny Trejo, Demian Bichir, Mel Gibson, Amber Heard, Michelle Rodriguez, Antonio Banderas, Cuba Gooding Jr, Lady Gaga, Walter Goggins, Alexa Vega, Vanessa Hudgens, Sofia Vergara, Charlie Sheen (billed as introducing Carlos Estevez).

Directed by Robert Rodriguez.



There is one thing you can say about the Machete series. It does not take itself too seriously. But it takes being deadpan and ironical with the humour quite seriously – and in that way it works successfully. Not that everybody would want to see the Machete films! They demand a fairly macho approach to movies from both men and women in the audience!

Writer-director (and director of photography, editor and co-composer) Robert Rodriguez, Texas-based, has always had an interest in genre films, loving action, but always ready to delve into the shadow side of human nature and present (exploit) human capacity for evil in fairly graphic ways, a Grindhouse imagination (From Dusk to Dawn, Sin City,). His career has given him freedom to do as he wishes – and that is obvious from his indulgences in Machete and Machete Kills.

The film starts with a trailer of Machete Kills Again – in Space. It looks like a joke, but just see how this plot progresses and how it ends. The trailer is not so implausible (at least in the Machete context).

Then Machete goes into action – in Mexico. This time he has been requested to investigate drug dealings and other crimes. He is portrayed again by Danny Trejo whose gnarled looks (very) make him look mean and meaner, enough to give anyone a fright. Though he can show his more human side. But, it is Machete in action, even without his machete, that look more like computer games violence than anything real.

There is someone who is after him, but takes different human forms, The Chameleon. Some of the forms include Antonio Banderas, Cuba Gooding Jr and Lady Gaga. And there is a succession of young actresses and Sofia Vergara as a villain.

There is a joke in introducing trouble-prone Charlie Sheen, with his real name of Carlos Estevez, putting him in the role of the president of the United States – jogging audience memories of his father, Martin Sheen, portraying President Bartlett in the television series, *The West Wing*.

As Machete seeks the drug lord, the film seems a bit James Bondish, larger-than-life villain and tough action. Played by Demian Bichir, he is at one minute a ruthless gangster, the next a respectable agent trying to do his work in dangerous circumstances. But, that is only the half of it. The US government wants Machete to track down an arms-dealer. This is even more James Bondish with a Blofeld-like villain, Voz, played by Mel Gibson.

This gets Machete into all kinds of dangers and trying to stop Voz launching into space with a group of wealthy humans who have paid big money to be re-located in space – as well as our hero, like Bond, trying to defuse a nuclear weapon within seconds. Off they go – and we realise the trailer is all too relevant to the adventures of Machete.

It has its violence and gory moments. It has its gross moments. But, with its solemn and, with respect, ugly antihero, a stock of one-liners and a mentality that likes to spoof the conventions it is using, *Machete Kills* can be listed as one of those guilty pleasures that you wouldn't like your friends to know about!!

MAGIC, MAGIC

Chile, 2012, 80 minutes, Colour.

Juno Temple, Augustin Silva, Emily Browning, Michael Cera.

Directed by Sebastien Silva.



Magic, Magic is a film by Chilean director Sebastien Silva who directed the atmospheric 2009 film, The Maid. Atmosphere is an important word for this director, who concentrates very much on atmosphere surrounding his characters.

In this case, the characters are generally a group of young adults, with some older local Chileans added in. The central character is Alicia, played by the British Juno Temple, a young woman who has not travelled outside the United States but has come with her cousin, Sarah (Emily Browning) and her Chilean friends. They are on holidays in the countryside, travelling to an island off the Chilean coast.

All seems normal enough except that Alicia is a nervous traveller, compounded by the fact that Sarah is called back to the United States to sit for an exam. This disconcerts Alicia but she is persuaded not to return home and to travel with the group to the island.

Augustin (Augustin Silva) is Sarah's boyfriend and is considerate towards Alicia. His older sister (Catalina Sandino Moreno) is rather aloof and unwelcoming. The other character is a friend of Augustin, an American from a diplomatic or family, Brink (Michael Cera). He is a rather obnoxious character, pranks and jokes, with a sadistic touch.

However, the point of the film is Alicia's mental deterioration on the island. Away from home and what she is used to, she feels alienated from the group, welcoming Sarah back from the United States, but unable to sleep, on tenterhooks, wandering away from the group. One major episode, long in this short-running film, is the challenge to Alicia to jump from a cliff, continually urged by the others, focusing on her delay and fear. Later, when things come to a head, the night, the darkness, strange experiences with animals, local traditional rituals, Alicia goes to the cliff again to jump.

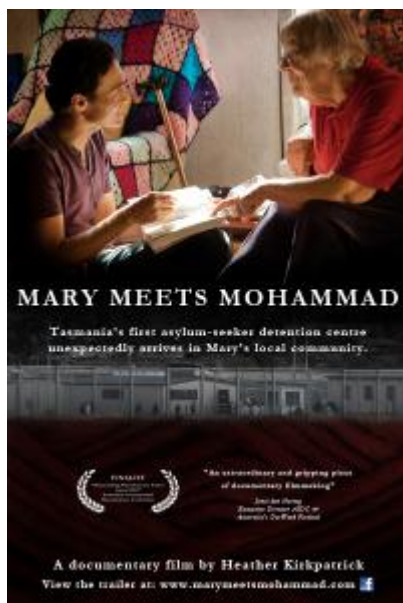
The film stops rather than bringing the drama to a conclusion. It is over to the audience to speculate on Alicia's future, what will happen to her in the short term with the others on the island, what will happen to her long-term.

Since the characters are not particularly engaging, some audiences will find it difficult to identify with them or warm to them. Rather, it is a film of atmosphere and observing Alicia and her mental collapse.

MARY MEETS MOHAMMAD

Australia, 2013, 83 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Heather Kirkpatrick.



There will probably be no surprise to find that when Mary meets Mohammad, there will be a meeting of minds and hearts. However, the surprise was all Mary's.

With so many headlines highlighting refugees and asylum seekers, many Australians have been stuck with the names as labels, rather than as seeing the refugees as persons. This documentary is a contribution to understanding and appreciation by doing that most ordinary of things, showing people meeting one another, getting to know one another as persons, and breaking through prejudices.

The film begins with the Australian Federal government's decision to build a detention centre outside Hobart, at Pontville. It shows the various stages of building, as well as local citizens meeting, objecting to the very idea of a detention centre, claims made about the nature of the refugees, especially as potential terrorists because they are Muslim. The nearest neighbours, sheep farmers, are asked about government consultation which was proclaimed as having happened. They are definitely stating that they were not consulted at all. And the farmer has some harsh things to say, not wanting these people bringing their problems to Australia.

[Somebody remarks that Australian and American forces have not been able to defeat the Taliban, what are the Hazaras expected to do!]

Factual information is given about Australian policy, information about detention, and information about SERCO who manage the centre.

But then the film becomes quite domestic, showing people that most audiences can identify with (especially older people): the Bridgewater knitting Society. The women decide that they will knit beanies for the anticipated refugees. They become enthusiastic, and liaise with the local Anglican priest and Bishop. There are also two young women, volunteers for visiting refugee centres, who are trying to cut through red tape in order to visit some of the internees. They are required to have the exact names of the people they want to visit and are turned back when there are inaccuracies in the names. The Anglican priest promises to use her influence in getting accurate names.

The volunteers are enthusiastic women in their meeting with the knitters and their talk to camera, communicating their feelings about their work, about the detainees, and preparing visits for the Bridgewater Society.

Amongst the knitters is 71-year-old Mary, a widow, living alone, and quite definite in her not wanting Afghan refugees around the place, let alone in her home. However, she is curious about the stories she has heard about detainees and their luxurious lifestyle – the farmer's wife quoting three course meals, spas... Well, Mary goes, finds that the men are different from what she was expecting. She continues to visit and becomes very friendly with a Hazara Afghan refugee, Mohammad. Because there was no filming for the media inside Pontsville, some of Mohammad's conversation is presented as text on screen.

Eventually, Mohammad receives a temporary visa and is released into the community. He is invited to a holiday house owned by Joy, the leader of the knitters. Mary happily goes as well. Again, we see ordinary scenes of Mohammad, in the parks and gardens, talking with the two women, reminiscing

about his home in Pakistan, where he lived illegally and could not go to school, his wife still there, though his ringing her for cooking hints for the ladies, his period of mental disturbance. He has a prayer mat and prays, with Mary saying that he seems to be more open to other religions than she is. There are meals, going fishing, conversations between friends, with Mohammad seeing Mary as his Australian grandmother.

It might seem that this is what we should expect from a film like this – but, considering some of the statements of the Tasmanians wary of the detention centre as well as apprehensive about the men themselves, the scenes may well come as a surprise to some Australians, as they would have to Mary before she met Mohammad.

There is a warmth about the film as well as strong campaigning on behalf of the detainees, especially the point of the 90 day limit on detention. And a note to say that the visa for Mohammad's wife to come could take several years – and one wonders why.

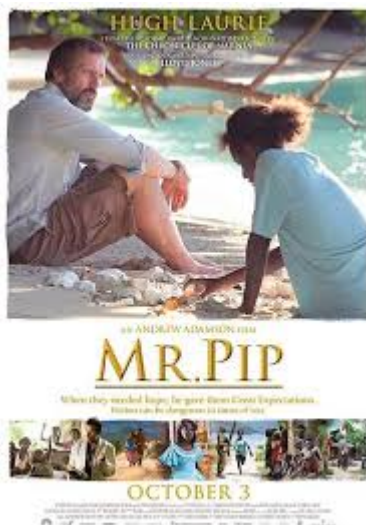
This is a film with a definite point of view, but one worth watching and sharing.

MR PIP

New Zealand, 2012, 116 minutes, Colour.

Hugh Laurie, Elka Darville.

Directed by Andrew Adamson.



Mr Pip is a New Zealand production, based on a story by Lloyd Jones, a journalist reflecting on the experiences of Bougainville in 1989, the closure of the copper mine, the financial crisis and the international companies, the rise of rebels and the intervention of the Papua New Guinea military. It has been adapted for the screen by the director, Andrew Adamson, director of the first two Shrek films and the first two Chronicles of Narnia films.

The photography for the film, in Bougainville itself, is very beautiful and offers the audience the flavour of the South Pacific. The audience is immersed in the life of the village, the hardships of the blockade, the closure of the schools. Later in the film the action will move to Mt Isa in Queensland as well as to London.

In fact, the film opens in London where the central character, the 14-year-old girl grown to womanhood, Matilda (ZX) is visiting the Dickens Museum. Audiences will be wondering what the girl is doing in London. The film then moves to flashback and tells the story of the girl and her encounter with an Englishman, Mr Watts (Hugh Laurie making a strong impression).

The core of the film is Mr Watts deciding to start some classes for the children on the island. He is not a teacher but has a profound love of Dickens, especially for Great Expectations. This seems an unlikely book for children on Bougainville. However, he begins to read and the children respond, especially with their imaginations and the development of comprehension. Matilda responds very well to the novel, even to imagining herself in the situations of the novel, with Pip and Magwich in the cemetery, with Pip going to see Miss Havesham, with the grown-up Pip in London... The film is strong in showing the power of the storytelling, the power of the imagination, the possibilities for education with such storytelling. (And a reminder of how the Taliban takes stances against this kind of schooling for girls.)

There is a difficulty with Matilda's mother, the leader of the church on the island, a Protestant-evangelical church, where she also conducts the choir, carries the Bible, and thinks that there is something too secular about reading Dickens instead of the Bible. When the military arrive, she has taken the book and hidden it in a large mat. There are dire consequences because of this.

While the sequences of Mr Watts working with the children are very congenial, the mood changes considerably with the arrival of the military, the toughness of the commander, the laissez-faire attitudes of his soldiers and their disregard of the locals. The commander makes the mistake of thinking that Mr Pip is a real person and that the village people are hiding him. When he returns second time, his avowed intention is to uncover Mr Pip with grim

threats to the villagers. It is at this moment that there is a change of atmosphere with the shock of military brutality, murder and rape (and a reminder that this kind of brutality continues all over the world, in such places as the Congo and Sudan, and in the civil war in Syria).

The experiences have harsh consequences for Matilda. However, she is fortunate in being to go to Australia, to Mount Isa and stay with her father. And, in some act unexpected circumstances, she goes to London for the visit that we saw at the opening of the film. There she meets Mr Watts's wife (Kerry Fox) and learns a lot about her teacher and why he was in Bougainville, about his Bougainvillean wife, her depression, the pathos of the reasons for it and Mr Watts' self-sacrifice.

In many ways, the film takes on too many issues, so that during the film the audience have to move dramatically from one to another, sometimes surprisingly, but, by the end, within the two hour running time, the audience does have the opportunity to consider all these issues, whether political and economic, whether educational, whether economic or dealing with refugees and working migrants.

MYSTERY ROAD

Australia, 2013, 116 minutes, Colour.

Aaron Peterson, Hugo Weaving, Jack Thompson, Ryan Kwanten, David Field, Bruce Spence, Roy Billing, Tasma Walton, Tony Barry, Zoe Carides, Damian Walshe-Howling, Robert Mammone.

Directed by Ivan Sen.



One of the best Australian films of 2013. It works in the genre of police investigation, murders, mystery in the context of an outback Australian town.

It is the work of writer-director, Ivan Sen, who made impact with such films as *Beneath Clouds* and *Toomelah*. It is set in an outback town of north-western New South Wales and draws on Sen's experience of this environment. He also comes from an aboriginal background, using this in his previous films, and making it quite central to *Mystery Road*.

Sen not only writes his screenplay and directs his film but is director of photography, editor and composer of the musical score. With *Mystery Road*, he has brought all these talents together most successfully.

Aaron Pedersen proves himself to be an imposing screen presence as Jay, the local man who made a mess of his marriage with his drinking, and his wife drinking, and abandoning them to go to Sydney where he trained to be a detective. He has now returned and is involved in the investigation of a dead aboriginal girl. He himself is aboriginal.

Jay is rather taciturn, has something to prove, wants to re-unite with his daughter but finds her unwilling and his wife still bitter and drinking. The local police chief relies on

him but does not involve himself personally in the case. Which leaves the onus on Jay to uncover clues, to interview people, to do some surveillance. He uses his powers of observation and his wits as well as a spirit of independence to uncover what is happening in the town, prostitution for the drivers of the road trains, the girls becoming addicts as well as being suppliers of drugs.

While the plot has its ugly dimensions, the photography of the town and its surroundings, a blend of contemplative longshots as well as probing close-ups, contribute to the atmosphere. And, the story is interspersed with a number of aerial shots, looking down on the town itself, the houses, the streets and the vehicles moving along them.

Pedersen leads a strong cast, peopled with a number of Australian character actors. Hugo Weaving is an enigmatic fellow officer. An almost unrecognisable Jack Thompson is an old codger who gives information to the police. Roy Billings is the owner of a gun shop. Bruce Spence is the coroner. David Field is the local landowner with Ryan Kwanten as his son. Robert Mammone is the police partner. Tasma Walton is Mary, Jay's wife.

This means that the film is interesting and entertaining in its genre, but also offers insight into the Australian character. And all this in the unusual beauty as well as some squalid human conditions. The film was shot in Winton, Queensland.

PATRICK

Australia, 2013, 90 minutes, Colour.

Charles Dance, Rachel Griffiths, Sharni Vinson, Damon Gameau, Jackson Gallagher.

Directed by Mark Hartley.



This reviewer has not seen the original film of 1978, its first release. This review will not be a comparison with the original film. After the review, a look back to the 1978 review of Patrick.

One of the advantages of a re-make is that the director and writer can take advantage of developments in camera equipment, styles of photography, in editing and pace, in special effects. This is certainly the case for this film. The photography is mainly dark and gloomy, creating the atmosphere of the old convent which has become a centre for research on comatose people and the possibilities of bringing them back to consciousness. The environment is not much cheerier, coast road, clouds, rain, fog. And within the convent, still with its many statues of the Sacred Heart, Mary, St Joseph, crucifixes, it is always very dark and eerie.

This is important because the head of the Institute, Dr Roget (Charles Dance) is urbane in a British kind of way, accent and all, and seems dedicated to his work. but, he is, of course, a mad scientist. His assistant in the Institute is his daughter Julia (Rachel Griffiths), who for most of the film is being the stereotypical hard matron, starchilly repressed. But, she has some more active moments at the end of the film.

However, the audience sees everything through the eyes of an eager young nurse, Kathy, played by Sharni Vinson, who becomes involved with the central patient, Patrick (Jackson Gallagher), a young man lying immobile, eyes open, but seemingly without consciousness. It soon appears that he does have consciousness with telekinetic powers. They are not the just the traditional powers, but an ability to use his power links to a computer to communicate in words appearing on the screen – not something possible in 1978.

Cathy is advised to socialise by Nurse Williams, the other member of the staff, a cheery young woman who does not take work over-seriously. She and Kathy meet Brian, a psychiatrist, rather flirtatious and interested in a relationship with Kathy. This leads to some danger for Brian and, ultimately, his death. Also in the picture is Kathy's former boyfriend, Ed (Damon Gameau), who also becomes the victim of telekinetic violence. And it all builds up to a hyper-melodramatic finale.

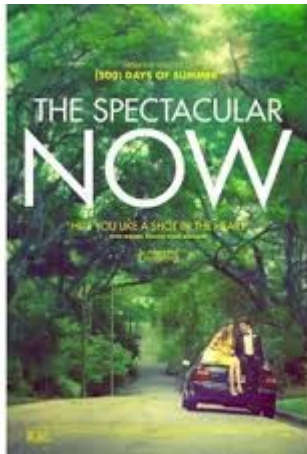
The director is Mark Hartley who made the very interesting documentary on Ozploitation movies, Not Quite Hollywood (narrated by Quentin Tarantino). The film opens with the conventions of dark mansion, mysterious laboratory, mad doctor, of the odd goings-on, then it moves more and more into some shock-horror moments - and really goes fairly bonkers towards the end. The audience will laugh at various times, sometimes from the pleasure of a shock which makes them jump, sometimes with the kind of spoof treatment of the theme, other times with some really ludicrous lines. But, we can suppose that this is what the filmmakers intended, and atmospheric and sometimes tongue-in-cheek hoot.

THE SPECTACULAR NOW

US, 2013, 97 minutes, Colour.

Miles Teller, Shaileene Woodley, Brie Larson, Jennifer Jason Leigh,

Directed by James Ponsoldt.



The opening of *The Spectacular Now* shows us the central character, Sutter (Miles Teller) at his computer, typing an essay on something that was hard and challenging in his life as part of his application for college. He recounts his exploits of the night before, with flashbacks indicating to the audience something of his character, his partying, his relationship with Cassidy (Brie Larsen) the glamorous blonde beauty of the class. He also starts to tell something of the truth about himself but deletes the letter.

As the film takes us into those high school parties, loud, dancing, drink... teenagers and young adults may get excited by this, while older audiences may slip back into their seats and wonder what they are going to be asked to endure. However, the film does improve both for its target audience as well as for those who may not be drawn into it immediately.

Sutter is 18, in the final year at school, not particularly interested in classes, full of wisecracks, considered something of a clown by others at the school. At this stage we are not sure that he has anything more to his character.

The Spectacular Now obviously means living to the full in the present, relishing it, glorying in it. At least, this seems to be the philosophy of Sutter. But Sutter, living in the now or in the immediate past, partying, drinking, trying to make an impression on his girlfriend, Cassidy, and generally failing.

As with so many films, all films really, we need to wait until the end to see how the situation develops and whether it resolves itself. This is particularly the case with *The Spectacular Now*.

The film is Sutter's story. He lives with his mother, separated from her husband, working on night shifts in a hospital. This gives Sutter plenty of time to indulge himself, with Cassidy, with his best friend whom he is trying to set up with a girl, making wisecracks which he discovers later make him seem like a clown to his fellow-students. And he drinks, often and strongly, with his concealed flask. What is to happen to Sutter, especially as he deletes the application for college?

The main crisis of the film is Sutter, drunk, disappointed, driving home and crashing his car, and waking up at 6.00 am with a fellow-student looking down at him on her lawn. She is Aimee (an impressive performance from Shailene Woodley, a rather unprepossessing young woman, dominated by her mother, even to doing her mother's paper delivery route. But, Sutter and Aimee unexpectedly click. She falls for him, he is comfortable in her company but does not see it as a loving relationship.

It is interesting to see the development in Sutter despite himself, becoming a more normal person, not just simply joking around, but really interested in keeping Aimee company. But he doesn't stop drinking, actually enticing Aimee herself to start drinking.

He is challenged by a lecturer to improve his geometry studies, and he asks Aimee to tutor him. This gives them the opportunity to be together, for him to learn something about her (a love of reading graphic novels, for instance) and for him to be more himself.

He has never known his father and his mother will not give him address or phone number to make contact. He dares Aimee to stand up to her mother (using language she never would have dreamt she would use) and she dares him to find out about his father. Eventually he does and asks her to go with him, an experience that he has been looking forward to but which, inevitably, ends in disappointment and anger. And he also asks Aimee to go to the prom with him. He becomes a changed young man, even when, in times of retrenchment, his boss wants him to stay on with his part-time job, asking him to give up drinking; he is honest enough to say that he cannot.

There is a strong scene towards the end when he begins to talk honestly with his mother and she talks honestly with him, not reprimanding him, but pointing out all his good qualities which he covers with his low self-image.

The film is clearly a moral fable, especially about being one's true and genuine self, not setting up a facade image, as well as in developing a sense of responsibility – and knowing that there can be a spectacular now another tomorrow, the next day, and...

THOR: THE DARK WORLD

US, 2013, 112 minutes, Colour.

Chris Hemsworth, Natalie Portman, Tom Hiddleston, Christopher Eccleston, Stellan Skarsgaard, Anthony Hopkins, Rene Russo, Kat Denning, Chris O'Dowd, Benicio del Toro.

Directed by Alan Taylor.



A venerable film reviewer often used a phrase to indicate that he thought a film was rather silly: 'a load of codswallop'. Thor: The Dark World probably deserves this epithet, though in a kindly way. It is an enjoyable, though not great, Marvel Comics entertainment. But the plot is rather silly and the screenplay does not want to take the proceedings too seriously. There are quite a number of deadpan lines and some sending up of the heroes and villains. As with other Marvel Comics films, it is best to wait to see the inserted trailer of a film to come, this time featuring The Collector. And, better still to wait until the very end of the long credits where there is another minute of the plot, with the happiest of endings as well as a tongue-in-cheek joke.

Once again, Chris Hemsworth is the hero, Thor. He is more confident than ever, deep-voiced, vocally articulate, full of swagger. As before, he has to defy his father Odin (Anthony Hopkins more rhetorical than ever), grieve the death of his mother (Rene Russo), who is given a Viking funeral. He has to confront sinister and evil powers, deal with his brother Loki (Tom Hiddleston relishing the role again), going back and forth between Asgard and Earth, teaming up with scientist Jane (Natalie Portman). In this sense, the story is not full of surprises as was the original film.

And, once again, there is an evil race, led by Christopher Eccleston, who have discovered the Aether, which they need to possess in order to take world domination, especially at the time of the configuration of the nine elements. This means that there are many sinister scenes and battles, especially to introduce the story. Meanwhile, on earth, scientist Eric Selvig (Stellan Skarsgaard), has

gone berserk running around Stonehenge with his equipment but naked, landing in in a mental institution. Jane is still doing her work but goes out to lunch with a co-worker, a cameo by Chris O'Dowd. Her assistant Darcy, Kat Jennings, is still sardonic, but has a naff intern, Ian, Jon. And then Thor turns up on earth after two years' absence, with Jane angry at him.

However, with the threats of the enemy, Jane is taken up to Asgard and later abducted with Thor rescuing her as she becomes a victim of the enemy, wanting to take her life-force. Loki is imprisoned before Thor takes the risk, with conditions, for Loki to help him in his mission. But the climax is to be held on earth, in London for a change instead of New York or an American City, specifically at Greenwich where it will be meantime in more senses than one.

More battles, more heroics, more romance.

One of the advantages of the sequel is that there is a good deal of attention given to Loki, the fans having appreciated him in the original film as well as in The Avengers. He has quite a few amusing comments and ironic remarks, which audibly pleased the preview audience a great deal. Since the screenplay, serious, does not always take itself too seriously, there are some amusing moments which make the codswallop acceptable.

WALESA – MAN OF HOPE

Poland, 2013, 128 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Andrej Wajda.



There was a time, from the early 1980s and through that decade, that most people knew who Lech Walesa was and how the Solidarity Movement in Poland, starting on the waterfront of Gdansk, led to the downfall of the Polish government and offered an example to other Soviet countries of how, especially after the death of the Russian President, Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet Union could never be the same. Then, in 1989, the Berlin Wall came down.

At the time, celebrated Polish director, Andrej Wajda, made a number of films that reflected the situations of the late 1970s, early 1980s. One of them was a fiction/semi-documentary, *Man of Iron* (1981), about Solidarity and how it was beginning its move against the government presiding over a failing Polish economy. It was also a society plagued by officialdom, bureaucracy, secret police and oppression of civil rights.

Wajda was in his mid-80s when he made this portrait of Walesa, his opportunity to go back to this period, not just to show it as it was, but with the benefit of 30 years of hindsight and almost a quarter of a century of freedoms. From this film, it is clear how admiring he is of Walesa of Solidarity and the changes in Poland.

Walesa is shown at the opening of the film being interviewed by famous Italian journalist, Oriana Fallaci. As the film keeps going back to the interview, it offers the screenplay the chance to ask significant questions as well as to show Walesa's character. He would not have been an easy man to deal with, sometimes a stolid waterfront worker and union man, not a smiling man. Rather, he is determined, strong-minded, prepared to be jailed many times, to keep to his principles. We see him at home with his long-suffering and loving wife. We see him in discussions with the workers. We see him at demonstrations. We are told of his charisma – which does quite come across. Perhaps the English sub-titles do not do justice to his charisma.

Nevertheless, the film is of interest to find the Polish point of view on Walesa. Involved in disputes and strikes during the 1970s (and sacked from his job), he survives with mechanic's work but finds that the 1980s are bringing to the surface the earlier uprisings of the 1970s. Authorities are exasperated by him and are out to get him. He is put to disadvantage personally and politically during the strikes and the consequent hardships of unemployment, loss of wages, hunger and the failing economy.

All the time there is the interest of John Paul II, elected in 1978, seen re-visiting Poland and supporting the goals of Solidarity. And his picture is on the wall of the Walesa household.

Ultimately, Solidarity prevails and we see footage of Walesa and his speech to the United Nations in 1989. He will soon become the President of Poland.

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20 FEET FROM STARDOM

US, 2013, 90 minutes, Colour.
Darlene Love, Merry Preston, Judith Hill.
Directed by Morgan Neville.

How does one find oneself 20 feet from stardom, in front of, to the side of, or behind stardom?

One of the answers is to be a back-up singer. This very entertaining documentary, especially for aficionados of the music that is presented, is an exploration of how many of the American back-up singers experienced their lives, their performances, their dreams, perhaps, of being a solo artist, or relishing the achievement that they had as supporting many of the stars.

It should be said that there is a great deal of singing and music, in the film, an opportunity to see stars like the Rolling Stones, Bruce Springsteen, Talking Heads, in performance but

focusing on the back-ups, after listening to their stories and recounting their experiences of what it was like to sing, to be associated with the stars.

One of the main singers to be featured is Darlene Love, going back to footage of the 1960s to see her in performance, and in the succeeding decades, eventually, at the age of 40, becoming a very successful solo artist with multi-selling records. She appeared for years on the David Letterman Show singing her Christmas song. She is interviewed and seen throughout the film, and in 2011 receiving award acknowledgements with Bette Midler saying it was about time. Another singer featured in the film is Merry Preston, and her featured career.

A more recent singer is Judith Hill, who was back-up for the proposed Michael Jackson final tour, and her singing at his memorial service. While she has the talent for and sometimes has been a solo artist, she enjoys the work of collaborating with the group, and relied on by such talent as Elton John and Kylie Minogue for her contributions.

The backup singers featured in this film are African-Americans². And so, the documentary is also a survey of the role of these singers from the 1960s when the expectation was that back-ups would be white. But The Blossoms, a vital group with different rhythms, came on the scene and opened the way for many other singers in backup. It is interesting to note that so many of them came from church groups with the great tradition of singing, one of them, Mabel John, being a minister in a contemporary church and instructing young singers.

Also in the film are comments from many of the star performers: from Bette Midler, from Sting, from Mick Jagger, and several sequences with Stevie Wonder, who voice their appreciation of the singers.

Of course, life isn't plain sailing. Darlene Love reminisces about taking up a cleaning job before she realised what she wanted from life and her talent. The documentary seems intent on avoiding any gossip, delving into personal problems, avoiding discussing marital situations or difficulties. This means that the film's outlook is very positive, choosing the particular singers, interviewing them sympathetically, listening to their stories, visualising them with a great deal of film and television footage, and inviting the audience to appreciate these often unsung (while they were singing) talents of American show business during the 20th century.

It is definitely a feelgood documentary, and with its focus on the music, the singing and some undaunted personalities. Why not?

AFTER MAY/ APRES MAI

France, 2013, 106 minutes, Colour.

Clement Matayer, Lola Creton, Felix Armand, Carole Combes, India Menuet.

Directed by Olivier Assayas.

The May of the title is that of May 1968, the month of the student demonstrations and protests at the Sorbonne, Paris. It was a moment of truth in French society and politics, signalling change. This story takes place some years later, focusing on a young man in high school, listening to a philosophical paragraph from Blaise Pascal, the teacher urging his students to think about their situation.

The potential for interest in this kind of story is quite strong and has been treated in a number of films, especially Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Dreamers*. However, while many audiences may be caught up in this story and its characters, many will not. This review is amongst those who were not.

The focus of the story is a pasty-faced, gaunt, long-haired young man who is committed to protests, demonstrating and running the risk of being injured by police brutality, is into painting graffiti on the walls of his high school, likes having abstract discussions about social issues and affiliations with groups like the Trotskyites. He also aspires to be an artist. And he moves with a group of like-minded young people, rather interchangeable with each other, rather than standing out as interesting and distinguishable characters. There is a young woman with whom the young man has an affair, but she moved to London. There is a fellow artist who is infatuated with an American woman in Paris. Then there is another young activist woman who could be in love with the young man, but...

After experiencing some difficulties and threats, some of the group go off to Italy but the young man is dissatisfied there and comes back to France where he is involved, partly-involved, continuing with his art, falling in and out of love, wanting to make films. He finally gets his chance to be involved in England when he works at Pinewood Studios in one of those prehistoric kind of films like *The People that Time Forgot*, but this one has a mixture of dinosaurs and Nazis and a submarine. And there we leave him except that he seems to stand in for the character of the writer-director, Olivier Assayas, who has made a number of very interesting films, but not this one. A film for specialists of the period and those who enjoy French films which are a mixture of the morose and the abstract.

AMERICAN HUSTLE

US, 2013, 130 minutes, Colour.

Christian Bale, Amy Adams, Bradley Cooper, Jeremy Renner, Jennifer Lawrence, Robert di Niro, Michael Pena, Louis C.K., Alessandro Nivola.

Directed by David O. Russell.

Some of this is true – an avowal at the beginning of the film. While some of the events may have been actual, one wonders whether this was the tone of these goings on. This is satire, an amusing and funny interpretation of oddball characters and their attitudes and behaviour.

This tone is set in the opening moments as conman, Irving, spends a lot of time putting on his comb-over – reference to his hairpiece often during the film. Later, Bradley Cooper, an intense and ambitious federal agent, has his hair in curlers for his frizzy hairstyle. Amy Adams has quite a few different styles, as does Jennifer Lawrence (hers straight out of fashion magazines) and Robert de Niro seems to have lost some.

By recounting this coiffeur information, it is an indication of the attention to detail (1970s style) that David O. Russell has given to this elaborate con story. Russell has made a variety of genres, from *Three Kings* and *I Heart Huckabees* to *The Fighter* and *The Silver Linings Playbook*. He works again here with several of his casts from these films. He is certainly versatile.

Back to the cons. Irving has many good things going for making money, being credible to naïve investors, taking his broker's fee but getting them no money. Christian Bale (who won an Oscar in Russell's *The Fighter*) comes across as very different from Bruce Wayne, let alone Batman, showing a flair for comic timing. He encounters Sydney (Amy Adams, also in *The Fighter*) who is his perfect complement in double-dealings. One of their targets is a mayor from New Jersey, an Italiano, who has mob links though he is earnest about his political influence (Jeremy Renner). Stealing the show whenever she appears is Jennifer Lawrence as Irving's wife. It is a supporting role but she brings such energy and presence that she makes the very best of her screen time – ditzy and imprudent, often funny.

The hustling becomes complicated when an agent gets wise to what is going on and decides to employ Irving and Sydney to set up a sting for the mayor and his Florida mob connections. Enter Robert de Niro as a Mafia chief – looking a great deal older (but with a brief flashback to remind us of what he was like in years gone by). And enter a fake sheikh, Michael Pena.

It's all in the timing, making good when plans go skewiff, exercising trickster confidence.

Surprisingly cheerful, sometimes quite funny, with top performances and some smart dialogue. As they say, what's not to like!

AUGUST: OSAGE COUNTY

US, 2013, 130 minutes, Colour.

Meryl Streep, Julia Roberts, Ewan Mc Gregor, Julianne Nicholson, Juliette Lewis, Sam Shepherd, Margo Martindale, Chris Cooper, Benedict Cumberbatch, Dylan Mc Dermot, Abigail Breslin, Misty Upham.

Directed by John Wells.

August in Osage County is very hot, which does not do very much for people's moods. And the moods in this film can be sometimes quite grim, often angry, and manifested in bizarre behaviour and a barrage of course language. It is not the most cheerful of family dramas, but is fascinating in a morbid kind of way.

It began life as a play, winning the Pulitzer Prize for its author, Tracy Letts. He has adapted his play for the screen – and, it often seems like a play, relying on intense dialogue and quite a number of set scenes, including an eruption at a long and frustrating family meal.

One of the grimmest characters in Osage County is a successful poet, Beverley Weston (Sam Shepherd) who is immediately introduced as interviewing a young Native American (and much is made of this fact with the film set in Oklahoma) to look after his wife. She is Vi, an angry woman, ageing, ill, relying on a mass of prescription drugs which sends her high and the absence sends her low. She is not impressed by her new maid. So the film begins with tensions and really doesn't let up.

When Beverley disappears, Vi becomes anxious. At home she has to rely on one of her three daughters, Julianne Nicholson, whom she treats with some disdain. She relies much more on her sister, Mattie Fae (Margot Martindale) who is something of a hard case as well and harbours a family secret.

Coming on to the scene is the oldest of the three daughters, played by a gaunt-looking Julia Roberts, perpetually angry and contributing mightily to that barrage of language. She comes with her husband, a rather meek Ewan Mc Gregor, although it emerges that they are separated. They bring their daughter (Abigail Breslin) who has torn emotions about her parents and is experimenting with drugs. so, plenty more ingredients for difficulties as the family prepares for the funeral and comes back after the funeral for that eruptive meal.

Also in the mix is another daughter who has stayed away from home for a long time. She is played by Juliette Lewis, rather naive, a bit on the outer, with her latest boyfriend, Dylan McDermott, tagging along.

The more calm members of the family are Mattie Fae's rather quiet and tolerant husband, Chris Cooper, and their son, whom the father admires but the mother is continually ridiculing, and comes late for the funeral, played by Benedict Cumberbatch.

The omission in this review of naming the character and the actress playing her is that of Vi herself. It is Meryl Streep, yet another most impressive impersonation and a different kind of performance and character. She has to play her age and project a complex personality, loving her husband in the past and admiring him, alienated from her daughters, highly erratic in how she deals with people, focusing on her drugs.

Perhaps this could be called a film that it is more interesting rather than entertaining, although it is fascinating to watch the ensemble cast and their interactions. This is a highly dysfunctional American family. Not that there haven't been many films with this theme, but here it is portrayed both seriously and comically, deadly secrets which can ruin people's lives, attempts to deal with harsh realities and generally not succeeding.

BACKYARD ASHES

Australia, 2013, 90 minutes, Colour.

Andrew S. Gilbert, Felix Williamson, Lex Marinos, Rebecca Massey, John Wood.

Directed by Mark Gentell.

So this is what life in the city of Wagga is like!

This is a small independent film which, unfortunately, had a very limited release. Audiences would enjoy it very much. It is not often that one sees a city council investing in a film but this is what the city of Wagga Wagga has done, and playing with words, it is a Crow Crow production!

The title tells all, or mostly all. A group of men who work in a local factory enjoy playing backyard cricket, especially in the house of Doug Waters (Andrew S. Gilbert). His friends are all rather Ocker types, pleasingly so, with a capacity for some droll one-liners. They include a friend with Japanese origins, and another with Indian origins and his wife. And not to leave anyone out, there is a Kiwi with a very prominent accent and pronunciation a real target as always.

Then there are retrenchments at the factory, one of the cricketers going off with his wife to

find work in Broken Hill. And who should buy his house but the very Pommy official who did the sacking? Doug and family can't believe that Mr Edward Lords is there next-door neighbour. He is come with his wife and, especially his cat, who plays a significant role in the high drama of neighbourliness and grudge matches – and provides ashes. In fact, Mr Lords is particularly British, pomposity personified, prefers to keep to himself, has no sense of humour, and when goaded into the backyard Ashes, finds that he has an intense drive to win.

Most audiences would enjoy the talk amongst the friends, the barbecues in the backyard, the cricket practice, even for Doug's young daughter. Meanwhile his wife and Mrs Lords become good friends.

When a feline tragedy ensues, what else can rivals do to compensate and make peace but organise a cricket match, local Ashes?

By the time the match actually comes round, the audience will have been chuckling most of the time, at the recognisable characters, at their interactions, at the local dialogue. This means that by the time of the match itself, we are ready to chuckle all the way through and the match provides plenty of opportunity with its rules, the boasting of one of the players, Spock, who also does a cricket commentary parodying Richie Benaud. Mr Lord's has found a British team – and the screenplay enjoys itself mocking Pommy manners, Pommy attitudes, Pommy b...

2012 saw another cricket film, *Save Your Legs*, about a Melbourne team which toured India. It was enjoyable but *Backyard Ashes* should prove itself even more entertaining, taking cricket seriously, but not taking ourselves seriously.

BLACKFISH

US, 2013, 80 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Gabriel Cowperthwaite.

Save the whale!

This has been an environmentalist cry for many decades, to save the whales in the ocean, to protest against Japanese whalers in the Southern Ocean, other whaling nations, and the concern about beached whales and those in captivity, the Free Willy syndrome. The Free Willy films offer child-friendly stories. The documentary, *The Cove*, offers grim facts from Japan.

Blackfish is in this vein, it shows its skill as a documentary by enticing the audience with scenes from Sea World in Florida, the antics of whales and porpoises in the theme parks, with commentary from several of the trainers who worked in Sea World in the past. For a moment, for the unwary, it looks as if this might be an advertisement for Sea World and other parks.

It is not.

After being led, or lulled, into some sympathy, we then get the facts from the point of view of the writer and the director. We are informed that there have been several deaths of trainers in different theme parks and we are shown footage of those tragedies. However, the main focus

is on the death of a trainer in 2010, Dawn Brancheau, the lack of information from the Sea World management and the excuses, the blame on human error and the trainer, the lack of information for the media about the whale itself, its history, and what really happens to whales and their psyches, so to speak, because of their captivity, restrictions, training and punishments, and their performances.

The witnesses who are interviewed for the film seem to be a credible and creditable group. They fill in the background of their ambitions when they join SeaWorld[?], employment and the development of their talents, the exhilaration of being in the water with the whales. Now, they offer some criticism of the management of the theme parks as well as the captivity of the whales. While Sea World declined to be interviewed for the film, some footage is shown of the management in court cases, the film very critical of their testimony and deflection of blame and responsibility. There are also one or other experts who are of the opinion that the whales are not harmed by their being captured, trained and performing.

As a counter to this, there are some sequences of the capturing of the whales, especially the young whales and taking them for sale to the theme parks and rough treatment in some failed European parks.

The main attention is given to the death of the trainer in 2010, a great deal of footage available to show what happened, for an interpretation of the behaviour of the whale, as a counter-criticism to management. And a great deal of sympathy from other trainers for this young woman who died unexpectedly.

The whale in question, Tilikum, becomes something of the star of the show at about the halfway point, but also becoming the villain who kills. Explanations and visuals are offered about his capture, his early career, his dangerous behaviour, his being sold on to Sea World, his training, his performances, his violent action against the trainer. The conclusion that the screenplay draws is that it is wrong to take the whales from the ocean and their life and freedom, and to confine them in such narrow surroundings, and using deprivation of food as a means of training. It is affirmed that this makes the whales very dangerous, despite audiences delighting in their tricks, leaps, diving.

While, in some ways, this film is preaching to the converted, and the unconverted will maintain that whales in captivity are quite safe, not harmed, and not a real threat to the trainers, this is a film which might make a number of converts to the cause of the whales, save the whales, in its appeal to the audiences and their sensibilities and sensitivities.

THE BOOK THIEF

US/Germany, 2013, 131 minutes, Colour.

Geoffrey Rush, Emma Watson, Sophie Nelisse, Nico Liersch,
Directed by Brian Percival.

The novel, *The Book Thief*, by Sydney author, Marcus drew sack, has become an international best-seller. Now comes the screen adaptation, and interpretation of stories of German citizens at the outbreak of World War II and during the war. The author has explained that he heard these stories while he was growing up from members of his own family.

For decades, audiences have tended to look at films about this period from the point of view of the Holocaust, the persecution of the Jews, their round-up, the sufferings in the concentration camps, the grim aftermath. While these issues are present in this film, they are not always to the forefront. Rather, this is the story of a young German girl whose parents belong to the Communist Party and who has had to flee with her mother and younger brother from Nazi persecution. On the train, her little brother dies and they have to stop for his burial. Afterwards, the mother cannot support her daughter and the girl, Liesel (Sophie Nelisse) is driven away to Stuttgart to a foster family.

The episodes from 1938 to 1945 are seen through her eyes.

The film is fortunate to have Geoffrey Rush portraying the foster father, Hans, a genial man who is kind to Liesel, helping her with her reading, even to putting a dictionary of new words on the basement wall. The mother, Rosa, is played impressively by Emily Watson, a very stern woman, continually commenting on her husband's behaviour, critical of the girl, a tough German exterior but something of her heart as revealed by the end of the film.

Ordinary life seems very ordinary in the town, Liesel going to school, though humiliated and bullied about her lack of ability to read. The young boy next door, Rudi, becomes her best friend over the years. We see them in Nazi uniforms at school, singing patriotic songs – though both Liesel and Rudi, considering their experiences, take a hearty dislike to Hitler. Rudi is a strong runner and has great admiration for Jesse Owens, even putting black polish on his face to imitate his idol.

We see a glimpse of Kristallnacht and the smashing of the shop windows and the taking away of the Jews. In fact, the family shelters a young Jewish man whose father had saved Hans's life in World War I. They undergo great hardships as the young man is sheltered for several years, but there are some light moments, especially when snow comes and they build a snowman in the basement and have a snow fight.

With the title of the book, we appreciate that books are important for Liesel, a book she picked up at the graveside of her brother, collecting a burnt book after a fanatic book-burning in the city square, befriending the wife of the mayor, who still grieves her son's death in World War I, and gives Liesel access to the many books in the in their library. There is a delight in reading, delight in words, Liesel describing the weather to Max who is sheltering – and his gift of a book for her to write in.

Despite the sufferings, the people in the city carry on as best they can, with their deprivations, ultimately having to take shelter during the bombardments – where Liesel is able to create a story which draws the attention of the frightened people. These ordinary people are comparatively isolated from the war, though Hans is conscripted, and do not have access to the information about what is going on in the wider Germany.

The film is narrated by Death, humanised as his voice-over (by Roger Allam) describes his attitude towards people, their souls, their experience of death, taking them to the next world. This is especially important at the end of the film and the issue of survivors of the Allied bombardments.

The film has a pervasive sense of humanity, even in the experience of suffering. Death finally

says he is 'haunted by humans'.

CARRIE

US, 2013, 100 minutes, Colour.

Chloe Grace Moretz, Julianne Moore, Gabriella Wilde, the Judy Greer, Portia Doubleday,
Directed by Kimberley Pearce.

Carrie was a surprise hit film of 1976, both at the box office and critically, with Oscar nominations. It made a star out of Sissy Spacek and marked Piper Laurie's later career as successfully dramatic. It was the first cinema adaptation of the Stephen King story.

As with so many re-makes, fans of the original ask why a re-make is necessary. Perhaps it is not necessary, but it can offer an interesting opportunity for a re-interpretation. This film is an arresting re-working of the story and characters, but, on the whole, the fans were critical, especially of Chloe Grace Moretz considered too pretty to portray Carrie.

The film has been directed by Kimberley Peirce, who was successful in directing *Boys Don't Cry*. She brings a strong female perspective to this film and a strong empathy towards Carrie and an understanding of her mother. To that extent, it is a re-interpretation, placing a great emphasis on bullying at school, as well as religious physical and psychological abuse at home. The girls at school are quite callous in their torment of Carrie, at sport, in the school corridors, in the shower block after she experiences her first period and does not understand it and experiences bewilderment and pain, and the girls call out mocking her, throwing tampons at her, filming her plight and then posting it on Facebook.

Chloe Grace Moretz is a very good actress and gives an interesting interpretation of Carrie. And Julianne Moore is very strong as her mother. Judy Greer has a good role as the sympathetic teacher.

Audiences familiar with Stephen King's story will follow the prom night development, Carrie reluctant, Sue feeling guilty about her role in the torment of Carrie, urging her boyfriend Tom to take Carrie to the prom, his initial reluctance, his charm, the limo, his gentlemanly behaviour towards Carrie at the prom, urging her to dance. It seems ironic that he should die in the fiasco of the prom.

Gabriella Wilde is the more sympathetic Sue. Portia Doubleday is calculating malice as Carrie's tormentor.

Of course, those familiar with the story are waiting for the prom and the scene with the bucket of pig's blood. There is a build up as we see the malicious girl killing the pig and the collection of the blood, her watching from above the proscenium to wait for the moment to pour the blood on Carrie. Once Carrie is drenched, she becomes an icon of vengeance with her telekinetic powers, creating mayhem in the hall, death and destruction, as she moves her arms and hands as if she were conducting an orchestra.

Finally, Carrie confronts her mother, who has often put her daughter in a cupboard filled with religious pictures and crucifixes, where, at one stage, Carrie sees blood flowing on a crucifix. As her powers are exercised on her mother, she transfixes her to the cupboard door like a

crucifixion.

There is some slight respite at the end as explanations are given in a courtroom scene. Then Sue goes to the cemetery, to Carrie's grave. Because this is a remake, it would have been appropriate to repeat the great shock sequence, so often imitated since, at the end of the original. The same point is made here, but in an ever-so-slight way, which is disappointing. But the film is an interesting re-make.

CLOUDY WITH A CHANCE OF MEATBALLS 2

US, 2013, 95 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: Bill Hader, Anna Farris, James Caan, Will Forte, Terry Crews, Andy Smaberg.
Directed by Cody Cameron and Kris Peam.

The first Cloudy... Meatballs appealed to a great number of audiences and critics. It was quite a colourful show, focusing on a young man, Flint Lockwood, who fancied himself as an inventor and his machine which could actually provide food from the skies, transforming the elements. He was something of a loner, but had a supportive family, especially his father, and a young woman, Sam the meteorologist, who walked into his life and into his romance. The film appealed to adult audiences as well as children.

So, now another visit to the inventor and the opportunity to see how he got on with his machine after it went skewiff in what it provided and what fell from the sky. Flint and his friends were organising themselves in Swallow Falls to tidy up their world when his idol, Chester V, arrives to recruit him to his new company. Flint takes the opportunity to begin again with his inventions, making good from the last one which went awry. He has his usual team, the chicken-clad, Brent, the local policeman, Earl, and with help from Sam and his father.

But... Chester V is not what he seems, or perhaps he is what he seems but Flint does not notice. He has a new machine which also goes awry, intentionally, transforming creatures into hybrids with names such as shrimpanzees, watermelophants, peanut butter and jellyfish, tacodiles, and bananostriches. Needless to say, lots of opportunities for comedy and lives, for visual colourful inventiveness, and the potential for crises.

Ultimately, Flint sees Chester V for what he is and has to rally his troops to remedy the situation which leads to some comic conflicts. Chester's assistant is a monkey called Barb but she has difficulties with her identity and what she should really call herself, monkey or not, finally coming over from the dark side.

There is a lot of sharp dialogue, plenty of action, use of the imagination for inventiveness, bright colourful animation. Amongst the voice talent is Bill Hader as Flint, James Caan as Flint's father, Anna Farris as Sam, Will Forte as Chester.

The film is eccentrically attractive but might be also an acquired taste.

DELIVERY MAN

US, 2013, 105 minutes, Colour.
Vince Vaughn, Chris Pratt, Cobie Smulders.
Directed by Ken Scott

Delivery Man is a star vehicle for Vince Vaughn. For many, Vaughn is an acquired taste for his comedies, many of which are fairly broad. He made an impact in such films as Swingers and The Wedding Crashers. While he has appeared in several serious films, the films themselves are not quite so memorable even though he is a distinctive presence.

This time he might be more memorable especially given the nature of the screenplay. Delivery Man is based on a screenplay and an original French-Canadian² film, Starbuck, written and directed by Ken Scott. Scott has now made an American version.

The opening of the film seems typical Vince Vaughn comedy, his being presented as a likeable loser, David Wozniak, an irresponsible man. He works for his father and with his brothers in meat company, he doing the deliveries but always getting waylaid, getting parking fines, even getting his truck towed away when he should have been delivering baseball basketball jerseys to his father. He also owes \$80,000 for a loan in a company that failed and thugs are after him. If the film continued in this vein, it might have just been an average film.

Then, the key plot element is reserved revealed. David gave over 600 sperm donations to a clinic in the 1990s. It was a way of raising money. The name used on the documents kept his anonymity and was Starbuck. Now a group of the children from the donations have instituted a lawsuit for him to come out of his anonymity. He has the friendship and help of his lawyer Brett (Chris Pratt) who struggles with children of his own and is keen on preserving David's anonymity and getting him damages.

What happens is that David starts to investigate the lives of some of the children, papering his wall with the official documents about the 533. He discovers a struggling actor who finds a job; he works with a young addicted woman and gets her to promise to go to her job in Bloomingdales; he supports a busker in the street, sees another son as a tour guide and listens to him frequently, even in the rain, and there is pathos when he finds that one of the sons is severely disabled, going to visit him, not knowing what to say, but forming a bond.

One day he follows one of the children, a gay man, who leads him to a meeting of the children where he suggests to them, still anonymously, that what they have discovered is a whole range of brothers and sisters and that they should be joyful about this. Ultimately there is a court case, reasons being put forward for his anonymity and his preservation of privacy as well as the reasons for the revelation for the sake of the children to know something about themselves and their parentage.

Of course, there are ethical issues in the whole sperm donation issue and how it was handled by the clinic. But given that the situation has arisen, there are ethical questions about what David should do and what the children have a right to. The film does gather together the various arguments and it ends with a heart answer over a head answer. And, in real life, which is more important?

FILL THE VOID

Israel, 2012, 90 minutes, Colour.
Hadas Yaron, Yiftach Klein, Irit Sheleg.
Directed by Rama Bushtein.

This film is different from the usual stories from Israel. While other films treat the Orthodox Jews and their stories, this film was written and directed by a woman who converted to the Orthodox and has lived within its strict rules and traditions. She is telling the story of a young woman from inside the community.

The film, photographed in authentic locations in Tel Aviv, brings the life and lifestyle of the Orthodox to the screen quite vividly. This is very patriarchal society. Women are subject to the decisions of the men. And this is particularly the case with arranged marriages, the theme of this film.

Shira is a young woman with some energy, studying the traditions, well-informed, but also faced with the prospect of women in the community, her marriage. The film opens with a slightly bizarre episode in a supermarket where a marriage broker contacts the young girl and her mother by phone to indicate that a prospective husband is in part of the supermarket and that they should approach him.

However, a severe complication arises when the young woman's older sister dies in childbirth. Her husband is expected to marry again, especially for the child, and for a moment he intends to go to Belgium for a new wife. Shira is attracted to him but the thought of her marrying her sister's husband with the sexual implications somewhat repels her.

Her father is a rabbi and on feasts holds court with people coming to him for advice and, especially, men coming for financial assistance. He runs a strict household and has views on the marriage of his younger daughter. The strong-minded mother is busy running the household but also concerned about her daughter.

There is also a rabbi of higher rank, consulted by many people, who gives advice to the young woman. In discussions with the widower, Shira finds more sympathy for him, especially as he breaks down, with tears for his situation, his dead wife and for his child.

Many audiences watching this film will feel somewhat alienated from the beliefs and the traditions of the people, the marriage arrangements, the situation of women. However, the writer-director presents the situation, takes it for granted, as, finally, does Shira.

A film insightful for its Orthodox audience, a film to be observed by those outside the community and by those who sympathy is not immediately for the community.

Israel's Academy Award nomination for Best Foreign Language film for 2012.

FILTH

UK, 2013, 97 minutes, Colour.
James McAvoy², Imogen Poots, Jamie Bell, Gary Lewis, Jim Broadbent, Shirley Henderson.
Directed by Jon S. Baird.

Filth is not the most attractive title for a film – and audiences seeking it out will not be too disappointed. Audiences who find themselves watching Filth may well be put off by the character at the centre of this film, his behaviour, his generally unredeemed qualities.

The film is based on a novel by Irving Welsh, well-known as an author as well as for the film version of his *Trainspotting*, 1996, a story of Edinburgh and the drug culture, directed by Danny Boyle. There was a version of his novel, *Ecstasy*, in 2011, a film about drugs and clubbing which did not make the same impact as *Trainspotting*. *Filth* goes a long way to living up to *Trainspotting*'s impact and reputation.

It comes as something of a surprise to find that the central character is a detective in Edinburgh. The film opens with a racist murder and the police mobilising to investigate. The audience sees who the killers are, a gang of would-be toughs in the city, but the mechanics of the investigation are left in the background of the film. James McAvoy's character, Bruce, begins a narration. Some of it is realistic, some of it is fantasy. The image of his wife (who may or may not be around) and her sexuality continues to enter his consciousness. He also suffers from depression, is drug-addicted and seems, at times, to have a sexual addiction. To that extent, his life is filthy.

What he is up to is to get himself promoted and he introduces us to each of the rivals in the office, mainly men, one woman. For a considerable part of the time we see him bad-mouthing, undermining the reputation of the various candidates. One of them is on his side, a young hopeful, but also with drug and sex problems, played by Jamie Bell. Another is quite a good natured, rather unsuspicious policeman played by Gary Lewis (who was Jamie Bell's father in *Billy Elliot*). There is also another man from the office, with Bruce having an affair with his wife behind his back. And, to him, the efficient female police officer, Amanda (Imogen Poots) is hardly worth consideration. Another man in the office is gay and Bruce capitalises on this to undermine his reputation. So, not an attractive scenario for us to be participants in.

As Bruce goes about his work, stopping off to his various indulgences, he also has interviews with a psychologist, played with an insinuating and teasing voice by Jim Broadbent. Sometimes hard to tell whether that interviews are real or in Bruce's imagination.

Bruce also has another victim, Bladesey, who is part of the Freemason brotherhood that the police chief belongs to as does Bruce, a pressure group for the management of law and order in the city. Bruce has some time off and takes Bladesey to Hamburg and leads him on a series of sexual adventures which have a bad effect on Bladesey and he finds himself in prison when back at home and accused of being a pervert. Meanwhile, Bruce has set up a liaison with Bladesey's wife (Shirley Henderson).

This makes it sound something of a wallow in some misery and filth and psychological disturbance. And it is. What makes it different from other similar stories is the intensity of the performances, the realism and surrealism of the writing as well as many experimental-style techniques in communicating Bruce's consciousness.

One might say this is a very clever film, as an appeal for audiences interested in the offbeat, but may well be a turn-off for a lot of audiences who prefer their films as portraying humanity rather than a self-inflicted inhumanity.

FROZEN

US, 2013, 108 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: Idina Menzel, Kristin Bell, Jonathan Groff, Josh Gadd, Robert Pine.

Directed by Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee.

Frozen is a Disney film, adapting the story, The Snow Queen, by Hans Christian Andersen. Almost 25 years ago, Disney Studios had a breakthrough with their adaptation of Andersen's The Little Mermaid. Frozen has received quite some critical acclaim and nominations for animation awards and it will be interesting to see whether it enters into public consciousness as did The Little Mermaid.

This is certainly a wintry film. While it opens in sunshine, and life in a country where there is activity and trade, ruled over by a benign king and queen, it soon moves to the grim cold. The reason for this is the character of Elsa, one of the daughters of the deceased king and queen. She has a cold personality but also has powers to transform a sunny experience into ice and cold. Her sister, Anna, loves her but is forced out of the kingdom.

A little unfortunately for us, Elsa disappears from the film until much later while the focus is on Anna, one of those feisty Disney heroines who can irritate audiences with her tough manner, no difficulty in delivering a few punches, while she could be a little bit more charming. We accompany her on her adventures, and meeting up with a pleasant young man Kristoff (not always the brightest!) who is an ice carrier and has quite an agreeable reindeer called Sven. Children's audiences will probably enjoy the snowman, Olaf, who keeps losing his shape as well as his carrot nose, but parent audiences might find him just that little bit hard to take. And then there are some rocks who turn in out to be trolls. Better is the huge, very huge snowman who pursues Anna and Kristoff.

There are several songs throughout the film, perhaps Disney studios having in mind to turn it into a theatrical musical as they have with Beauty and the Beast and The Lion King. There is a mixture of adventure and comedy.

Ultimately, we are back at the kingdom with Elsa defending herself with her powers, transforming rooms with extraordinarily visual ice barriers. And then there is Anna, getting colder and colder, hoping that a kiss from the foreign emissary, Hans, will be a sign of true love and leading to peace in the kingdom – and summer. While that, of course, does work out, it does not happen in the way we might have predicted, but it does mean that Elsa and Anna are reunited and there is always Kristoff for Anna to fall back on.

This is the kind of film that will appeal predominantly to a female audience, but there is enough action and comedy that might attract the boys in the audience. And parents probably won't mind it at all.

THE GILDED CAGE

France, 2013, 90 minutes, Colour.

Rita Blanco, Joaquim de Almeida.

Directed by Ruben Alves.

This is one of those French comedies which are light on the surface but have something to say underneath. Perhaps it should be stressed that this is a combination of French and Portuguese comedy, the central characters, husband and wife, who migrated from Portugal 30 years earlier and have worked in Paris ever since, bringing up their children as Brazilians and French. The director is Portuguese and is visualising his memories and experiences.

The Gilded Cage has proven itself a box-office winner in Europe, where audiences will identify with the situations in these two diverse countries of the European Union. It travels beyond Europe quite nicely but, probably, without the strong impact that it had there.

The focus is on a middle-aged couple, very well played by Rita Blanco and Joaquin de Almeida. We see the wife jauntily walking along a street, greeting everyone, and then we find that she is the concierge in an apartment block, at the beck and call of an elderly woman whose life is governed by whims, by a Chinese resident, by a couple with twins. She loves work and does not feel imposed on though that is what has happened to her for 30 years. Her husband works for a building construction company and he, in his turn, has been imposed on by the CEO of the company. They have two children, young adults.

Then something happens which transforms their lives, offering them the freedom that they have never experienced, and the possibility of returning to Portugal. The wife's sister, wanting to set up a Portuguese restaurant in Paris, certainly does not want her sister to go back home and fabricates a story about her very ill husband who needs all kinds of help. And the residents of the apartments certainly do not want her to go, thinking that they could not manage without her. It is the same with the boss of the company, devising ways of making it impossible for his worker to leave him.

Then there is the complication of the son not wanting to leave Paris, and pretending to friends that he is well-to-do, ashamed of his parents, as well as the daughter being in love with the son of the construction boss.

Comedy is to the fore as the couple toy with the idea of being wealthy and trying to keep up with their more affluent friends, especially a meal with all its disruptions, something that the French do so well. Needless to say, there are plenty of crises, especially with the younger generation and the couple's friends. The daughter's crisis is beautifully resolved when she goes with her fiancé to a Portuguese restaurant and listen to a singer with a beautiful ballad about Portugal.

Where there's a will there's a way – and the trouble started with a will. However, where there's goodwill there is also a good way and that is how it all ends up, cheerfully and everyone together.

THE HOBBIT: THE DESOLATION OF SMAUG

New Zealand, 2013, 161 minutes, Colour

Ian Mc Kellen, Martin Freeman, Richard Armitage, Luke Evans, Evangeline Lilly, Orlando Bloom, Benedict Cumberbatch, Cate Blanchett, James Nesbitt, Ken Stott.

Directed by Peter Jackson.

We are now in the middle of the story, a year since we were invited to enter the world of the hobbits, pre-Lord of the Rings, and it will be another year until we reach the grand finale and the final credits. In the meantime, we have this sequel-prequel, sometimes an uneasy middle film in a series of three. However, this part of the story is far more straightforward, less unnecessarily complicated than the first in the trilogy. We have become used to the characters, especially the dwarves with Bilbo tagging along to help them on their quest to regain their kingdom.

This is a story of the dwarves, encouraged by Gandalf to go on a quest to reclaim their kingdom, taken over by a monstrous, but very articulate and rhetorical Dragon, Smaug. As they go on their adventures, continually pursued by villainous and deadly Orcs, Bilbo has been seconded again to the group to infiltrate the Treasury and find the jewel that will lead to success.

Ian McKellen as Gandalf is always welcome in these films. But he tends to disappear for long times, going on his own quest, finding an ally who will enable him to enter the dark caves to confront Smaug. The dwarves have a detour on the way, going into the kingdom of the elves, a dialogue with the King, meet Tauriel (Evangeline Lilly) and Legolas (Orlando Bloom again), who are willing to help the dwarves and who slaughter a great number of Orcs along the way. So, plenty of action adventure for those who like this kind of thing.

The dwarves come into their own in this film, a rowdy bunch in the first film causing mayhem in Bilbo's home. This time they are more differentiated in character for the audience to appreciate many of them but, especially their leader, Thorin, with Richard Armitage coming into his own as the core of the film rather than Bilbo (Martin Freeman ever reliable). Not that Bilbo doesn't have plenty of things to do, especially at the end, though it is difficult to understand why he didn't actually keep the jewel when confronted by Smaug.

Another detour on the way to the kingdom is a visit to Laketown, helped by a trader, Bard (Luke Evans) and his family. He is something of a revolutionary in Laketown, a target of the Lord of and his sinister accomplice. This is one difficulty in the film. The Lord is played by Stephen Fry, looking like Stephen Fry, sounding like Stephen Fry, and making the audience focus on Stephen Fry rather than his character. Nevertheless, there are plenty of adventures in Laketown.

In fact, there are several entertaining adventure sequences, especially when the dwarves escape from the kingdom of the elves in barrels and find themselves not only falling into the water but being carried down river until rescued by Bard.

But the climax of this film is having the dwarves outside the caves, then finding the key (Bilbo does that), getting in, but relying on Bilbo to confront Smaug. As noted, Smaug is a highly articulate Dragon, not lost for a word, speaking in a very cultivated accent – and all this courtesy of Benedict Cumberbatch. He has a great deal of aggressive dialogue with Bilbo while breathing out great gusts of fire. (A pleasure for film buffs is that Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman worked together in the telemovie series, Sherlock, Cumberbatch as Sherlock Holmes and Martin Freeman as Dr Watson.)

This tends to be a very masculine piece of storytelling except for the very vigorous warrior, Tauriel, no slouch in her role of protecting the towards.

This episode finishes with a question in the form of a deadly exclamation, indicating that Smaug is on the rampage, that Laketown is under threat, and the dwarves regaining their kingdom seems less likely... Audiences now have a year's anticipation!

HOMEFRONT

US, 2013, 100 minutes, Colour.

Jason Statham, James Franco, Isabella Vidovich, Kate Bosworth, Clancy Brown, Winona Ryder.

Directed by Gary Fleder.

Homefront is a standard action show, and not untypical American action show.

It is also a vehicle for Jason Statham, who achieved considerable popularity from 1999 and lock, stock, and two smoking barrels Lock, Stock, and To Smoking Barrels. He became a standard action hero, grim and laconic, tough, in the transporter series and many action thrillers. He is something of an acquired taste – but has been acquired by many fans.

This film opens with a drug bust in the streets of the city, states them as Philip broker, working undercover. After the success of the sting, he retires to Louisiana with his young daughter, Maddy (Isabella Vj of each), building a house with the help of an African American friend, sending his daughter to school where she shows she is the tough daughter of her father by asking bullies to stop twice and then punching him out!

However, there is the constant pervading of drugs, this time a big warehouse outside the town, presided over by local celebrity criminal, gate Gator, James Franco in an unsympathetic role. There is also his drug-addicted sister, Cassie (Kate Bosworth) who is the mother of the bullying boy. No love lost and plenty of anger.

Meanwhile, the father of a criminal shot in the initial drug raid, comes to Louisiana bent on revenge – which leads to a complicated shootout at brokers home, and the taking of his daughter. Coming onto the scene is a kind of contemporary gangsters moll, an unsympathetic and unhelpful role for Winona Ryder.

With all the preparations for a big deal and all of drugs, things go askew, leading to shootouts, the abduction of his daughter and the rescue, and a huge explosion.

The screenplay was actually written by Sylvester Stallone and, 20 years earlier, would have served as an action vehicle for him. So, Jason Statham becomes his substitute on screen – as well as appearing with Stallone in the three Expendable films.

HOW I LIVE NOW

UK, 2013, 101 minutes, Colour.

Saoirse Ronan, George Mackay, Tom Holland, Harper Bird, Anna Chancellor.

Directed by Kevin Macdonald.

How I Live Now is based on a novel by Meg Rosoff. It is a story about teenagers and is

geared to the teenage, young adult niche audience. It is written in this style, the characterisations are designed to get young audiences to identify with the characters and their situations, and it is the same with the language.

The film was directed by Kevin Macdonald, an Oscar-winning director of documentaries, including *Touch the Void*, *Enemies*. He also directed a few feature films, most notably, *The Last King of Scotland* for which Forrest Whitaker won an Academy Award.

For those not in the know before they begin to watch the film, there will be something of a surprise in the portrait of the girl who arrives by plane from the United States to stay with her cousins for the summer. We hear the voices in her head during the credits. She is quite a controller, also obsessive, listening to music and surly with people, her clothes with a touch of the Goth, in need of mending, someone with a haughty manner and very little consideration of others. She finds her cousins off-putting as well. Their house could do with some cleaning. There are three children plus the young lad, George, from next door who seems part of the family, the enigmatic Eddie (George Mackay), 16 years old, Isaac (Tom Holland), 14, who was at the airport and drove an old truck home, and the younger girl, Piper (Harper Bird). The visiting cousin is called Elizabeth but she resents this name and wants everybody to call her Daisy. She is played by Saoirse Ronan who has proven herself one of the best young actresses (*Atonement*, *The Way Back*, *The Lovely Bones*, *The Host*).

Audiences will presume that this is a story of someone who feels alien and gradually becomes part of the family and the countryside. Not quite. Or, rather, not at all.

There have been armed soldiers at the airport. We see trucks and soldiers driving through the city and the countryside. It soon appears that there are possibilities of war, the mother of the children being involved in peace activities, going to Geneva for discussions.

Then there is the huge explosion, nuclear, with the destruction of tens of thousands of people in London. War situations then prevail, lack of power, difficulties with food, terrorists (never identified) who have poison the water systems. The children are taken by the army and sent to different sites where they help collect food and try to survive. But, the plan is to escape.

Much of the film is the journey for Daisy and Piper, making their way through the woods, sometimes hiding, trying to survive, a long walk to return home. There are some frightening experiences for them along the way, a crashed plane, men terrorising some women, their being accosted by two men in the woods, finding a container-centre with the bodies of dead boys and young men, preyed on by scavengers.

But, the physical journey is also a psychological and moral journey for Daisy, coming out of herself and her self-centredness, concerned for Piper though irritated by her, letting go of a lot of the controls that she has clung to, listening to the voices in her head very differently.

Some audiences may be reminded of the Australian film, *Tomorrow When the War Began*, teenagers in a war situation finding ways to survive. But, this is a more character-focused film.

LAST VEGAS

US, 2013, 111 minutes, Colour.

Michael Douglas, Robert De Niro, Morgan Freeman, Kevin Kline, Mary Steenburgen, Romany Malco, Roger Bart, Joanna Cassidy.

Directed by John Turtletaub.

There have been a number of films in recent years, especially from the United Kingdom, that are targeted to middle-aged and older audiences, especially women. These are the films that husbands accede to because of their wives' choice. This is one where the wives may have to accede, enjoying the presence of the stars, perhaps, rather than enjoying the story and the macho behaviour. But they may enjoy some of the geriatric jokes at the expense of the men.

The premise is amusing enough. We are introduced to The Flatbush Four, a group of boys, friends from the old days (that is back in the 1950s), whose photos we see during the credits and whose exploits are dramatised in the film's prologue, just to give us an idea of the kind of boys these characters used to be, somewhat tough, good friends, and two of them in love with the same girl. But here they are, as the film notes, 58 years later.

The smartest and the most financially successful of the four, Billy, played with suave confidence by Michael Douglas, has decided to get married, to his assistant who is 32 years younger than himself. He decides to have a bachelor party at Las Vegas and invites his friends. He phones each of them, who automatically think that a phone call from the others indicates prostate trouble or some other kind of health predicament. They decide to go. Kevin Kline is Sam, married for 40 years, going to health exercises with his wife, but the marriage having fallen flat. He wants to go for some excitement and his wife gives him a condom to take with him but does not want to know anything that might happen in Las Vegas. He phones Archie, Morgan Freeman, twice-divorced, having suffered some strokes, living with his son and his granddaughter. He also decides to go. But the problem is Paddy, who lives in New York, Robert De Niro, who is upset with Billy who did not attend his wife's funeral when he expected him to as well as to give the eulogy. He does not want to go to Las Vegas and is not exactly happy when he finds out what it is all about.

The film spend some time in partying scenes, which are somewhat like the spring break kinds of capers, trying to pick up girls, judging a bikini beauty contest (which Robert De Niro does not really seem to be enjoying from the look on his face), doing some gambling (at which Archie is particularly successful), and, of course, the loud partying. Someone remarked that it looked like *The Hangover* for the elderly.

One of the more interesting aspects of the film is the story of the men encountering a lounge singer, Diana, a former lawyer, played very attractively and warmly by Mary Steenburgen. She befriends the group, and the screenplay arranges it that both Billy and Paddy are attracted to her, just as the two of them were attracted to Sophie when they were young and she had to choose. Actually, it is in these scenes that Robert De Niro comes more into his own, better at the dramatic side of things rather than the comic. Michael Douglas is able to handle both. And there is always the problem of whether he should be marrying the younger woman and whether he loves her or not. And there is that ambiguous issue of the condoms in Sam's pocket, building up to a sequence where, as is so often in American films which raise sexual issues, edifying choices are made.

The film is fairly slight, intentionally so, though drawing for some strength on the friendships with Diana. Otherwise, it is a film for extroverts who might identify with the elderly

Flatbush Four – though the characters are all aged around 70 (which might make many of the audience think of their fathers or even grandfathers as they watch – and wonder).

LE WEEKEND

UK, 2013, 96 minutes, Colour.

Jim Broadbent, Lindsay Duncan, Jeff Goldblum.

Directed by Roger Michel.

Le Weekend has received very good reviews. It is designed for an older audience, probably those who enjoyed *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* and *Quartet*. While it is put forward as a comedy, there is an edge to the film. Trying to find a word that would describe its sharpness and its pleasantness, the result would probably be ‘bittersweet’. And, with the British background, ‘bitter’ wins out many times.

The film has a literary background. The screenplay was written by Hanif Kennaishi, novelist and screenwriter whose films include *My Beautiful Launderette* and *The Buddha of Suburbia*. He is working again with the director of *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Roger Michel, well known for such films as *Notting Hill*.

Nick and his wife have been married for 30 years. He lectures in philosophy at a university college but has been fired because of inappropriate remarks to a foreign student. They have a son who sponges on them. A lot of the spark seems to have gone out of the marriage. They decide to rekindle their love by going back to Paris for a weekend.

The film is effective through the performances of Jim Broadbent and Lindsay Duncan as the couple.

Because the action of the film takes place over two days, we have a great number of ups and downs in the relationship, affection one moment, irritation the next, the desire to walk out, tender moments of reconciliation. To that extent, the screenplay seems to be rather contrived, trying to put as many episodes in the running time as possible. Which means that the relationships and the tensions move too quickly as to be entirely credible.

A lot of the time is taken in going to a hotel, finding it undesirable, booking into an expensive hotel, scouting other restaurants, scrimping at one moment, paying up at others. And there are plenty of irritation scenes to go with it, making the audience continually wonder whether the marriage can be saved.

Then an unexpected character turns up, a friend from Nick’s student days, someone who has admired him and has presumed that Nick’s professional life has been unending success. He invites Nick and his wife to a party which is filled with left-bank intellectuals and academics from the Sorbonne. The friend, Morgan, is played enthusiastically by Jeff Goldblum.

The film then takes an even more serious tone with some conversation sequences, especially Morgan pouring out his admiration for Nick, toasting him at the dinner, then an important speech by Nick outlining the failure of his life. In the meantime, his wife has accepted an invitation to have a drink with one of the intellectuals after the party and has overheard Nick in another important conversation, this time with Morgan’s young son from America. The

wife also makes a short speech at the dinner table, which contains a nicely subtle acknowledgement of her love for her husband.

It is not quite over yet, the couple finding that they do not have enough money to pay their extravagant hotel bill. Morgan again to the rescue. His zest communicates itself to the down-and-out couple.

This is a film which middle aged and older couples may well identify with, reflecting on their lives, on their marriage, high points and low points and the possibilities for failure or continuing success. (A caution for some older audiences who might find some of the language off-putting.)

ONE CHANCE

UK, 2013, 103 minutes, Colour.

James Corden, Alexandra Roach, Julie Walters, Colm Meaney, Mackenzie Crook.

Directed by David Frankel.

This is a crowd-pleasing film, the story of a young boy growing into a man, bullied at school, encouraged by his mother, discouraged by his father, a boy who from his earliest years loved opera and loved singing it. It is based on the story of Welsh contestant on Britain has Talent, Paul Potts, who won the competition, despite his nervousness and setbacks in his life, and went on to a career of recording and performance.

The film has been directed by an American, David Frankel, best known in for *The Devil Wears Prada*, *Hope Springs* and *Marty and Me*. He enters into the Welsh atmosphere of the film, filming in Paul Potts' town, Port Talbot (the town of Richard Burton, Anthony Hopkins, Michael Sheen). There are many overviews of the town, the industrial centre, the coast, the port, as well as the details of the houses, the shops, the churches, ordinary life.

James Corden, has appeared in a number of comedies, especially *The History Boys* as well as the National Theatre's film of *One Man, Two Guvners*. This time, while there are a number of comic scenes, Corden creates a credible and sympathetic character. We see Paul as a pudgy young boy, tormented by his classmates and physically bullied and humiliated. We see him as a young adult, still the butt of his tormentors. His mother, played with her usual zest by Julie Walters, truly believes in her son and his talent. His father, played by Colm Meaney, is a factory worker who had his moment as a footballer but has been satisfied with his lot, thinking that there is something odd with his son and his interest in singing.

Paul has been corresponding and texting with a young woman from Bristol, Julz (Alexandra Roach) he calling himself Brad Pitt and indicating that he had similar looks, while she has been Cameron Diaz. When they eventually meet, there is a strong rapport between the two, she encouraging Paul in his desire to go to Venice to train to sing as well as meet Pavarotti. His performance in a local competition, dressed as Pagliacci, draws derision in the pub but he overcomes them and receives thunderous applause. And he goes to Venice, with the possibility to sing for Pavarotti, but his nervousness ruins his audition.

It looks as though he will have to work in the factory, but finds he cannot do it and returns full-time to a temporary job that he had in Carphone Warehouse. Speaking of product

placement, Julz works at Boots. When he is invited to perform in a local production of Aida, he has to have surgery for his appendix and collapses, with a later return to hospital when he is hit by a car, even losing his voice for some time. Encouraged by his best friend, a lugubrious-looking Mackenzie Crook who works at Carphone and his hard-case girlfriend, Paul is persuaded to enter for Britain has Talent, with the support of Julz whom he has married.

The film incorporates footage from the actual show, with the judges, Simon Cowell (one of the producers of this film), Amanda Holden and Piers Morgan as well as the response of the audience. Paul receives great acclaim for his singing of Nessun Dorma. There are quite a number of operatic excerpts throughout the film which will please even audiences who are not opera fans.

This is a feel-good film, the kind of film which more serious critics tend to look down on, even venturing the word sentimental. While there is a lot of sentiment in this film, most audiences will appreciate it, share it, with plenty of laughter (and there are some very funny lines), and even a tear when Paul triumphs.

PHILOMENA

UK, 2013, 95 minutes, Colour.
Judi Dench, Steve Coogan,
Directed by Stephen Frears.

Philomena is a good old-fashioned Catholic name, a bit like Christopher, names which derive from saints whose authenticity has been questioned. So, Philomena is an apt name for the central character who evokes a past Catholic Church, a strong and triumphant Church, which is now shaming so many Catholics around the world. This film has subject material that has been brought up in many government enquiries, particularly in Ireland where the key action of this film takes place. The fate of unmarried and pregnant young women in Ireland was often a kind of internment in institutions run by sisters, using the young women as Magdalenes in their laundries. Films which dramatised these situations include *The Magdalene Sisters* and the telemovie, *Sinners*.

This is a reminder that the Catholic Church has been criticised in a number of films, especially in the context of clerical sexual abuse. Catholics are being asked to examine the conscience of the Church and acknowledge more sinfulness than they might have imagined in years gone by. Whatever the stance of *Philomena*, it contributes to this examination of conscience.

The challenge of the film will be more extensive than others since it stars the ever-popular Judi Dench as Philomena and she gives one of her best performances, already nominated for awards. *Philomena* is getting widespread distribution.

Older Catholics, especially in English-speaking countries, could recount similar stories to those in the film: harsh attitudes towards these young women, severe and authoritarian behaviour of nuns and clergy. But, so many Catholics, while decrying this behaviour, remained steadfast in their faith – as does Philomena Lee, the actual subject of the film.

And the film itself.

It was written by Steve Coogan, best known as a comic performer and writer, himself an ex-Catholic portraying journalist, Labour government adviser, Martin Sixsmith (also ex-Catholic), who worked with Philomena Lee in the search for the son who was suddenly taken from her when he was about six. While Coogan has written all the anti-Catholic comments in the film and Sixsmith demands an apology from Sister Hildegard, morally intransigent in her attitudes towards the young women, declaring that they deserve their pain and suffering for their immoral behaviour, Coogan has devoted his energies to this story. (There is dramatic licence here since the actual Sister Hildegard was dead.)

Audiences can forget that it was Coogan who also wrote the faith statements of Philomena as well as her criticisms of Sixsmith's anger and seeming bitterness.

Judi Dench perfectly embodies Philomena, now elderly, a former nurse, who signed a document of silence about what happened to her and her son. She is a simple woman, not so quick on jokes, loves to recount the plots of Mills and Boons type novels. Martin Sixsmith decides to investigate where the boy might have been taken – which leads to the US.

The search is a blend of hope and disappointment, finally reaching a sad solution, once again highlighting the cruel decisions of the sisters concerning concealing information from Philomena and her son.

While the performances are powerful and the subject so serious, there is a great deal of humour (like the bit in the trailer where Philomena refuses a drink on British Airways, Martin telling her that it is free and she relenting, remarking that you have to pay for everything on Ryanair).

The director is the prolific Stephen Frears, a master of all kinds of genre. His other film with Catholic themes is *Liam*, a story of Catholics in Liverpool in the 1930s, written by Jimmy McGovern².

Both *Liam*, in 2000, and *Philomena*, 2013, won the SIGNIS (World Catholic Association for Communication) award at the Venice Film Festival.

THE RAILWAY MAN

Australia/UK, 2013, 116 minutes, Colour.

Colin Firth, Nicole Kidman, Jeremy Irvine, Stellan Skarsgård.

Directed by Jonathan Teplitzky.

A film that can be recommended – with the caution that it has many harrowing moments.

The advertising for the film seems to indicate that this is a film about the Thai-Burma² railway during World War II. It is, but it is much more than that. The main action takes place during the 1980s.

The film opens with a group of ageing former soldiers sitting in a veterans club in a Scottish town by the sea. One of the characters is Eric Lomax, a veteran of the Thai-Burma² railway.

But, he is also a railway man in the present, a love for trains, a seemingly encyclopaedic knowledge of the intricacies of British rail, stations, times, timetables, possibilities for connections. He suddenly rushes out of the club telling the other men that he has a puzzle to solve.

There is a flashback to one of his trips, his missing a connection but working out another, explaining this to the rather quiet and bemused woman who is sitting opposite him in the train. They begin a conversation, he giving information of the history of the town about which she is talking. There is something of an attraction but he has to hurry from the train for his connection. He realises later that he is drawn to her and calculates that he would be able to meet the train she had told him about at Edinburgh station. There is an attraction, love, and a wedding.

In the early months of their wedding, Eric has a nightmare, his adult self back in the prison camp, being hustled into the black hole. He wakes screaming which terrifies his wife, Patti. But he cannot communicate anything of his war experiences to her.

The screenplay, based on the Eric Lomax's book about his experiences, introduces one of his friends from the camp, Finlay, who is able to take her through his version and memories of the experiences. This begins a series of flashbacks to Eric during the fall of Singapore, the Japanese round-up, the cramming of prisoners on the trains, arrival at the site of the building of the railway as well as many scenes in the camp, the brutal work in the heat, the humiliation of the officers, the beatings. Eric is able to build a radio from scavenged parts which give some contact to the outside world for the prisoners. But this is short lived.

Eric has developed a hatred of the Japanese, a brooding hatred which he shares with Finlay. And the question is raised: can Eric go through life with the bitterness and the hatred?

The latter part of the film deals with Eric and his emotional dilemmas in the 1980s, including a visit to the site of the camp and an encounter with the translator in the camp. Since the story of Eric Lomax and his book have been quite widely publicised, it is not revealing too much to say that the theme of the latter part of the film is a purging of hatred and a movement towards reconciliation. 'The hatred must stop.'

The film has been written by Frank Cottrell Boyce, writer for many films of Michael Winterbottom and of the Catholic-themed story of a little boy and his visions of saints, *Millions*. It has been directed in classic style by Australian, Jonathan Teplitzky (*Burning Man*). Colin Firth has proven himself a strong and substantial actor over the years and his interpretation of Eric Lomax offers one of his best performances, both direct and subtle. Nicole Kidman plays his wife, unglamorous but with charm and empathy. Stellan Skarsgård is Finlay. And Hiroyuki Sanada has some very strong and moving moments as the translator, Nagase.

Because the Thai-Burma [railway](#) played a significant role in Australian involvement in World War II, the film is of particular interest. But, its theme of cruelty and torture, its theme of bitterness and feelings of vengeance, its theme of asking when hatred must stop and reconciliation be fostered, make it a very moving and significant film.

SI PARLA ITALIANO: LYGON STREET

Australia, 2013, 90 minutes, Colour.
Narrated by Anthony La Paglia.
Directed by Directed by Angelo Priccolo and Shannon Swan.

It is not often that a reviewer watches a film in the place where it was made and is in the title. The Nova cinemas in Lygon street, Carlton, in Melbourne, are not featured at the end of the film but they should be. They draw crowds to Lygon Street to the screenings in their 15 cinema site – where we watched this film in Cinema 8.

While this is very much a Melbourne film, it is interesting in itself as an Australian film, a film about post-World War II migration, especially the Italians (one in six of the migrants in those years). It is interesting because of the issues of migration, the reaction to migrants, issues of language, different culture – and, especially, of food and coffee.

Si Parla Italiano is also highly entertaining. There are quite a few talking heads but, especially, a group of older men sitting around reminiscing both in Italian and in English about what has happened in Lygon Street over a period of 60 years and more. There are also some other speakers, all very articulate, the Australian-born wife of a restaurant owner who brings some down-to-earth reflections on what she has seen in the street during the decades. There are also some guest speakers like Sir James Gobbo, former Governor of Victoria as well as Ralph Bernardi, the Lord Mayor of Melbourne, 1979-1980. There is also a guest appearance of Joe Dolce reminiscing about his hit song in 1980, with some visuals of him singing the song, Shaddap Your Face.

Early in the film, there are scenes of the migrants arriving by ship as well as their being put in a camp in the 1950s outside Wodonga where they were isolated from the community, not having an opportunity to get jobs, although some ran away. The main crisis was about food, a Russian cook and his menus and a revolt on the part of the Italians who succeeded in the in their case for being allowed to cook for themselves.

Cooking was one of the key themes for the growth of Lygon Street but, not before the development of different tastes in coffee and the bringing in of espresso machines, the first time in Australia, with some humorous stories about the installation, some touches of rivalry as to who was first, some words from the man whose father established a business bringing in the machines commercially even though some of the Italians did not know how to work them. And there are some stories about the origins of cooking Italian food, setting up Italian restaurants for Italians – and having to call Italy to get details of some of the recipes.

So, by the 1960s and into the 1970s, Lygon Street became a centre for Italians in Melbourne, the opportunity to come and drink coffee, to have an Italian meal, to talk. This had a carry-on effect for friends of the Italians, the Australians coming to frequent Lygon Street and experience Italian food and culture.

There are lots of memories and anecdotes about life in Carlton in those days and the developments which came when Italy won the World Cup in 1982 and thousands descended on Lygon Street to savour the victory. There are pictures of the celebration for the victory in the America's Cup where people suddenly turned up and celebrated, but at the end of the day the police had to be called in because of drinking and violence, upsetting for the residents of Lygon Street. Further disruption came with young people bringing their cars and using Lygon

street as a drag strip. One of the consequences of this was the widening of the foot paths and putting the block down the centre of the street.

Any gangsters? There were some celebrated families but the men around the table continue to say there is no such thing as the Mafia. One of the speakers is the celebrated contemporary Melbourne identity, Mike Gatto, about whom many things are said and surmised. But there were shootings, there were deaths and towards the end of the 1990s, there was concern about Lygon Street. The residents also have many comments about the television series *Underbelly* (and a number of sequences are incorporated into the film, especially some with that top Italian actor from Melbourne, Vince Colosimo). Many of them agree that *Underbelly* was an interesting show but they are at pains to indicate how it really didn't incorporate a lot of the facts and was not realistic.

It is suggested that curiosity about the gangsters, about *Underbelly*, brought a number of people back to Lygon Street to ask about what it was really like. And so, in the first decade of the 21st-century, people have flocked back to Lygon Street, enjoying the restaurants and the coffee, enjoying the wide foot paths and the possibility for having meals out in the air and sunshine (more in Melbourne than is thought of by those from other states). It is also pointed out that with difficulties in the economies of Europe, and in Italy, a number of young Italians have migrated and a new generation is working in the restaurants of Lygon Street.

Si Parla Italiano, narrated by Anthony La Paglia, offers a fascinating overview of a section of Australian society for more than half a century. It can take its place with other overviews of different aspects of Australian society and culture. While Brunswick Street, Fitzroy, and Acland Street, St Kilda, have acquired a strong reputation for eating and socialising, judging by the crowds outside the Nova, Lygon Street is still very, very popular.