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12 YEARS A SLAVE

US/UK, 2013, 134 minutes, Colour.

Chiwitel Ejiofor, Michael Fassbender, Benedict Cumberbatch, Brad Pitt, Paul Giamatti, Paul Dano, Lupita Nyong'o, Alfre Woodard, Michael K. Williams, Sarah Paulson, Scoot McNairy, Bill Camp, Garret Dillahunt, Quvenzhané Wallis.

Directed by Steve McQueen.



It is surprising to find that the story on which this film is based was first published in 1853, the memoir of Solomon Northup, who had been abducted from Washington DC and transported into slavery in the South. He spent 12 years, 1841-1852, as a slave, working in cotton fields, on cane fields, on menial tasks as well as engineering work. It seemed impossible that he would be released and ever see his wife and children, living in Saratoga in New York State, ever again. Through the intervention of a Canadian working in the South, his friends were able to come and effect his release. After writing his book and in succeeding years, he worked for the Underground Railway, enabling the escape of slaves from the South to come to Freedom in the North.

This is a most worthy story as well as a reminder, not often presented in films, of the racist presuppositions of the slave-owners, the slaves not being humans but their possessions, and the humiliation of the slaves as persons as well as the deprivation of their freedom. This is presented strikingly and most forcefully in this film.

The film opens with scenes of Solomon working in the cane fields, herded with other slaves in the mass sleeping quarters. And then it goes back to his past, to his freedom in the North, in his status as a citizen of Saratoga and his being well received by the town's people, especially the store owner who will come to his aid at the end. He has a wife and two children. Accepting the invitation to play the violin, which he does very well, for a circus and three weeks engagement, he is drugged and imprisoned, treated shamefully and brutally, and sent for sale in New Orleans.

The screenplay has frequent flashbacks to Solomon's life, highlighting his anguish.

The pathos is emphasised a young woman being tricked as she sought out her children who were taken and they are all sold as slaves, her children being separated from her, and her continued depression at their loss.

The first landowner is comparatively benign though he still thinks of his slaves as his possessions. He is impressed by Solomon who now goes under the name of Platt, and shows his skill in improving the transport of goods along the river. But he falls foul of an overseer and fights with him, thus forfeiting his right to stay on the plantation and he is sold then to a ruthless landowner, who is sadistic in his treatment of his slaves, resorts to brutality and whippings, humiliates Solomon, and exploits a female slave, Patsy, as his mistress, to the haughty anger of his wife. Both plantation owners are pictured gathering the slaves together and reading the Bible to them – and later the plantation owner interpreting the Scriptures to bolster his interpretation of possessions.

This mere description does not do justice to the visuals of the life of slavery, the effect on the men and women themselves, the psychological oppression, the physical and psychological violence which is up there, sometimes relentlessly, on the screen.

Director, Steve McQueen, began his career as an artist, a painter, and this is evident in the visual style of the film. As with the silent film directors, he uses a fixed camera for most of the sequences, letting the action happen within the frame. Sometimes he moves the camera, tracking as people walk. He has long takes, like paintings, while the audience has time to contemplate what is happening.

The film is blessed with a strong cast, led by stage and screen actor from Britain, Chiwetel Ejiofor, who has had a successful career in the United States. The more kindly plantation owner is played by Benedict Cumberbatch, while the sadistic and tyrannical owner is played by Michael Fassbender, star

of McQueen's previous films, *Hunger* and *Shame*. There are smaller roles, dramatically significant, for Paul Giamatti as the auctioneer in New Orleans, for Paul Dano as a jealous overseer, for Brad Pitt, who produces the film, as a Canadian who takes on Solomon's cause. The film introduces the Lupita Nyong'o, whose performance as Patsy, requires her to experience humiliation and great physical pain as she is flogged. She was nominated for an Oscar for Best Supporting Actress.

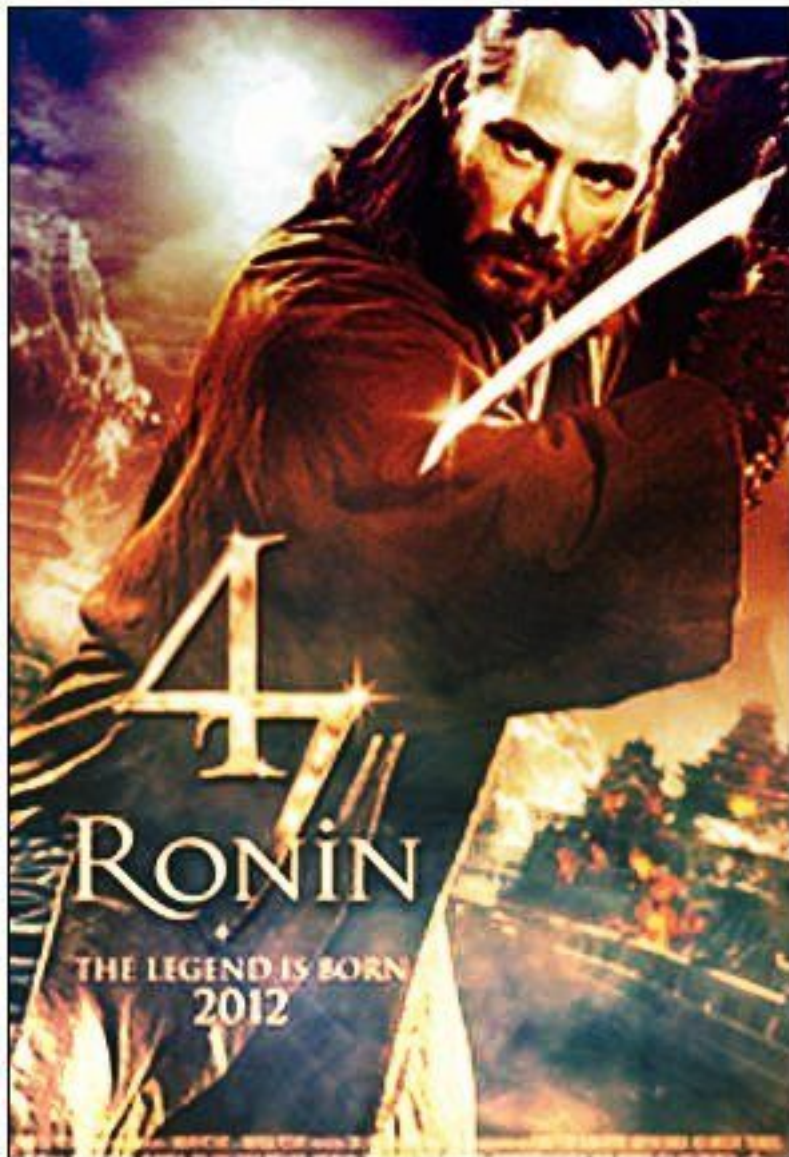
The film will be seen as important in its time, dramatising the experience of the slaves in the American South, a story and treatment which remind audiences of the continued slavery in different parts of the world.

47 RONIN

US, 2013, 119 minutes, Colour.

Keanu Reeves, Hiroyuki Sanada.

Directed by Carl Rinsch.



If you would like a matinee adventure, colourful and often spectacular, with Samurai martial arts, and a touch of romance, then why not 47 Ronin?

The film was very costly and, unfortunately, reviews and box-office have not been kind to the film. On the other hand, ordinary audiences who do go and see it have generally been more than satisfied.

One of the difficulties for critics and for some of the public is that the star is Keanu Reeves. While he received acclaim for The Matrix series, most of the comment about him is that he has a rather wooden, often passive, screen presence. He is not an actor of huge emotions. Here he can capitalise on that screen persona. He portrays what everybody in the film refers to as a “half-breed”. That is, he is the son of a Japanese woman and a British father, stranded in Japan, brought up in the woods by a strange hybrid people, thought by many to be a Demon.

The screenplay is a variation, imaginative, on the famous Japanese legend of the 47 Ronin, a group of disgraced Samurai who band together to avenge the death of their leader who was executed by the Shogun for attacking a guest. The audience knows, however, that a shape-shifting Demon incited him to this action, working for his rival who wanted to take over his kingdom. The Demon is quite spectacular in her transformations, the special effects people working hard to see her as a wolf, as a presence threading through the palace rooms and, finally, as a fire-breathing dragon.

The half breed is punished along with the other Samurai and then sold into slavery. The daughter of the executed Lord is in love with him but is taken off by the rival and, after a year of mourning for her father, she is to be married to him.

The Ronin loyal to the Lord is imprisoned in a hole for a year. On his release, he decides that he will avenge the Lord – Samurai belief in a circle of vengeance for crime. Reconciliation and diplomacy are certainly not on the agenda of the Samurai. He goes in search of the half-breed, releases him, and rounds up the exiled Ronin.

The first part of the film is quite spectacular, forest locations and an enormous giant beast who pursues the Warriors through the forest until the half-breed kills it. There are mime and musical performances in honour of the visiting Shogun. Colours are bright, costumes brilliant and a great deal of pageantry.

The second part of the film is rather grim, the training of the Samurai, the half-breed's visits to the hybrid people with whom you grow up in order to get swords to be able to fight the enemy. This also has spectacular moments as the Ronin are tested, not to draw their swords, no matter what. Some do and suffer the consequences.

But, when the Ronin attack the villain, the Demon has anticipated it and there is a battle and a rout. It is the final fight, within the Palace, during another performance in honour of the couple about to marry, that brings the story to a vengeful, fight-filled climax – and the loyal captain fighting the villain to the death, and the half-breed confronting the dragon and destroying it.

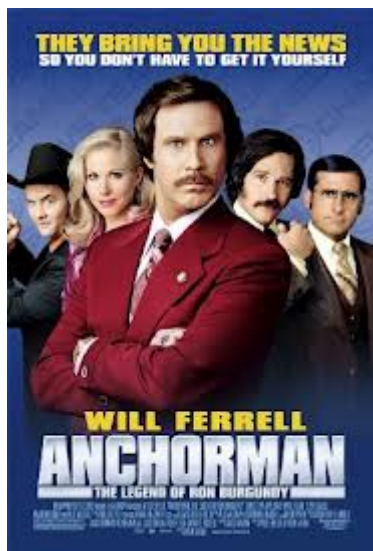
47 Ronin does what it sets out to do and offers an entertainment for those who are fans of this kind of Japanese Samurai stories.

ANCHORMAN 2: THE LEGEND CONTINUES

US, 2013, 119 minutes, Colour.

Will Ferrell, Steve Carrell, Paul Rudd, David Koechner, Christina Applegate, Dylan Baker, Meagan Goode, Greg Kinnear, James Marsden, Josh Lawson, Kristin Wiig, Harrison Ford, Fred Willard... and a host of cameos from big stars at the end (beware they are listed at the end of this review if you don't want to know who they are beforehand).

Directed by Adam McKay.



Enjoying Anchorman 2, and remembering Anchorman from 2004, I looked up the review and found a sentence I rather liked. And, of course, it is relevant to this sequel: One culture's hilarity is another culture's stone-faced incomprehension. So, it is obvious that not everyone is going to enjoy Anchorman let alone warm to Ron Burgundy's personality.

We are still back in the past when anchor rivalries on networks could bring on warfare. This time round, boss Harrison Ford wages an attack on Ron, sacking him, while making a star of Ron's wife and co-host, Veronica (Christina Applegate). While Will Ferrell has the capacity to create a character who is unlikeable and somewhat likeable at the same time, his Ron Burgundy is something of a dill, narcissistic, but fine at jokes and spoofs. What is Ron to do?

Fortunately, he is being headhunted for a new 24 hours TV News Service (which Ron thinks is silly, but the pay is good). He rounds up his old friends from last time and finds them in funny situations: David Koechner (racist and homophobic) has a fried food franchise – which fries bats; Paul Rudd is photographing cats; and Steve Carell thinks he is dead and attends and speaks at his own funeral.

The new network is financed by an Australian, Josh Lawson with a broad accent, owner also of Koala Airlines. Where did they get the idea for an Australian magnate who owns TV networks? Ron's rival at the network is an equally narcissistic James Marsden.

The screenplay is sending up the origins of reality TV and the news as entertainment, a helicopter following a chase in the hope that there is something sensational. Just by filming it with Ron's commentary has made it sensational and watchable. Ron appeals to his audience to think American.

So, we are off to silly shenanigans, like smoking crack on screen, which are not too far from what passes today for news. Foxnews? There is also a squirmingly funny sequence as he goes to his manager's family for a meal and does all the caricature of black people turns. The others get their turn at the funnies, especially Steve Carrell as Brick, the most seriously obtuse weather man you could find – who falls in love with the humourless assistant, played by Kristin Wiig. His deadpan responses become better and funnier.

Ron has a romance with the manager, Meagan Good, goes blind for a time with Veronica trying to make up with him. Then defiance of the powers that be because of interference.

How can it end – mainly with his son's recital of a piano piece he composed for his father – but not before a battle of the news anchors which brings in a whole lot of cameos from some performers you would not expect to see. So, there is a lot of entertainment in this fracas. (The cameos are from Sacha Baron Cohen, Will Smith, Kirsten Dunst, Liam Neeson, Marion Cotillard, Jim Carrey, Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, John C. Reilly, Vince Vaughn, Kanye West).

Ron Burgundy, despite himself, would be welcome to come on screen again.

ARE WE OFFICIALLY DATING?

US, 2014, minutes, Colour.

Zac Efron, Miles Teller, Michael B. Jordan, Imogen Poots.

Directed by Tom Gormican.



Wild oats seem to be getting wilder – but young people are still sowing them, and profligately.

This is a film about 20-somethings for 20-somethings. As Danny Glover said (often) in the Lethal Weapon films, ‘I’m too old for this...’.

If *The Wolf of Wall Street* can be described as a ‘cautionary tale’, then this, in its minor way, is the same kind of tale for its (probably) eager audience.

Three friends have a code (that’s dignifying it) where they have a list of women they liaise with – but no real relationships or commitment. This allows for some sex moments with touches of sleaze.

But, you expect that, this being an American film, this will not last and the three men will learn that traditional love, relationships and commitment are what is truly worthwhile.

The three are played by Zac Efron as the leader, Miles Teller as the obvious sleaze and Michael B. Jordan who, at the end, seems left high and dry after the failure of his marriage.

So, this is mostly looking at the three friends, Zac Efron living up to the code until he realises that he has fallen in love, Miles Teller secretly in a relationship, Michael B. Jordan secretly trying to revive his marriage.

And, that's it, until the next similar film turns up – and it will soon.

BLUE IS THE WARMEST COLOUR/ LA VIE D'ADELE –CHAPITRES 1 ET 2

France, 2013, 179 minutes, Colour.

Adele Exarchopoulos, Lea Seydoux.

Directed by Abdellatif Kechiche.



Blue is the Warmest Colour is an arresting title although it is not quite explained during the film. The French title is much more realistic, The Life of Adele, Chapters 1 and 2. This title appears on the film itself.

The film was warmly received in Cannes, 2013, winning the Palme d'Or.

However, the film was not without a great deal of controversy, at the festival and with the film's distribution. While the film is the story of a young woman, starting at the age of 17 and moving into her young adult years, it is a study and close portrait of Adele, growing in self-awareness and coming to the realisation of her sexual orientation. At first, this puzzles her, until she sees a young woman in the distance, a striking woman, with a blue hair rinse. She watches in fascination, feeling the first stirrings of attraction.

The woman with the blue hair, Emma, comes into life, meeting her, talking in a friendly manner, the two sharing their lives and hopes. The attraction becomes stronger, becoming a forceful sexual attraction which leads to sexual encounters between the two young women. There are several scenes of sexual intimacy, quite detailed in their sensuousness and sensuality – which challenges the audience to ask themselves whether they are empathising with the two women and their experience and love or is this something prurient, even voyeuristic (or both). It should be said that this is a very long film, three hours, and the first explicit encounter does not occur in the film until after 75 minutes, which gives a strong context for the scenes, and with so much of the film yet to come in the study of the two young women.

Adele Exarchopoulos is able to hold the story together, from the eager schoolgirl running for the bus at the beginning, to talking with her friends at school, often with some sexual curiosity, to her hopes to become a teacher, to her training and qualification (which occur off-screen), to her working with kindergarten children with some tenderness, a little more moody when she has to teach writing and dictation, but, despite the disappointments in her life, she is resilient.

Lea Seydoux is Emma. She already has quite a number of films in her career, especially *Lourdes* and *Farewell My Queen*. At first glance, with her blue hair, audiences might make judgements about her. In fact, she is a very sympathetic character, an art student with talent for painting, succeeding in her profession with several exhibitions. As she encounters Adele, she gradually falls in love and the experience with Adele has profound effect on her.

But, as the years pass, and as with heterosexual couples, life takes on a more even pace, passion diminishes, and there is the possibility of fidelity and infidelity, the dying of the relationship. This has quite a profound effect on Adele, who loves Emma and has become strongly emotionally dependent on her. It is not the same with Emma who becomes enraged when Adele behaves stupidly and risks their partnership.

The director has made some interesting films, including *La Grain et le mulet*/ *The Secret of the Grain*. He is originally from Tunisia but has lived in France, bringing a different sensitivity and sensibility to his film-making, especially from male director making this very female-centred film.

But he is a skilful storyteller, maintaining a quietly even pace, highly attentive to details of background and in the characters' behaviour, so that the audience feels within an hour that they have got to know the two characters well – and the reality of another two hours running time to understand them and appreciate them better.

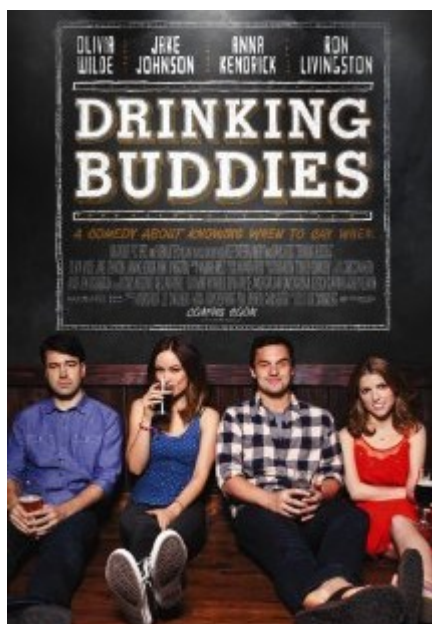
A challenging film for all different stances in these years of diverse public and private opinion on same-sex relationships and commitments.

DRINKING BUDDIES

US, 2013, 90 minutes, Colour.

Olivia Wilde, Jake Johnson, Anna Kendrick, Ron Livingston, Ti West, Jason Sudeikis, Joe Swanberg.

Directed by Joe Swanberg.



Drinking Buddies is a small, independent film, written and directed by Joe Swanberg (who appears in this film as the cantankerous driver fighting with Luke, who is helping to move his friends, Kate's, furniture).

The action takes place over a couple of weeks, focusing on Kate (Olivia Wilde) who works as secretary and part-manager at a beer factory. She is good at her job, liaising with other companies, making sales, continually on the phone. But she is also asked to do other jobs, like preparing a social

party for the company and prospective customers. At work, she has a good friend in Luke (Jake Johnson) who works on the floor of the factory. They joke together, have lunches together, and join other workers in having a beer after work.

They are all drinking buddies, and a genial look at drinking buddies rather than just watching gatherings to have drink after drink. These people have their drink, enjoy the conversation, enjoy the company, crack jokes, and build up a good spirit in their factory.

The film also shows two sets of relationships. Kate is involved with recording executive Chris (Ron Livingston) who seems to get on well with Kate and she with him. The other pair is Luke and his partner, Jill (Anna Kendrick). Jill is a Special Ed teacher, committed to her work. And committed to Luke.

The two couples go together for a vacation to the mountains. On a hike, Chris is attracted to Jill, having admired her for her work and dedication, and they kiss. That's all. But, of course, there are repercussions.

Jill goes away to sort out her relationship with Chris. In the meantime, Luke enjoys Kate's company, helps her to clean up the apartment she is leaving, helps her with the removal of her goods and furniture – though he cuts his hand with a nail and she has to call in some of the other men from the factory to help her. This does not please Luke and they fall out about their plans for dinner after their work.

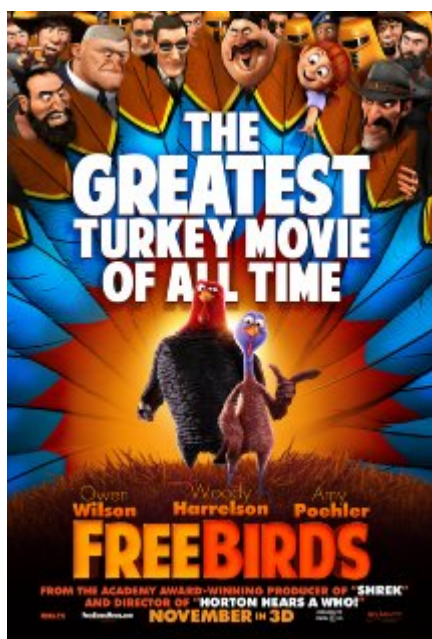
The final scene is very low key, action rather than words, but a gently pleasing end to this story of work and relationships in the lives of the various buddies, drinking or not.

FREE BIRDS

US, 2013, 91 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: Owen Wilson, Woody Harrelson, Amy Poehler, Colm Meaney, George Takei.

Directed by Jimmy Hayward.



Once upon a time - actually in 1995 - children around the world were entranced by Farmer Hoggart's sheep-pig, Babe. And many made resolutions that they would not eat any pork!

Unfortunately, Free Birds has not had the popularity of Babe. Which may be a pity, because this is the equivalent story of turkeys, of turkey liberation. How the film was made in the United States, with its annual menu of Turkey and cranberry sauce for Thanksgiving, is something of a mystery – the film is a plea for the safety and lives of turkeys.

This is an animation film which may not appeal so much to the littlies, except, perhaps, in its visuals. It is a film that young boys might enjoy. And, if this reviewer is someone to go by, it is a film that might appeal more to adults watching it in a relaxed vein.

A blue Turkey, Reggie, is the hero of this film. He is the outsider, always has been since he was young, the other turkeys ganging up against him. He tries to tell them that they are being fattened in order to be killed for Thanksgiving dinners – but they have a flock-like mentality and eat up whatever the farmers give them. But then Reggie encounters an odd Turkey, Jake, who says he has a mission from The Great Turkey but does not know what it is – but has a belief that he has to travel in a time capsule. The capsule appears and Jake and Reggie find themselves in the 17th century, with the Settlers and the Indians, and many turkeys, of course, preparing for the first Thanksgiving.

Reggie and Jake are turkeys on a mission and are persuasive with the 17th century turkeys, the chief, and the plucky (that's not quite the right word) daughter, Jenny. The settlers seem a tough lot, especially their defender, Miles Standish.

This leads to quite a lot of comedy, but also a sense of dread in the turkeys, and battlelines being drawn up as the turkeys face the Indians and the settlers. Part of the action involves flashbacks to Jake's unhappy background and his vision of The Great Turkey. Part of the action also involves Reggie going backwards and forwards in the time capsule, inviting Jenny to come with him to the 21st century, and in another flashback, discovering who The Great Turkey actually is.

Looking back at that paragraph, it might seem that the film is a whole lot of nonsense. However, the screenplay is well written, has many witty lines, and is perhaps a bit daring for an American audience to suggest that the turkeys are really a symbolic equivalent of the Native Americans and that the settlers seem to be rather ruthless aggressors. The points are made, but this is an animation film for the family, and so there is some kind of happy ending, symbolised by the Indians and settlers sitting down to the Thanksgiving dinner.

The voices are particularly good with Owen Wilson and Woody Harrelson bringing their vocal style of comedy to Reggie and Jake. And Amy Poehler is a strong-minded Jenny.

LA GRANDE BELLEZZA/ THE GREAT BEAUTY

Italy, 2013, 142 minutes, Colour.

Toni Servillo, Carlo Verdone, Sabrina Ferilli.

Directed by Paolo Sorrentino.



Just when you are pleased that you have made the Fellini connection with La Grande Bellezza, you find that every reviewer and every blogger has had the same thought. Never mind, it is, most definitely, very close to a Fellini film, especially through most of the running time, La Dolce Vita. It is

Rome and *La Dolce Vita* since the release of the film in 1959. This is one of Italy's most eminent directors in recent years, Paolo Sorrentino, and his meditation on Rome, its hedonistic life and culture and, in the latter part of the film, its worldly Catholicism.

For those who have visited Rome, for those who know it well, the film will be fascinating, stopping along the way at many landmarks in the city as well as many of the ordinary goings-on in the different quarters. For those who do not know Rome, it may be difficult to see some of the points or appreciate how it Roman in look and style, language and image that the film is.

The opening is a tantalising look at some aspects of the city, Japanese tourists and one dropping dead after taking photos, a choir of women singing in the alcove of an agent building... And then a huge scream and in an instant transition to *La Dolce Vita*, 21st century style, pounding music, writhing dancing, over made-up older women, under-clad younger women, older men, younger gigolo types, with atmosphere of rhythms and beats, provocative sexual poses, drugs. And from this emerges the man whose 65th birthday it is, Jep (Tony Servillo who has appeared in most of Sorrentino's films), King of the socialites, known by everyone, knowing everyone, mingling with the guests, a complacent smile on his face (or is it incipient boredom?), a writer of only one novel, 40 years earlier, everybody asking him why he has not written more. He has, but only articles and commentary on Rome's culture.

As the plot emerges, Jep and some other characters also emerge. over the long running time of the film, we are shown Jep in various situations, like a pseudo-dramatic art performance in a field outside Rome and an interview with the pretentious performer, going to an exhibition photos of every day in the life of a now middle-aged man, going to a kind of clinic where an expert (or a charlatan) injects into clients, including a nun who has sweaty hands, and charging a small fortune for his services. There is also a little girl whose parents encourage her to take buckets of paint, throw them on a canvas, her hands over them and produce an expensive inverter, work of art'.

On the personal side, Jep encounters a friend who had married the love of Jep's life long since. He has read her diaries and found very little reference to himself, only as a companion, and says there is no reference to Jep. This occasions flashbacks to his encounter with the girl – and his regrets that he never followed through with her? A father is concerned about the sexual activities of his middle-aged daughter. Jep becomes friendly with her, goes to social events and parties with her, takes her to an exclusive gallery, but she is ill. And there is his writer friend of 40 years who is desperate to succeed theatrically and, momentarily, does. Another friend has a giraffe in the Coliseum and promises to do a magic trick to make the giraffe disappear.

After all the partying, after all the strange counters encounters, with all the Fellini style grotesques, and his impending age, Jep begins to take stock of his life. At a wedding reception, he encounters a cardinal, ascetic looking, pleased with all his cardinalatial robes, who is touted to be the next Pope, but his conversation is generally confined to recipes, cooking and cozying up to Roman aristocracy. (It would be interesting to see Pope Francis review of the film and his comment on this character!). Then, at the end, a 104-year-old nun who has worked in Africa visits Rome. She has a reputation as a saint (echoes of Mother Teresa) and is being touted by an over-enthusiastic, unctuous entrepreneur. However, as she sits on a kind throne and dignitaries, from various faiths,

come to kiss her hand, her legs dangle, she shakes her sandal and it falls off. It is an arresting symbol of this artificial scene.

Jep wants to ask the Cardinal a spiritual question, but the Cardinal is distracted and hurries off to lunch. Later Jep says to him that he doesn't think he should ask the question – because he could be disappointed if the Cardinal had no answer.

The sister agrees to go to a dinner at Jep's house, the Cardinal trying to draw attention to himself and his recipes, while the entrepreneur explains that she eats roots – and the Cardinal saying he liked roots with lemon! She excuses herself to go to the toilet and is later found asleep on the floor, which is her custom. In the morning, a flock of huge birds, winging themselves out of Europe, are found on the balcony. She breathes out and they fly away. She advises Jep that roots are important. While she ascends the Scala Santa on her knees, indicating faith and belief in the transcendent, Jep goes back to the lighthouse and the memories of his early love, the final two images of the film being the sister on the steps and the image of the girl Jep loved.

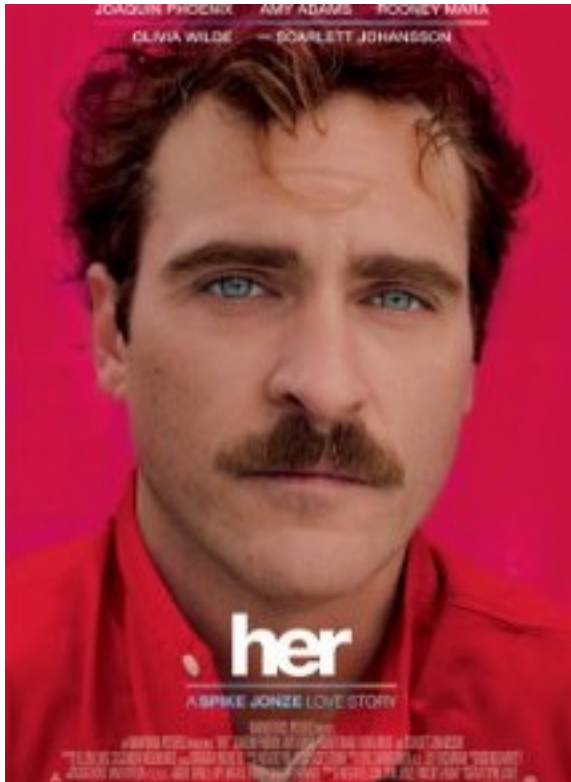
The final credits are beautiful, gliding along the Tiber, the camera roving around, watching people on the bridges, gliding under the bridges, to a rather plaintive melody. Jep has been asked about his search for the great beauty. He seems to be coming close to the end of his quest.

HER

US, 2013, 126 minutes, Colour.

Joaquin Phoenix, Scarlett Johansson, Amy Adams, Rooney Mara, Chris Pratt.

Directed by Spike Jonze.



It was not a surprise when Spike Jonze's film won the Golden Globe for Best Screenplay. Jonze made an impression some years ago with his films about identity, Being John Malkovich and Adaptation.

This time he goes into the not-too-distant future. It looks very much like our own time – and especially with people, so many people, walking the streets and talking into some kind of communications implements. To capture this atmosphere, the exteriors of the future city are those of Shanghai in the present, with some locations in Los Angeles.

And why the title, Her?

It is best to first consider the hero of the film, Theodore Twombly, Teddy/Ted to those close to him. The trouble is that there are not too many people close to him. At the opening of the film, we see him telling a story into a computer, a sad letter which we find he is composing for a client, working at the company bestletters.com. He has some contacts which with his fellow workers, especially Paul who always praises him and his work. But, as he goes home, we realise he is in the middle of a divorce, his wife wanting him to sign the papers. He has a son whom he loves. And that is about all.

Teddy sees a huge billboard advertising a computerised Operating Service, providing a voice and intelligence as some kind of assistant or companion. Teddy signs up and is given Samantha, Sam, who proves herself not only a companion, an intelligent friend, but someone who is exploring her own identity even though she is an artificial intelligence. Teddy begins to rely on her more and more, talking with her, listening to her, sharing her personality and vitality, and falling in love with her.

Most of the film is taken up with this growing friendship and love, a growing intimacy, sexual awareness. The film is unpredictable, the audience not sure where it might be going in terms of Teddy and his identity, his humanity, his love. And the audience is not sure how Sam will develop and how human she could become.

We are very conscious now of how people rely on mobile phones, texting, continually communicating with people who are not physically present and how that has repercussions on what they are actually doing, saying, sharing with the people who are with them. Her takes for granted this kind of communication (most people in the film, in the streets, in buildings, are busy talking but not to anybody physically with them). What will it be like in the future with the developments in technology and the developments in robotics as well as artificial intelligence? Will humans be the better for all of this? More human? Better communicators?

While these issues are being explored and the audience thinking about them, the film invites us to share Teddy's life and experience, his ordinariness, his sense of failure, the support that Sam gives him and the power of her transforming him. And questions are raised about the personalities of the artificial creations, with all the semblance is of humanity and intelligence.

Joaquin Phoenix gives one of his best performances, being on screen for all the scenes, communicating by his body language, his silences, the intensity of his inner feelings, who Teddy is and what he is longing for. For most of the film, Phoenix is interacting with an off-screen voice. Scarlett Johansson provides the voice of Sam, and is compelling. Amy Adams plays a close friend, a sympathetic sounding board for Teddy.

Once more, Spike Jonze contributes an interesting and tantalising exploration of contemporary men and women, the technologies of the 21st century and the challenges, creative and potentially destructive, of how human beings can be.

INSIDE LLEWYN DAVIS

US, 2013, 103 minutes, Colour.

Oscar Isaac, Carey Mulligan, John Goodman, Justin Timberlake, F. Murray Abraham,

Directed by Joel and Ethan Coen.



'Inside Llewyn Davis' is the title of the recently-released album of folk songs from the central character, Llewyn Davis. But the film intends for us to go beyond the music, to go exploring inside the character and psyche of Davis, perhaps surprised at some of the things we find there, but also disappointed in that there is not so much to find. And Davis himself, during the film, has to go inside himself, seeking the truth about himself, also disappointed in what he finds, with people thinking that he is a loser. And in many ways, he really is.

This is a film from the Coen Brothers, who have been making excellent films fairly consistently for almost 30 years. With this one they won the Grand Jury Prize in Cannes 2013. It has received several further nominations and awards.

The setting is 1961, New York City, the time of the emergence of the folk music that was to characterise the early part of the 1960s, the movement, pushed by the experience of the Vietnam war, which led to many of the popular singers, Arlo Guthrie, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Peter Paul and Mary (whose 500 Miles is performed during the film). At the beginning, Davis is singing a ballad, about life, about death, about love, about regrets – with forlorn lyrics. By the end of the film, when he sings the ballad again, we realise and, perhaps, he realises, that he is come full circle but that it is a very narrow circle.

Oscar Isaac has received great praise for his performance. He has a wide range of films behind him, The Nativity Story (as Joseph) Drive, down, and as Jose Ramos Horta in Balibo, but he also has a strong future ahead of him.

Davis wanders New York, gets some small gigs in a club, goes to visit his friends only to find that Jean (Cary Mulligan) is pregnant and he wants to get money to pay for an abortion for her. Her husband, Jim (Justin Timberlake), is unaware of this and offers Davis an opportunity to do a record of a comic song in praise of the President, John F. Kennedy. Davis also catches hospitality from these friends and from a Jewish professor in upper New York City. They help him but he seems unable to help himself.

The film also features the strong presence of a cat, owned by the Professor, but accidentally locked out of his apartment, with the elevator driver refusing to take care of him and Oscar having to carry him around the city, almost losing him in the subway. We focus on the cat, perhaps a symbol of Llewyn Davis himself, getting lost, being found again (or, perhaps, not).

There is also something of the picaresque about Davis's journey, hitching a ride to Chicago hoping to get some recognition and performance dates, with John Goodman in the back seat, larger-than-life, with sardonic observations and wisecracks about music. In Chicago he meets an entrepreneur, F. Murray Abraham, who does some plain talking to Davis.

The other option that Davis has is to go back to the merchant navy where he is known, especially as the son of his father also in that navy. There seems to be little love lost between father and son and Davis goes wandering again. He is rude in his dealings with others, ridiculing some of the other singers, leading to his being beaten up, twice.

And, at the end, there he is in the same place, singing the same song, the same forlorn lyrics, which have book ended Inside Llewyn Davis as well as his own attempted self-exploration.

The look and the tone of the film are greyish. There is a certain glumness, bleakness about the characters and the story. But this does not mean that this is not a very good film, that it is not an interesting film – rather it is a slice of life, a visit to a particular time and place, a memoir of the music of the period and what it meant. The visit inside Llewyn Davis is both challenging and effective.

JACK RYAN: SHADOW RECRUIT

US, 105 minutes, 2013, Colour.

Chris Pine, Kevin Costner, Kenneth Branagh, Keira Knightley.

Directed by Kenneth Branagh.



This film will probably not be on Vladimir Putin's must see list. But, by the last scene, it will definitely be on President Obama's list.

It is an action thriller, an espionage drama, based on characters created by Tom Clancy. In fact, Jack Ryan appeared on screen almost a quarter of a century ago in the form of Alec Baldwin in *The Hunt for Red October*. He was then portrayed by Harrison Ford in two films during the 1990s, *Patriot Games* and *A Clear and Present Danger*. His previous incarnation was by Ben Affleck in *The Sum of All Fears* ten years ago.

This time round it is a much younger Jack Ryan. He is played by Chris Pine who has come to substantial screen presence with his role as Captain Kirk in the new *Star Trek* films. He is young when the film opens, doing his PhD in London at the time of 9/11. As a result, he joins the marines, fights in Afghanistan, writes high-powered confidential reports and saves two fellow-marines in a helicopter explosion. And this before the title comes on screen.

During his rehabilitation and learning to walk again, he is helped by his physio supervisor, Kath (Keira Knightley) and visited by a CIA officer (Kevin Costner). Then it is 2013, Jack is a 30s something financial analyst on Wall Street, already in a relationship with Kath (no wasting time with onscreen romantics here). Transition to Moscow and an introduction to the villain, an ultra-patriotic financier who is masterminding a plot to bring the US economy to Depression. Everything introduced – and then into it.

A quick review would be to say that if you enjoyed the Bourne films, then you will probably like this one. It is smaller-scale, just over a day in Moscow for Jack (and Kath who turns up as well) with Kevin Costner there to supervise (with the help of a huge range of surveillance and tracking and communication soft and hardware that seems to work instantly), getting the blocked financial information. There are some fights and a desperate car chase. The rest of the film is a day in New York to stop an activated 'sleeper' from performing another terrorist attack. It's a variation on those CIA espionage novels, not great but effectively entertaining. And very ra-ra pro-US – and the Russians sinister.

With Kenneth Branagh having time out from the classics (though he also directed Thor) and enjoying himself with this kind of popular fare, he guides Chris Pine in an action performance even though he looks, as Costner remarks, like a boy scout on a picnic. It is good to see Costner in a good part and Keira Knightly having something to do. But the key performance comes from Branagh himself, making the villain (whom we see as instantly brutal) an interestingly complex character, not a comic-book cutout.

LABOR DAY

US, 2013, 111 minutes, Colour.

Kate Winslet, Josh Brolin, Gatling Griffith, Toby Maguire, Clark Gregg, Maïke Munro, James van den Beek, J.K. Simmons, Brooke Smith, Brigid Fleming.

Directed by Jason Reitman.



Labor Day is a quietly moving drama. Some audiences may find it very slow moving, but the film is finely detailed, giving the audience time to appreciate, be moved, contemplate what is happening and to contemplate the characters and their feelings and interactions.

In a sense, the plot is fairly familiar and, perhaps, predictable. It has been seen in dramas like *The Desperate Hours* when a family is held hostage in the home by escaped criminals. But, *Labor Day* is not like this. There is little or no overt violence in the film, except, most unexpectedly, when the mother of a boy with muscular dystrophy is annoyed at the end of a busy day caring for her father and slaps him across the face – more unexpected because of the lack of violence throughout the film.

We are introduced to Adele, a middle-aged woman suffering from depression and a general fear of going out of the house or making contact outside. The introduction is made in the voice-over by her son Henry, at the time of the film's action he is 12 or 13, but the voice-over voice is that of his adult self, played by Toby Maguire. He explains that he has to look after his mother, care for her, take responsibility for her, which he does willingly. On a rare visit to a supermarket with his mother, Henry is accosted by a man who is bleeding and asks to be taken to his house. Adele is afraid, especially when it emerges that the stranger is a prison escapee, who had been serving a sentence for murder.

After the initial alarm, the film settles down in a way that we had not anticipated. We begin to wonder whether the escapee, Frank (Josh Brolin in a most sympathetic role), is guilty of the charge. During the film there are quite a number flashbacks to his previous life, his marriage, the birth of his child, the death of his wife. While tying up Adele for appearance's sake, and intending to leave the next morning, he decides to stay for the Labour Day weekend. And he proves himself an extraordinary father-figure, mending things in the house, coaching Henry at baseball, a kindly and wise man. He is practically a saint-figure, a practical one at that.

This is all reassuring for Adele, who is played excellently by Kate Winslet, an intelligent actress in all her performances. Henry is played by Gatling Griffith, a talented young man who is able to keep his own on screen with both Kate Winslet and Josh Brolin. The weekend is not what they all we were anticipating and it leads to plans for the future. In the meantime, Henry has a Sunday visit with his father, who confesses that had he been a stronger man, he would have been able to stay with Adele in her depression.

Significantly, Adele's depression has been caused by trauma in giving birth to Henry, several miscarriages, and a very difficult birth experience which will move all audiences, eliciting compassion for women who experience such circumstances.

The screenplay is not as predictable as some audiences might have it, more of reality than we might have expected. Some reviewers have remarked on sentiment and sentimentality – but it always

depends how involved you are with the film before you go on the side of appropriate sentiment or decry sentimentality. Many audiences will share the sentiment in this story of three human beings who, by chance, interact with each other and whose lives are changed.

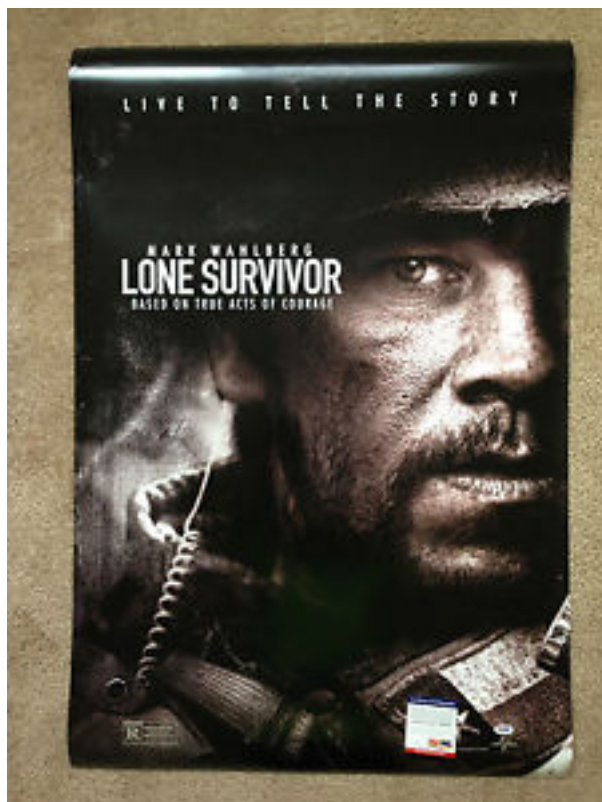
In some reviews, the writers and speakers have noted the previous films by director Jason Reitman, Juno, Up in the Air, and Young Adult, which had strong and wry senses of humour. They seem to blame him for not continuing in this vein but he has moved towards a more humane story and characters.

LONE SURVIVOR

US, 2013, 121 minutes, Colour.

Mark Wahlberg, Taylor Kitsch, Emile Hirsch, Ben Foster, Eric Banna.

Directed by Peter Berg.



Lone Survivor is a strongly American patriotic film. In the first week of its release in the United States it was the top of the box office.

It is best to give a warning for audiences. If you do not want to spend two gruelling hours in the cinema, best to let it go. With its close-up of a mission, and the close-up fighting, it is a particularly visceral film. We are so immersed in the mission and the fighting – and wounding and death – that it is a tough movie experience.

The film is based on a true story, an American mission in Afghanistan in 2005, targeting an Al Qaeda leader, but the mission ending in failure. As can be seen from the title, there is only one survivor.

The timing of the film's release is interesting. Had it been soon after the actual mission in 2005, with memories of 9/11 still vivid, it might have been used as propaganda for the American presence in Afghanistan, the war against terror and against Al Qaeda. However, it was released at the end of 2013, with the imminent withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan. Many watching the film and being stirred by it, by American military prowess, by the antagonism towards the Taliban, might have thought that the withdrawal of the troops was a wrong decision.

During the film, in a particularly difficult situation where the squad on mission are discovered by goat herders and they have to decide what they will do, various stances are discussed: whether to kill the men and save lives, how to apply the rules of engagement, investigations into military behaviour. The four men on mission show the different attitudes towards their mission and hostility towards Afghans and the Taliban.

The leader is played by Taylor Kitsch, making the decisions but also putting forward all the options. Emile Hirsch is a young man caught up in the aggression. Ben Foster (who in many films has shown himself a sinister presence, sometimes villain) is aggressively gung-ho. Mark Wahlberg plays the older member of the group, more common-sensed, Marcus Luttrell. It is his memoir on which the film is based.

Prior to the mission, we are introduced to the men, Navy SEALs, their presence in Afghanistan, their skills and training. Their commander is played by Eric Bana.

Actual filming was done in New Mexico, mountains, forest and desert standing in for Afghanistan.

The writing is stronger than in many similar films and the audience has time to get to know the central characters and so identify with them during the mission, their hard decisions, the pursuit by the Taliban and their being wounded and dying.

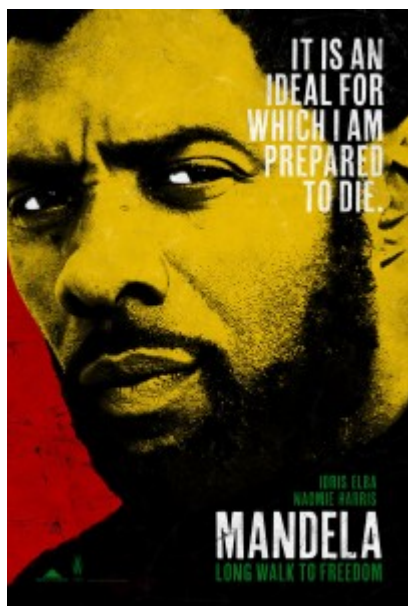
However, the action then moves to the survival of the lone Navy SEAL. He is rescued by Afghan villagers who are then attacked by the pursuing Taliban, which makes the action a little more complex as the villagers fight back with guns and guard the American, and reactions to Afghans more complex. The survivor is wary at first, but then he is cared for because of the very long traditions of hospitality and care for guests that guide the people in the village. In part, Marcus Luttrell's book is his opportunity to thank the Afghans for their kindness and care, and the final credits, showing photos or home movie footage of the members of the mission, also includes a photo of Luttrell in 2010 with his Afghan friend.

MANDELA: LONG WALK TO FREEDOM

UK/Africa, 2013, 141 minutes, Colour.

Idris Elbar, Naomie Harris.

Directed by Justin Chadwick.



Nelson Mandela was one of the most significant personalities of the 20th century. His life, and especially his endurance, if they were the subject of fiction, might seem exaggerated. But his story was well known all over the world, finally written by Mandela himself in his autobiography, Long Walk to Freedom. Now screenwriter, William Nicholson (Shadowlands, Nell, Les Misérables, Everest) has adapted the autobiography for the screen, a difficult task in compressing 94 years of life into 2 ½ hours screen time. It is clearly the material for a television mini-series. However, audiences will be pleased to have this cinema biography available.

The film is in the traditional biopic style, a fairly straightforward presentation of Mandela's life. It follows his life chronologically, with some alerting sequences when he was a boy, his family, initiation ceremonies in the 1920s. We also see something of his early professional life as a lawyer, an excellent scene which sets a tone for the film where a black woman is accused of stealing a white woman's lingerie, the woman in high dudgeon at being questioned by a black man who effectively wins the case for the accused, not without some humour. But, at this stage he is not politically active though sought after by the African National Council.

Injustices are dramatised effectively, and the humiliating treatment by the white population. With the legislation for apartheid in 1948, Mandela, who had married and had a family, opts for protest, leaving his wife and family, and becoming involved politically. He becomes increasingly radicalised, showing his abilities in leadership. As is well-known, after the failure of protest, he opts for some sabotage activity, shown briefly in the film, and he and his comrades are arrested, tried, and, to avoid making them martyrs, the judge sentences them to life imprisonment.

Many audiences will be aware of this part of Mandela's life but it is interesting for it to be fleshed out, however briefly. It was at this time that he encountered Winnie whom he married. The group is sentenced to Robben Island, off the coast at Cape Town.

Again, audiences will know something of the 18 years he spent on Robben Island and the further nine years in prison on the mainland. But, it is dramatic to see the island, the cells of the prisoners, the courtyard where they worked, the quarry where they slaved, and, again, the humiliating treatment by the warden and the brutality of most of the guards.

For those interested in Mandela's influence on South African politics, the film shows the discussions with the white politicians, with President De Klerk, the combination of shrewdness and practical idealism that marked Mandela's ability to change South Africa. After his release, there were riots and killings of traitors amongst the black Africans (shown graphically). But, in showing the broadcast where he spoke plainly, offered leadership, explaining that fighting the whites was a war that could not be one, we see him as the elder statesman, stressing peace. His final words in the film are about people not being born haters, their having to learn that, but that human beings are born with the capacity to love.

Idris Elba is able to capture the manner and the speech patterns of Mandela. Perhaps he is made to look too old before his time and audiences may focus on the make-up for the older Mandela, a bit too obvious. But this does not detract from the performance and the communication of the spirit of Mandela.

While the story of the man himself is familiar, and he is seen, not perfect, as strong, even with touches of heroic leadership, from his early years, it is the story of Winnie that is dramatically effective in the sense that she has to move from a devoted young woman and wife, mother of Mandela's children, to a woman who is arrested, tortured, kept in solitary confinement 17 months, who becomes a leader, ever more embittered, alienated from her husband's non-violent approach, becoming actively militant, even to military uniform, separating herself from her husband's way of achievement, and their personal separation and divorce. Which is a sad, openly public, comment on the complexities of the anti-apartheid movement and the walk to Freedom.

Morgan Freeman made a great impression as Mandala in Clint Eastwood's *Invictus*. He was played by Denis Haysbert in a little seen film of 2009, *Goodbye Bafana*), a drama of Mandela's final prison years and his emergence on the world scene with a focus on the sympathetic guard, played by Joseph Fiennes, who is also dramatised significantly in this film. Other portrayals of interest include a 1987 biopic (worth looking at in retrospect) with Danny Glover and in two films about Winnie Mandela.

Long Walk to Freedom ends in 1994, Mandela is elected President, confounding the expectations of both black and white South Africans, unthinkable six years earlier when the discussions about his release began.

This is a worthy film, and an opportunity for audiences to obtain more knowledge about Mandela, about apartheid, about South African politics, and the extraordinary phenomenon that was Nelson Mandela himself.

PARANORMAL ACTIVITY: THE MARKED ONES

US, 2014, 84 minutes, Cover.Cover.Colour.

José Diaz, Andrew Jacobs, Gabrielle Walshe.

Directed by Christopher Landon.



A Paranormal Activity film has become an annual event, celebrated by the faithful fans of the series. They have capitalised on their title, also capitalising on the number of films which have used hand-held cameras to observe the minutiae of the spaces under continued surveillance. They also have capitalised on found footage of episodes from the past. They have tended to focus on a particular family, its history over the decades of strange movements in the night, poltergeist experiences, evil powers and their presence.

There is something of the same in this edition but it is quite different, different family, different settings.

The film opens cheerfully with a high school graduation in California, the speech of the valedictorian urging change as the means to go into the future. Actually, he and some of the others do not survive very far into the future...

The action takes place in a Hispanic section of a Californian town. Jesse, the main character, has a camera, which – as in the other films – he uses in all circumstances, even when they are implausible. He and his friend Hector, who also takes over the camera work times, seem to be living a fairly idle kind of life, a touch of drugs, a touch of sex, and not much interest in anything else except the camera.

But, there are noises and bumps downstairs and, with nothing better to do, they decide to explore. Lowering the camera down the chute, they discover a naked woman and a seemingly Satanic ritual going on. Then the woman dies. And their friend Oscar runs screaming from the house.

As with the more recent Paranormal Activity films, the screenplay takes a bit of time to get going, in the sense that it creates atmosphere rather than makes audiences jump from their seats. Though there are some of these scenes later on, especially at the end, which probably means that the fans leave the cinema laughing at their fears and jumps, satisfied with what they have experienced, and looking forward to the next instalment.

After a lot of ordinary events, seeming a bit like padding, Jesse, Hector and Marisol, decide to try some Ouija experiments. But, the battery-run, technicolour surface toy that they use does seem a touch ludicrous as it highlights the green panel for a yes and the red panel for a no.

If you intend to go to see this film, this review, in terms of plot, needs to end here. Some bad things happen to Jesse, and to the cheerful grandmother who gave a bit of a human dimension to the early story. As might be expected from seeing the Satanic ritual, a coven of midwives is discovered, the characters go to the house, camera in hand even in less credible situations, and... Shocks and jumps and we're ready for the next film in the series. (The coven, with its midwives 'marking' some babies to be possessed at age 18 offers a link with the earlier films, the girls and their grandmother.)

THE PAST/ LE PASSE

France/Iran, 2013, 130 minutes, Colour.

Berenice Bejo, Tahir Rahim, Ali Mossaf.

Directed by Asghar Farhadi.



Asghar Farhadi has proven himself to be one of the world's best directors, and one of the best directors to come from Iran.

In his film, *About Ellie*, he portrayed a group of adult characters interacting on a holiday, something tragic occurring and the repercussions on the life of the group and their perceptions of Ellie. Then came *A Separation*, impressing audiences at the Berlin Film Festival, winning the main prize (and winning the Ecumenical Prize also), then moving to international distribution, receiving praise everywhere, leading to many awards including Golden Globe and Oscar.

The Past is his next film, with audiences having high expectations. They will not be disappointed. This is a very fine film, continuing in the vein of his previous films and their close study of individuals and interrelationships, often low-key, set within a comparatively small world, but nevertheless showing an extraordinarily humane sensitivity and creating believable characters with both strengths and weaknesses.

The film was made in France, the director not speaking any French but, nevertheless, eliciting wonderful performances from his cast. Berenice Bejo as Marie won the Best actress award in Cannes, 2013 (where *The Past* also won the Ecumenical Award). She is most persuasive in a very complex role. And the men are impressive as well, Ali Mossaf as Ahmad, her former husband arriving in Paris to sign divorce papers, and Tahir Rahim as Samir, the local drycleaner with whom she is having an affair and wants to marry, especially because she is pregnant.

The performances by some of the children in the film are outstanding, making us wonder how on earth the director elicited such action, feelings, extraordinary expressions of emotions, especially of the young boy). They include Marie's teenage daughter, as angry a character as you will ever see on screen, resenting her mother and the new liaison, its effect on her, on Samir's little son, because

they have both moved in with Marie. And the performance of the little boy, Samir's son, is absolutely convincing and passionate, in anger, in wilfulness, ultimately in affection.

All seems well at the airport when Marie welcomes her former husband who had abandoned her four years earlier and returned to his native Iran. There are smiles, but soon the smiles will disappear, especially as we wonder at Marie's motivation in inviting her ex-husband back when there is no legal need. And she expects him to stay at her house rather than a hotel which makes it very uncomfortable for him – and the rest of the family. She also wants him to talk to the teenage daughter, her daughter from a previous liaison, but who admires him and listens to him as well as argues with him. Because she does a number of very imprudent actions which have deep effects on the other characters, we feel for her, are aghast at what she has done, but trust that with her confessions she will be able to recover and continue on her life.

Samir owns a dry-cleaning shop and the action moves there later in the film as he returns with his son. In fact, he is married, and the question arises whether his wife knew about the affair or not, if she found out, because she attempts suicide in the shop, complicated by the actions of the young woman who works as an assistant in the shop. As the film opens, she is in hospital in coma.

While all this is happening within a very short space of time and in a rather narrow area of Paris, we see that there are universal themes in relationships, in vindictive attitudes, and the consequences of choices for children, and responsibilities for the consequences, sometimes like attempted suicide, for those not immediately involved in the crises.

The performances are excellent, quite believable, especially in audiences responding sympathetically. The dialogue is powerful, and very credible. In fact, the film does offer a mirror to us all, loves, fidelities, infidelities, rancour, vengeance, angers, with an Iranian sensibility which is quite universal. One of the best films of any year.

SAVING MR. BANKS

US, 2013, 125 minutes, Colour.

Emma Thompson, Tom Hanks, Colin Farrell, Annie Rose Buckley, Kathy Baker, Paul Giamatti, Jason Schwartzman, Bradley Whitford, Rachel Griffiths, Ruth Wilson, B.J. Novak, .

Directed by John Lee Hancock.



Everyone probably has a view on Mary Poppins, how much they like her or, perhaps, have some reservations. A personal response: when I saw Mary Poppins in 1965, I felt somewhat bad for having some caution about this most famous nanny. She seemed far too severe in her manner and in her speeches. So, while I enjoyed the film, Mary Poppins was not a heroine for me in the same way as Maria Von Trapp in The Sound of Music really was! And then came Jungian psychology: Jung described a perspective on the criteria one used for making decisions, whether they were clear, logical and objective or whether they were more personalised. Mary Poppins was certainly clear logical and objective, not exactly my cup of tea.

But, back to the review of Saving Mr. Banks. Being a bit wary of Mary Poppins, I wondered whether I would enjoy this film. I definitely did and would heartily recommended it to most audiences, especially older audiences who remember seeing Mary Poppins half a century ago and to those who've seen the film and watched it on television in the succeeding decades. It brings Mary Poppins to life in the persona of her creator, P.L.Travers.

This is a film about the making of Mary Poppins. Walt Disney had been asking P.L. Travers for the rights to make the film since the 1940s when his daughters read and enjoyed the stories. She had resisted but, in the early 1960s, running short of funds, she was persuaded to go to Hollywood, meet Disney and discuss the screenplay for the film. She had many reservations, certainly did not want any animation, was wary of it being a musical, and she didn't want Dick Van Dyke. In fact, when she went to the meetings with the screenwriter and the Sherman Brothers, who are composing the songs, she stipulated that all the meeting should be tape-recorded.

It is wonderful to see Emma Thompson as P.L.Travers. She portrays a difficult personality, not immediately blessed with personal communication skills. We see this in her dealings with her agent, on the plane with the flight attendant, with all the staff at the Disney offices, even with Walt Disney himself. She disliked a lot of the screenplay, took umbrage at some of the songs, especially when the Sherman Brothers invented the word 'responsibilit' which she urged them to unmake. And there is a humorous moment when the brothers conceal the music page which starts 'Super...

And Disney himself is played by Tom Hanks, bringing dignity to the role as well as an affable approach to his difficult author. There are many scenes in the Disney offices, interesting and entertaining, but very helpful in terms of dialogue, descriptions of characters, especially Mr Banks and his mustache, and the composing of the songs. Mrs Travers also has a visit, with Disney himself,

to Disneyland.

There is a very good supporting cast including Paul Giamatti as her Los Angeles chauffeur, Bradley Whitford as the screenwriter, Jason Schwartzman and B.J. Godly as the Sherman brothers.

But, this is only half the film. In fact, it opens in Maryborough, Queensland, in 1906, with the author herself as a little girl whose nickname from her father was Ginty. The family was poor, the father working in a bank, but having a drinking problem. He was devoted to his daughter, sharing her love of stories and poems. Later, the family is transferred to south-western Queensland where her father works in the bank, almost getting fired because of his drinking.

The sequences of Queensland are intercut all the way through the film with the scenes in Hollywood. What happens is that the adult Mrs Travers is understood through her childhood and her relationship with her father, and Mary Poppins is understood from the childhood, especially with the aunt (Rachel Griffiths) who looks and sounds like Mary Poppins when she comes to look after the family during the father's illness. It is quite surprising to find Colin Farrell playing the father, strongly and sympathetically, despite his drinking and his failings.

There is plenty to interest and enjoy in this behind-the-scenes story of the difficulties and joys in making Mary Poppins classic movie.

THE SECRET LIFE OF WALTER MITTY

US, 2013, 112 minutes, Colour.

Ben Stiller, Kristin Wiig, Shirley MacLaine, Kathryn Hahn, Sean Penn, Adam Scott.

Directed by Ben Stiller.



Ben Stiller. Ben Stiller has been making an impact on cinema screens and on television screens for several decades. He can write. He can direct. And he can be a striking screen presence, sometimes hilarious, sometimes more serious, and in *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, something of both.

In his early 30s, he chose to make, both directing and acting, the absurdly funny *Zoolander*. *Zoolander* was a supremely self-confident of award-winning nincompoop of a male model, coming from a disapproving mining family, vain, ignorant, but, finally, something of a movie hero. That was then, this is now. In his early 40s, he has decided to re-create James Thurber's comic character, Walter Mitty. The short story by Thurber is readily available on the Internet, only two pages long, published in early 1939 – with a comic and musical version starring Danny Kaye in 1947.

Is a 1930s Walter Mitty relevant to the 21st century? In a period when men are supposed to be men (with more than a macho touch), is there room for a comic hero who is alarmingly introverted, satisfied on the surface with his 16 year basement but important job in framing and editing the photos for *Life Magazine*, unable to make real contact to find a girlfriend? And there is also his mother and sister, Shirley MacLaine enjoying herself as his mother, Kathryn Hahn as his eccentric sister.

A man is expected to be sure of his identity and go about using it and developing it. Although, come to think of it, there is a whole generation of introverted game-players, assuming all kinds of identities instead of their own – is there a Walter Mitty computer game?

At the opening, Walter is unable to send a 'wink' to an attractive girl at work. He phones the computer dating company and begins a series of conversations, often at the most inopportune times and unlikely places, with the editor of the site, finally meeting him when he makes one of those times opportune instead of inopportune (funny silhouette version of an airport search). And then he goes into 'the zone', those imaginary spaces and places which Thurber introduced in his short story and which filmmakers and writers have taken much, much further. Walter is a hero, he rescues dogs, his photo is on the cover of Life Magazine, and , then, he is stranded on the subway station having missed his train.

Matters get complicated at Life Magazine, an executive (Adam Scott) being sent in to close the print magazine and put it on-line. This executive is a monster of a person, ruthless in his self-satisfaction and in his downsizing the staff. Needless to say, he is not impressed by Walter Mitty at all (though Walter does get the better of him in fights in the elevator and skateboarding along New York streets, in his imagination, of course). Then there is Cheryl (Kristin Wiig), new at Life Magazine, with a young son and an ex-husband, who begins a touch compassionately for Walter eventually attracted to him.

And that is only the opening. The Mitty adventures really begin, in real life, when Walter flies to Greenland to try to make contact with Life's staff photographer, an interesting cameo by Sean Penn. There are some funny sequences with a big, burley, inebriated, singing helicopter pilot who takes Walter out to the ship, dropping him in the sea for him to be picked up rather than landing on the small ship. No luck in Greenland, trying out in Iceland where there are lots of mod cons but an erupting volcano. So a few Mitty real-life adventures.

Just when we think that this is a climax, Walter's mother tells him that she has met the photographer and he has gone to Afghanistan to film snow leopard's. What else is Walter to do but go there – the aim to find the perfect photo for the last cover and meet the deadline. Actually, what follows, in the Himalayas, are some rather nice emotional touches care of Sean Penn, and the resolution of the problem so laid-back that you might not notice, care of Shirley MacLaine.

Walter's imaginings are entertaining, with some funny episodes, though the film is not a long laugh-aloud to fun-fest. Rather it is a somewhat romantic, comic and serious exploration of a man in mid-life crisis who has not really faced his early-life crises. Good luck to Ben Stiller.

US, 2013, 96 minutes, Colour.

Brie Larson, John Gallagher Jr, Keith Stanfield, Kaitlin Dever, Rami Malek.

Directed by Destin Cretton.



While this is a small, independent film, it has much to commend it. Ecumenical Award winner, Locarno, 2013.

The setting is a small institution, for short term internees, children 12 plus. At the beginning of the film, some of the staff stand around and one of them tells an embarrassing story about chasing one of the youngsters. There are many stories told throughout the film, and at the end, the staff are standing around and listening to yet another story.

Some of the stories are very funny, some have their sad, even tragic side.

Brie Larsen and John Gallagher Jr portray Grace and Mason, two of the staff who work in direct contact with the kids. They are also a couple. But Grace is in charge, with Mason very agreeable in working with her. A new member of staff, Nate, is introduced with the stories.

It means that there are two strands of the film intercutting each other. The first is the story of Grace and Mason, their love for each other, pregnancy and the issue of whether there should be a termination, Mason acknowledging his foster parents and the influence they had on him, and the gradual revelation of the very difficult childhood that Grace endured. The actors seem very natural in their roles and communicate their personalities and their problems to the audience.

The other strand is, of course, the stories of some of the children in the institution. One of the main characters is Marcus, an African American about to turn 18, down on life, yet stimulated by music and rap. Mason is particularly helpful to Marcus, listening, playing the drums, sharing his aspirations. The other principal character is Jadyn, a bitter young girl, prone to cutting herself, daughter of a wealthy businessman who fails to turn up at the time of her birthday, which leads to her wanting to get out. It is Grace who relates well to her, putting up with her critical comments, and her not wanting to be involved with the other children, yet having a capacity for drawing. Ultimately, she communicates her life and her emotions, especially with her father, to Grace in a story of a shark and its devouring friendship with an octopus. After she intervenes for Jadyn, Grace is able to tell her own very difficult life story to Jadyn.

A lot of the film is ordinary day life at the institution, the meetings and notifications, meals, birthday party, yet the tragedy of attempted suicide. The party sequence where Mason and all the other foster children of a Hispanic couple join together is an optimistic and welcome relief from the day-by-day troubles and joys of the institution.

Father Edward Flanagan, the founder of Boys Town, said that there was no such thing as a bad boy. Short Term 12, operates on a 21st century variation of this motto – that there is no such thing as a bad person and that friendship, support and love can gradually break through any shell that wounded persons protect themselves with. This is quite a humane and moving film.

THE WIND RISES /KAZE TACHINU

Japan, 2013, 126 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Hayao Miyazaki.



The Wind Rises received award nominations, including for the Golden Globe for Best foreign Language film. It is the final film of celebrated animator, Hayao Miyazaki, noted to such films as Howl's Moving Castle and Ponyo by the Sea. He also received an Academy Award for his animation film, Spirited Away.

This film is quite different from his previous films which led the audience into worlds of fantasy and magic, human beings but also strange animals, immersed in the Japanese countryside and the seaside, but accessible to Western audiences (and mostly dubbed by American actors of some note for the international release).

This time the focus is on the human, especially a young boy, Jiro, who is fascinated by planes. It is the 1920s, the era of development of aircraft, the beginnings of commercial aviation, and the design of planes which could be used in warfare.

It is somewhat disconcerting for a Western audience to watch this film, the story of a young man who contributed to Mitsubishi's development of planes that were used in World War II, confronting the allies, contributing to the kamikaze ethos of the Japanese pilots, and contributing to many deaths. However, it is a film which takes the Japanese audience back into its past, an audience sometimes reluctant to consider the aspects of World War II, like this, and highlights the ambiguity of attitudes of the period and later.

Jiro goes to the University, but in a very dramatic sequence, he experiences the great fire of 1923. It must be said that the animation for the sequences is most impressive, far from the world of fantasies, rather grim pictures of the extent of the fire, the population and their terror, Jiro and his rescue of two young women from the fire. They search for him but do not find him – yet, after a long search, he is found in the latter part of the film, which forms the basis of a romantic story, complicated by the fact that the young woman that Jiro loves is suffering from tuberculosis and has to stay in a sanatorium.

In the meantime, a great deal of the film is devoted to Jiro and his research, working with a friend, collaborating with the Mitsubishi boss. During the 1930s, the two are sent to Germany where they examine the planes, under the auspices of the designer, Junker, and experience some hostility from the Germans who see themselves as superior to the Japanese.

The film also introduces the Russians and has subplots indicating the espionage network of the 1930s.

Jiro is an engaging hero, something of a nerd of his time, lost in his books, in his imagination and world of design, bespectacled. His love for the young woman changes his life – and gives something of a moral to the film where people design planes that can be used as weapons and instruments of war whereas their motivation is for peaceful and profitable use, and the realisation that love is the most important experience.

There is an interesting fantasy in Jiro's imagination – the presence of an Italian designer who encourages Jiro, develops all kinds of fascinating planes which, eventually, fail. However, he is an inspiration Jiro.

And interesting that late in a significant career, contributing to Japanese animation for over a quarter of a century, and introducing it to international audiences, that Miyazaki has chosen to tell this Japanese story.

THE WOLF OF WALL STREET

US, 2013, 175 minutes, Colour.

Leonardo DiCaprio, Jonah Hill, Margot Robbie, Rob Reiner, Jean Desjardin, Jon Bernthal, Matthew McConaughey, Jon Favreau, Joanna Lumley.

Directed by Martin Scorsese.



Fascinating and repellent.

There is something mesmerising about films which portray the wheeler dealers of big finance, especially on Wall Street. In the 1980s, Oliver Stone gave us the archetypal insider dealer, Gordon Gecko (who is mentioned in passing in this screenplay). Other films which led us into the world of finance and sales include Glengarry Glen Ross, based on David Mamet's play, and the world of young dealers in Boiler Room. While 2013's American Hustle is about fraud, it is still based on the premise of getting money as the most important quest in life. The miss quote from the Letter of James, 'money is the root of all evil', actually reads 'the love of money is the root of all evil'. And the

behaviour of Jordan Belfort and the other brokers in *The Wolf of Wall Street* certainly illustrate this dictum. So here is Martin Scorsese's take on this world, his fifth collaboration with Leonardo DiCaprio.

There has been quite some controversy about this film, some claiming that it glorified this self-centred, warped and sometimes degrading world. Those who defend it say it is 'a cautionary tale', not an exhortation to be another Jordan Belfort. Some audiences have been disgusted by several orgiastic interludes but out of a film that runs for 175 minutes, they are comparatively brief and are meant to illustrate the way of life that the central character, Jordan Belfort, has become accustomed to.

In this kind of cautionary tale, there is always the possibility, especially in the early part of the film, that some members of the audience, especially ambitious men, might identify with this kind of behaviour. But, as Jordan's father reminds him early in the film and he neglects to remember it, chickens come home to roost. Nothing succeeds like excess – until it catches up with you.

Leonardo DiCaprio has won some awards for his performance as Jordan Belfort. This time he is something of a combination of his landowner in *Django Unchained* and the great *Gatsby*. Starting as a naive young man with ambitions, he is overwhelmed by the energy and frenzy of the brokers on Wall Street, listening attentively to his mentor or, a very effective small cameo from Matthew McConaughey, who glorifies the exhilaration of making money, egged on by cocaine, alcohol and womanising. It is not long before Jordan is not only part of this world but a leader.

Everything might have collapsed after the Stock Exchange failure of October 1987. Jordan goes on the road giving talks about making money but his wife urges him to follow up and and he discovers a small company, dealing in small shares and almost instantly takes it over, recruiting a group of avaricious men who are not the greatest intellects but have killer instincts for their job. He is pursued by a young man, Don (Jonah Hill) who gradually becomes his right hand man, not only in work, but in self-indulgence and a willingness for debauchery.

These themes sound serious but, in fact, the tone taken is rather comic, often sardonic and ironic, sometimes, as with a prolonged scene where Jordan and Don indulge in pills which take time to take effect, and Jordan, affected by them, has to crawl along a hall and fall down steps to get to his car and drive it under this influence – which does lead to a crisis with the police, with his wife, and his daughter.

It is a long film, prolonged at times, but it shows the ambition and self-delusion of a would-be highflier, ignoring realities, including investigation by the FBI, opening accounts in Switzerland with the aid of his wife's aunt (an unexpected cameo by Joanna Lumley) which unexpectedly leads to more crises and a reckless voyage in the Mediterranean in the lavish yacht he has bought for and named after his wife, his second wife, Naomi (Australian Margot Robbie). The Swiss banker is played by Jean Desjardin, Oscar-winner for *The Artist*.

Often it is said that this is an amoral world and, indeed, it is. But on the evidence of *The Wolf of Wall Street*, it is an immoral world, recklessly so, exploitative lease so. But this is not to say that it is advocating this kind of world – it is presenting it in a way that is both fascinating and repellent.

REVIEWS, FEBRUARY-MARCH 2014

3 DAYS TO KILL

ALL IS LOST

CHINESE PUZZLE

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GRAND BUDAPEST HOTEL, The

I, FRANKENSTEIN

IN A WORLD...

MONUMENTS MEN, The

NEBRASKA

NON-STOP

NYMPHOMANIAC VOLUME 1

OUT OF THE FURNACE

ROBOCOP

ROMEO AND JULIET

TRACKS

VAMPIRE ACADEMY

WINTER'S TALE, A

WOLF CREEK 2

3 DAYS TO KILL

US/France, 2013, 117 minutes, Colour.

Kevin Costner, Amber Heard, Hallie Steinfeldt, Connie Nielsen.

Directed by Mc G.



If you have two hours to kill, you might enjoy watching three days to kill! In fact, there is an ambiguity in the title, with a father having three days to spend with his estranged daughter, and his CIA involvement in an assassination attempt.

On the whole, the film is serious in its portrait of an ageing CIA agent, discovering that he is terminally ill, and wanting out of his work in order to re-connect with his family. His assignment is very serious indeed: an arms dealer, his agent with a dirty bomb, his accountant and other associates. But then, the film also has a lot of humorous touches, especially in the agent's trying to

deal and understand his daughter who is at school in an international college in Paris. He is also benign to an agent whom he tortures but also relies on for advice about daughters. Put the two ingredients together and stir and you come up with this film.

It has been directed with flourishes by McG who made two Charlie's Angels films a decade ago. It is based on a story by Luc Besson, who has made some classics, like Subway but who has also provided stories for quite a lot of action films including the Transporter series and a film which plays on similar themes but much less successfully, The Family with Robert De Niro and Michelle Pfeiffer.

The agent, Ethan Renner, is played by a world-weary Kevin Costner, something he does quite well and quite convincingly. When we see him in action as an assassin, we realise that he considers it just as a job and his conscience is fixed solely on American loyalty and obeying CIA orders. He is shrewd, quick into action, but at this time he has terminal cancer, only three months to live. When his contact from the US, Vivi insists that he complete the mission he began in Belgrade, with all kinds of explosions and shootings in one of the main streets, in Paris where his estranged wife and daughter live.

Audience credulity is rather strained when we see the CIA agent in charge of the mission to kill the arms dealer. Initially prim and unremarkable in her interviews with the CIA bosses, she transforms into a combination of the vamp, femme fatale, and parody of female enemies in James Bond films. She is played by Amber Heard, far too young, it would seem, to have made such progress in the CIA ranks. However, she is not plagued by any moral scruples and insists on Renner completing his work.

On the family side there is Connie Nielsen as his wife, who still loves him despite his five-year absence and his daughter, Hallie Steinfeldt, who is that the precocious stage, falling for a senior student at school, thinking that her hair do going awry is an apocalyptic disaster.

The ending relies on an enormous coincidence, but it gets the characters together in the one place, serves as an occasion for mayhem, and, with the help of a mysterious experimental drug provided by his vamp superior, Renner may actually get some extra time with his family.

Eye-catching while on the screen, but one that will fairly quickly fall out of the memory.

300: THE RISE OF AN EMPIRE

US, 2014, 106 minutes, Colour.

Sullivan Stapleton, Eva Green, Lena Heady, Rodrigo Santoro, Hans Matheson, Callum Mulvey, Jack O'Connell, David Wenham.

Directed by Noam Murro.



300, Rise of and Empire, takes up the history of the Greek confrontations with the Persians in the fifth century BC. There are allusions to the original film, 300, in the opening credits, the dead lying at Thermoplae with Leonidas amongst them. Dilios, played by David Wenham, is also a link, giving an account of what happened at Thermoplae. The other link is Leonidas' wife, (Lena Heady who not only provides a voiceover narrative, but becomes part of the action, advocating the superiority of Sparta, but eventually leading her fleet to the action).

The King of Persia, Xerxes, who looked so strangely exotic in the original film, appears again trying to save his father, Darius, from being killed at the Battle of Marathon, then influenced by Artemisia and going through a ritual out of which he appears covered in gold and chains.

However, this film is not a sequel. Rather, it is a parallel story of what was happening in Athens and in the Bay of Salamis as the Athenians confronted the Persian fleet while the Spartans were battling at Thermoplae.

The hero of the film is Themistocles, the Athenians leader, who commands the smaller forces of Athens and their fleet. He is played by Australian, Sullivan Stapleton, commanding in appearance (though his Australian accent is less forceful than that of, say, Russell Crowe in Gladiator), clever in strategies, eliciting loyalty from friends and soldiers. The villain of the film is Artemisia, played with full force by Eva Green, a Greek woman whose family was brutalised by Greek soldiers, she herself raped and taken into slavery and ultimately rescued by a Persian – hence her being an aggressively

vicious leader of the Persians. She is played as an intense, malevolent and sadistic monster, with her moments of sensuality and seduction, defying Themistocles, and ultimately facing up to him, one-on-one, both at sword point.

While there might be some inaccuracies in the history of the story, it nevertheless brings this picture of Greek history and legend to life. The main reason for this is that it uses, visually, the equivalents of the graphic novel, the graphic comic. The sets are stylised, the colour grading dark and ominous, especially during the sea battles. The photography and editing is for the equivalent of cartoon panels, the action sometimes in slow motion, even slowest motion, so that the audience has time to focus on particular panels, close-ups, but, especially, on the vivid combat scenes and death. There is a moment when there is a discussion that war is not for glory – but, with so much bloodshed and the blood spurts coming at the audience (especially if seen in 3-D), it is certainly gory.

This means that polished acting is not required. Rather, there is a great deal of posing and posturing, both with Themistocles and Artemisia, but, more especially, with Xerxes (who looks more like someone on a float in a parade rather than King of Persia).

There is a thundering score, pounding sound engineering, all creating an atmosphere which makes quite an impression whether one likes it or not.

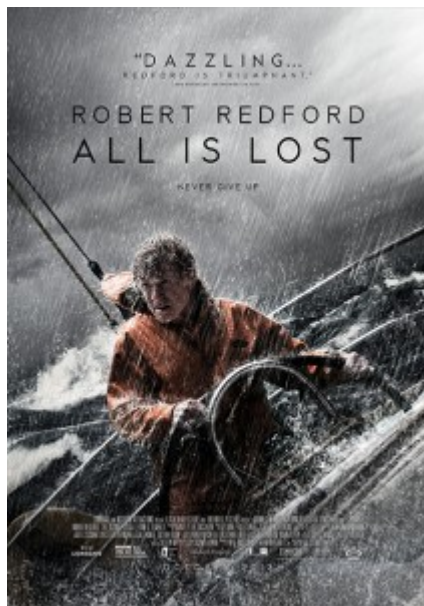
This reviewer studied Greek and ancient history at school and was basically familiar with the plot elements – and found a certain satisfaction in seeing them come alive in graphic novel style, graphically.

ALL IS LOST

US, 2013, 107 minutes, Colour.

Robert Redford.

Directed by J.C.Chandor.



All is Lost is a film of endurance, not just because of the experiences of the lone sailor on the Indian Ocean, but also of the psychological and emotional demands made on the audience.

The plot is quite straightforward, an older American man is sailing around the world alone, finds himself 1700 miles from Sumatra and discovers that a container, falling from a ship, has collided with his yacht and has put a hole in the side. Water is getting in.

While the sailor does attempt some kind of communication, he is really on his own and has to face the difficulties with his yacht, with his own fears, with his own competence, all by himself. The audience spends 100 minutes in his company, sharing in all his experiences, his hopes, his practical endeavours, his sightings of container ships passing and using flares but their not noticing him, a sense of final despair, that nothing can be done, even as sharks circle his boat.

This is not the kind of story that most audiences are interested in watching and they may have to force themselves to continue. Audiences who identify immediately with the sailor and with his experiences will find the film engrossing.

One of the advantages of the film is that the central character is played by Robert Redford, aged 76 at the time of filming. With his long career in front of the camera and behind it, it is satisfying to see him get this strong role at this stage of his life and career. He makes the most of it, convincing us that he is experiencing what is being shown on screen.

The screenplay and direction is by J.C.Chandor, who previously directed the Wall Street drama, Margin Call. This is quite a different film with different demands on the director, illustrating Chandor's talent.

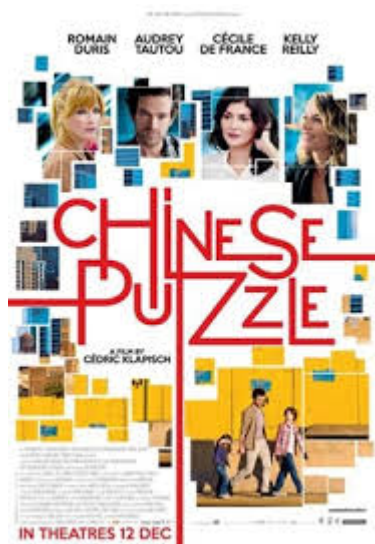
The film has its niche audience, but others will appreciate seeing this fine performance by Robert Redford.

CHINESE PUZZLE/ CASSE-TETE CHINOIS

France, 2013, 117 minutes, Colour.

Romain Duris, Audrey Tautou, Cecile de France, Kelly Reilly.

Directed by Cedric Klapisch.



We might well ask why a French film, mainly set in New York, has a title such as Chinese Puzzle! Actually, the director, Cedric Klapisch, has made a trilogy with such unusual the names. The first was L'Auberge Espagnole, which translated Pot Luck or Euro Pudding. The second was Russian Dolls, using the English phrase for the title. So, audiences alerted, we wonder what these tales could be.

They are the titles of three films with a central set of characters. At first, in L'Auberge Espagnole, they were a set of students living together in a Spanish apartment, with all the issues of their age, relationships, hopes for the future... In Russian Dolls, they were getting older, moving into career situations, continuing with their relationship issues. Now, they are around the 40 mark and experiencing problems that make them re-assess their lives.

One of the major surprises of the film is the New York setting. What is a very French director doing when his central characters opt to live in New York rather than in France? A French concession to the United States? The director has indicated that now we have a generation which is more mobile, and is not afraid of mixing with different cultures, live in different countries, deal with international challenges. But French characters actually opting for life in the US?

Once again, the central character, Xavier, played by Romain Duris, is beset by problems. He has become a successful writer and is continually hounded by his agent in Paris. He has been married for 10 years to Wendy (Kelly Reilly from the previous films) and has two children. When he moves to New York, so does she – though they are separated and she has taken up with an American. His questions include asking his children whether they want to live in the United States, issues of completing his novel, even his search for an apartment for himself.

The other central character from the past, Martine (Audrey Tautou), also makes contact. She and her son come to America for a holiday, making all kinds of complications for Xavier and his friend, Isabelle (Cecile de France), also from the previous films, who is in a lesbian relationship, and an affair, and allows Xavier to have her apartment as a base. And it becomes more complicated as Xavier has decided that he wants to get a green card in order to work with in the US. Fortunately, he has helped a Chinese taxidriver when he was assaulted and the family is extremely grateful, one of the daughters agreeing to stand in as his wife for the card. This also involves some complications with the apartment and the Inspector who wants to see whether the marriage is genuine.

On the whole, this is a frothy French comedy – allowing for its love for the United States and New York City – and will entertain fans of the other films, wanting to see what happens in the lives of these characters.

DALLAS BUYERS CLUB

US, 2013, 120 minutes, Colour.

Matthew McConaughey, Jared Leto, Jennifer Garner, Dennis O'Hare,

Directed by Jean-Claude Vallee.



Dallas Buyers Club made quite an impact on its release at the end of 2013. It was nominated for a number of Oscars, including best film and won acting awards for Matthew McConaughey as best actor and Jared Leto as best supporting actor.

This is an interesting experience rather than an enjoyable film. It takes its audience back into the 1980s, to the time of the emergence of AIDS, with puzzlement about the emergence of the illness, its origins, its causes, its communication, the prevalence among gay men, the acquiring of the disease through unprotected sex with men and women, the communication of the disease by shared needles. With the subsequent 30 years of history and the changes in treatment for AIDS, its prevalence throughout the world, the removal of much of the social stigma of the 1980s and 1990s, it is important to do some kind of examination of the situation, some kind of examination of conscience, about reactions and behaviour in those decades. It is also important to look at the developments and abuses of drugs taken to combat the virus.

We are introduced to Ron Woodruff, an electrician in Texas, a participant in rodeos (with sexual behaviour behind the barriers), a kind of self-important man-about-town, leading a carefree and somewhat dissolute life, especially as regards sexual behaviour, alcohol and drugs. When he is injured through an electrical fault, he finds himself not only in hospital but with serious doctors telling him that he has only 30 days to live, that he was infected with the AIDS virus. He reacts violently, in denial.

He does go back to hospital where he encounters a transvestite in the ward, Rayon (Jared Leto), also with AIDS from his life on the street. Ron reacts to him with homophobic outbursts – which he then experiences from his co-workers, suspicious of his behaviour.

With the help of a worker at the hospital, he finds a doctor in Mexico who is able to supply him with AZT which improves his health. However, eventual research indicates that AZT is injurious to the immune system and Ron makes further investigations about the availability of drugs, many of which are prohibited by the FDA in the United States. He starts to import from Mexico and from other countries, impersonating a priest to get them through the border, but not being effective and immediately coming under suspicion.

To continue to help people who line up at his motel door, he decides to form a club asking financial membership which enables the members to get the drugs. He is helped by Rayon and the two gradually form a strong friendship, Ron overcoming a lot of his prejudices as he deals with actual people rather than gossip and hearsay.

The film continues with interventions from the FDA officials, court cases, his improving health and Rayon's deteriorating health. All through he has been helped by a sympathetic doctor from the hospital, played by Jennifer Garner.

Ron Woodruff eventually lived another seven years, and during those years the US government had to consider further medication to combat AIDS and the safety and health of those involved in trials as well as the many – which we know from history was numerous – who were to die from AIDS.

While Matthew McConaughey is jauntily comic at times, and Jared Leto gives a moving performance, the film is not so much popular entertainment, but a film which engages the mind as well as the heart and urges us to look back over history in order to learn from it.

ENDLESS LOVE

US, 2014, 106 minutes, Colour.

Alex Pettifer, Gabriella Wilde, Bruce Greenwood, Joely Richardson, Rhys Wakefield, Robert Patrick.

Directed by Shana Feste.



It was surprising in 1981 that celebrated film and theatre director, Franco Zeffirelli, directed the Hollywood film – with the touch of soap opera – Endless Love. It was a star vehicle for Brooke Shields in those days and Tom Cruise had a small role. The main protagonist was played by Martin Hewitt who did not have a strong career in films. But the theme song, sung by Diana Ross and Lionel Richie, proved very popular at the time.

But now this is a new time and a new version of Endless Love. A number of comments have indicated that it is quite different from the novel, and the novelist himself, Scott Spencer, has recommended that people avoid this film and satisfy themselves with reading his book. Certainly, in reading some synopses of the book and of the original film, the 2014 version changes a number of the emphases.

This time the young man is played by British Alex Pettyfer, who has had some success in recent times in American films like The Butler and Magic Mike. Here he is a strong character, unlike the original, and audiences will empathise with him, a rather principled young man from the wrong side of the tracks. The focus of emotional trouble is on Jade (Gabriella Wilde), finishing her high school, sad, along with her grieving family, at the death of her older brother, the shining light of the family who died of cancer. She has been quiet, confining herself to home and study, but sees David and is attracted by him and asks her parents for a graduation party so that she can invite him to. This is the beginning of endless love for them both.

All might have been well except that Jade's father, expertly played by Bruce Greenwood, a single-minded father, distraught at the death of his favourite son, putting down his other son who never seems to be able to please him, and, to his father's mockery, he is studying Communications. The father now places all his attention on Jade, wanting her to be a doctor, following in his footsteps. She is willing, until she falls in love with David, and wants to spend the summer vacation with him rather than going to a medical apprenticeship. Father not pleased, to say the least.

David does have Jade's interests at heart, and is supported by his garage-working father, played by Robert Patrick. There are some fights, a fire disaster, which brings things to a head and, finally, the possibility of a future for David and Jade, a real beginning again for an endless love.

One thing to say about Endless Love is that unlike so many of the film is about young teenagers emerging from America, which tend to be fairly crass and sexist, this one advocates genuine feelings and wants to foster mutual respect in love and in families. Which is something in American films that we should not knock.

THE GRAND BUDAPEST HOTEL

US, 2014, 100 minutes, Colour.

Ralph Fiennes, Tony Revolori, F. Murray Abraham, Edward Norton, Jude Law, Saoirse Ronan, Tom Wilkinson, Harvey Keitel, Jeff Goldblum, Adrien Brody, Willem Dafoe, Matthieu Amalric, Lea Seydoux, Jason Schwartzman, Bill Murray, Owen Wilson, Bob Balaban.

Directed by Wes Anderson.



The Grand Budapest Hotel is quite an entertainment. It is the work of writer-director, Wes Anderson, who has developed a strong reputation since the 1990s and his initial films, *Bottle Rocket* and *Rushmore*. This reviewer has not found his films in recent years quite to his liking, especially *The Darjeeling Limited*. A past favourite has been *The Royal Tenenbaums*.

But, here is a film which should entertain most audiences. Specialists will enjoy the Wes Anderson imagination. Audiences coming in unawares may well be taken up by its humour and its quirkiness. The quirkiness can be seen even in the construction of the film: starting with a young woman going into a cemetery and sitting by the monument to a famous author and reading the book which is the title of the film; the narrative then recedes to the 1980s with the famous author doing an interview straight to camera but interrupted by his little boy; there is a further receding in time, a younger version of the author going to the Grand Budapest Hotel in 1968 for his health and meeting the owner and spending time listening to his telling the story of the hotel and his own involvement; further receding to 1932 where most of the action takes place, the vitality of the hotel in its time, the clientele, and, particularly, the concierge, Gustave H.

Anderson also uses different cameras and different ratios to present these different times, the 1932 stories using the traditional box screen.

There is quite an eclectic cast for the film, many of whom have work with Anderson in his previous films. But the centre is Ralph Fiennes as Gustave H. It one of his best performances, tightly controlled, a concierge who knows all the rules and all the manners – but also knows how to manipulate the rules for the whims of the guests while keeping his dignity (except when he surprisingly bursts into some swearing).

The other central character is young refugee from the Middle East, Tony Revolori in a very fine performance, as Zero Moustafa who becomes an apprentice to the concierge. He also shares in many of the adventures – which include getting mixed up with the rapacious son of an elderly woman who was devoted to Gustave, as well as the son's murderous assistant, and the stealing of a painting which was bequeathed to him. This leads to police chases, arrests, and Gustave's time in jail as well as arranging an escape.

Part of the entertainment is that the audience has no idea where all this is leading, entertaining episodes building on each other without predictability.

It is difficult, sometimes, even to recognise some of the cast, especially Tilda Swinton made up to be the 84 year old benefactress, Jeff Goldblum as the lawyer, Harvey Keitel as the prison leader. Other actors are easier to recognise and more quickly, sometimes with very brief appearances like those of Bill Murray, Owen Wilson. And Willem Dafoe proves that he can be one of the most sinister villains on screen. On the more gentle side is Saoirse Ronan is young chocolate maker who falls in love with Zero. Tom Wilkinson is the older author, Jude Law the younger. And F.Murray Abraham is excellent as the older Zero who is narrating the story.

It all takes place in a fictional central European country, reminiscent of *The Prisoner of Zenda*. It also has a fictitious parallels to the Nazis and the SS, led by Edward Norton, which gives some sinister tones to the proceedings.

Come to think of it, it might be well worth sitting through *The Grand Budapest Hotel* again.

I, FRANKENSTEIN

Australia, 2013, 91 minutes, Colour.

Aaron Eckhart, Bill Nighy, Yvonne Strahowski, Miranda Otto, Jai Courtney, Bruce Spence, Nicolas Bell, Aden Young.

Directed by Stuart Beattie.



In the final credits of this reworking of the Frankenstein Monster story, there is a thanks to Mary Shelley. It is not certain that Mary Shelley would appreciate this expression of gratitude because, while the film does use some of the elements of her classic story, it moves into the 21st century and futuristic science-fantasy.

Aaron Eckhart is, perhaps, the best looking of the cinema Frankenstein Monsters. He says he was made from eight different corpses, and he looks remarkably integrated with a very limited number of scars, especially on his face. He is an intense Monster, speaking out his animosity towards his maker, revenging himself by killing Frankenstein's wife, Elizabeth, with the scientist pursuing the Monster to the north, eventually freezing to death and being buried by the Monster, while finding his manuscript detailing his experiments.

Attacked by a range of Demons, the Monster finds himself in the 21st century – filmed in Melbourne, utilising some of its landmarks, a tram and tram stop at the top of Bourke Street or Collins Street, a notice, Central Station, on the Arts Centre, something that the locals have found amusing but which other audiences will not notice. It is a strange city, full of decaying edifices, cathedrals and Gothic buildings for the race of Gargoyles, and then suddenly seeing some modern cars and rubbish skips in the streets. Since it is all based on a graphic novel, these imaginings we have to accept.

While the story is serious, there are touches of the absurd, even of the ludicrous, in some of the dialogue and performances. Yvonne Strahowski is the human scientist, along with Nicolas Bell,

working on a re-animation program at the behest of alleged entrepreneur, Wessex, who is really the arch Demon, Naberius. He is played in familiar manner by Bill Nighy, indicating moods and attitudes simply by raising an eyebrow or giving a sideways glance. Also in the cast is Miranda Otto as the Queen of the Gargoyles and Jai Courtney as her henchman.

The colour is dark, the city is sinister, the laboratories modern. There is a reliance on special effects, especially for the explosions of the Demons and the battles with the Gargoyles.

Written and directed by cinematographer, Stuart Beattie, who directed Tomorrow When the War Began.

A variation on the theme, but certainly not the last word or image on the Frankenstein myth legend.

IN A WORLD...

US, 2013, 93 minutes, Colour.

Lake Bell, Rob Corrdry, Demetri Martin, Geena Davis,

Directed by Lake Bell.



In a World... words maybe very familiar to moviegoers who take notice of trailers for forthcoming films and the words and tone of the voice-over talent. Don La Fontaine was celebrated, in real life, for using these words in many of the introduction to the trailers. This fictitious story, based on fact, takes up the issue of who was to succeed him in doing these significant voice-overs. Hence the title, In a World...

The film is the work of actress, Lake Bell, who has written the screenplay and directed the film, as well is taking one of the central roles. She has done quite a fine job for the film and won an award at the Sundance Festival for the screenplay.

She plays one of two daughters of a vain father who fancies himself and his voice talent, tends to put down his daughters, and is taken up with a wife half his age. He also has a candidate for the new voice-over talent because he is retiring.

Carol (Lake Bell) is still diffident because of the suicide of her mother and the repressive attitudes of her father. She relies on her sister and her sister's husband. She is also interested in a technician who records auditions, who is interested in her, but is also very diffident. In the meantime, she goes to a party thrown by a celebrity who is also after the role will. She has an attachment to him – and then finds that he is the talent.

The film takes us into a fairly isolated world, even with their own annual awards for commercials and trailers. This is quite interesting in itself, and the characters are well brought to life, even though most of them are quite unsympathetic. Geena Davis appears at the end, the producer of the new quadrilogy (instead of the expected trilogies like those for the Twilight series and Three Hunger Games).

A small, small-budget, independent film which, nevertheless, entertains in its own right.

THE MONUMENTS MEN

US, 2014, 120 minutes, Colour.

George Clooney, Matt Damon, Bill Murray, John Goodman, Bob Balaban, Jean Desjardins, Cate Blanchett.

Directed by George Clooney.



The Monuments' Men is very much a George Clooney film. Not only did he co-write it, he directed it and is the star. And he has gathered round him a very strong cast including Matt Damon who has worked with him many times and Cate Blanchett who worked with him in *The Good German*. Along with the stars, he also has some comic actors including Bill Murray and John Goodman. And, for good measure, he has the Oscar-winner for Best Actor of 2011, Jean Desjardins. There is a nod to the popularity in the United States of *Downton Abbey* with the presence of Hugh Bonneville.

The plot is interesting, a variation on war films, a more polite and well-mannered *Dirty Dozen*, for instance. The focus is on the art treasures that the Nazis were stealing all over Europe, especially those from France and Belgium, including the famous altarpiece in the Cathedral in Ghent and Michelangelo's *Madonna from Bruges*. German soldiers are invading the sacred places, interrupting the clergy, even killing them when they find that they are hiding the art treasures.

A concerned group approach President Roosevelt for permission to track down and recover the art treasures. He makes the important point of asking whether the saving of these treasures is worth a human life – with the answer that this is the historical and cultural heritage that is important for recovery after the war and for people's cultural identity. It is interesting to note that President Truman asks the same question at the end of the war.

George Clooney portrays Stokes, the officer in charge of the operation and he has permission to recruit art experts, who are eager to enter into war action since they have been rejected because of physical disabilities. Matt Damon is Granger, who works at the Met in New York. Bill Murray is an architect. John Goodman another expert. They are put through some rigorous physical training, a bit difficult for people of John Goodman's build and age! But this is a good opportunity for them to bond. They are joined by Hugh Bonneville, who has had his own personal difficulties in England, but is considered indispensable for the project. Once in Europe they are divided into teams of two except for Granger who goes to liberated Paris to track down a woman who worked in the *Jeu des Paumes* during the war years and is now considered a collaborator. She is played by Cate Blanchett.

There are several war action sequences, involving snipers, landmines, working undercover, and discovering that a lot of the art has been saved in a variety of mine shafts in Germany. With the approaching end of the war, some German squads are destroying the treasures. So, it is a race against time with some tension as the war ends, the Russians advance in Germany and the American group has to track down the most famous of the famous treasures.

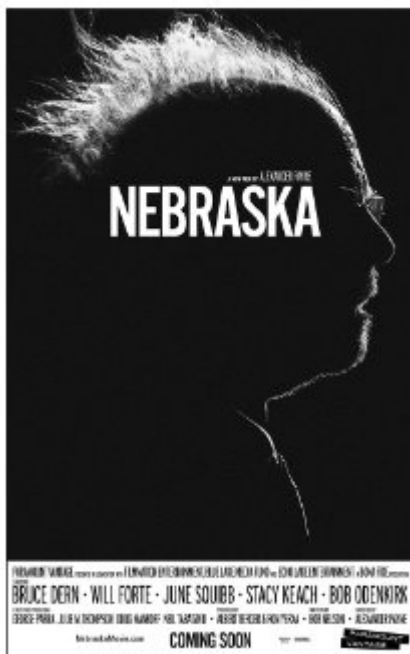
While the film is quite serious in its theme, the writing is often quite humorous, American-style jokes, deadpan quips that give a kind of jaunty air to the film. For most audiences it will be a quite acceptable blend of action, adventure, with comic touches.

NEBRASKA

US, 2013, 106 minutes, Black and white.

Bruce Dern, Will Forte, June Squibb, Stacey Keech, Bob Odenkirk, Rance Howard.

Directed by Alexander Payne.



Nebraska is a very likeable film, one of the most likeable in recent years.

It was nominated for Best Picture at the Oscars with nominations also for Bruce Dern and for June Squibb. Had they won, the awards would have been well-deserved.

Bruce Dern has had a long career, gaining an Oscar nomination in 1978 for *Coming Home*. But, he has not been a leading man, rather a character actor, and this film gives him the chance of a lifetime – and he takes it and creates a memorable character. He plays Woody, an old man, becoming confused, thinking that he has won a \$1 million because he receives one of those brightly-coloured pages in the mail that trumpets that he is a winner. He does not understand these promotions, does not know the conditions, but is convinced that he has one and decides to go to Lincoln, Nebraska, to get his million dollars. He starts off by walking but is brought home by his son, with his wife ticking him off.

So, we are introduced to a ‘typical’ old man, rather gaunt, bearded and scruffy, sometimes confused, prone to keep to himself, sometimes a hard case, and an old heavy drinker. We are also introduced to his wife, a strong-minded woman, who has stayed in her marriage despite all the difficulties and certainly wears the pants in the family! The couple have two sons, one successful in television, the other a rather morose man in middle age, often feeling forlorn, separating from his girlfriend, in an okay job but just that, not relating so well to his father.

In an inspired moment, David, this younger brother (Will Forte) decides to drive his father to collect his winnings, all the time trying to persuade him that he has not won. This will be a significant journey not only for Woody but also for David. They begin to talk as they travel, the father not revealing much, David challenging him at times, opening up some leads.

Their overnight stop is with one of Woody’s brothers, Ray (Rance Howard, Ron Howard’s father). Woody is comfortable with Ray and his wife, Martha, but their oafish twin sons are mocking and try to steal the ticket for the winnings. No matter how hard David tries to dispel the news about the winnings, everybody takes this as a sign that Woody has actually won.

At night, they wander around the small town, visiting bars and eventually finding older men that Woody knew, especially his partner from the past, Ed Pegrem (Stacey Keech), who has something of a nasty streak, wanting money from Woody although he should be in debt to him and revealing some unpleasant aspects of Woody’s past. Better is the family dinner where all his brothers and their families come to Ray and Martha’s house. The visual composition of Woody and all the brothers watching TV is classic. But, some of the family also have their eye on the money, bringing up situations from the past – but finally being emphatically told off by Woody’s wife who praises his past generosity and their meanness.

There is a fine sequence where David goes to the local newspaper and meets the widow of the publisher who shows him newspapers from the past, with Woody's photo and his Korean service, and reveals something of Woody's past more kindly.

As might be expected, there is no money in Lincoln. However, David does an admirable gesture at the end, an acknowledgement of and a tribute to his father.

The film was directed by Alexander Payne, not a prolific director, but a fine one with different films like: Citizen Ruth (starring Bruce Dern's daughter, Laura), election, Election, About Schmidt, Sideways, The Descendants. He tells a good story, spends a good yarn, and elicits great humanity from his cast. He has also opted to film in black and white, a striking use of this black and white, the vistas of the open spaces of the mid-West, wonderful close-ups of the characters, fine compositions with characters, so that one welcomes the power of black and white photography.

Enjoyable, humane, thoughtful.

NON— STOP

US, 2014, 106 minutes, Colour.

Liam Neeson, Julianne Moore, Michelle Dockery, Scoot McNairy, Nate Parker, Lupita Nyong'o.

Directed by Jaume Collett-Serra



Non-stop is in the tradition of the airport films as well as disasters on board planes. With its continual reliance on technology, it is very much taking the airport tradition into the 21st century.

The film is a star vehicle for Liam Neeson who, in his later middle age, has proven himself an action hero in the Taken series and Unknown (which was directed by Jaume Collet-Serra, who directed this film). Neeson, a strong actor at any time, has a powerful screen presence, even when he is shown to be a character with many weaknesses – in this case, depression, grief over the death of his daughter from cancer, divorce, losing his police job in New York City, drinking and smoking addiction.

He plays Bill Marcks, now a security agent on international flights. At the beginning, we see his weaknesses, yet his alertness as he goes through passport control and security with the other passengers to board his plane. He dreads take off, but once in the air, and find himself in a dire crisis, with great risk to the passengers and the plane, he combines the intensity of his commitment to solve the situation as well as his own personal anguishes.

While it is all on screen, the situation has a certain plausibility, despite its complexity and its use of mobile phones and texting. But, in retrospect, one wonders about how it all could have possibly been engineered.

On board, is Julianne Moore, sometimes a suspicious character, but someone who stands by the air Marshal during the crises. So does Michelle Dockery (Downton Abbey) as the main flight attendant.

Interestingly, the other flight attendant is played by Lupita Nyong'o, who won the Oscar for Best Actress in a supporting role, in 12 Years a Slave.

The supporting cast draws on character actors like Scoot McNairy, Nate Parker. Linus Roach (Priest) is one of the pilots.

Tension, of course, is most important for this kind of film and Non-stop certainly raises the tension as we watch the desperate Marshal puzzling over what is happening, enlisting the support of the two women, being muzzled because of protocols by the pilots and by his supervisor whom he talks to by phone. Even the passengers, learning more about his background, try to stage a takeover.

The special effects come into their own at the end of the film, with the handling of the bomb situation and the landing of a plane severely damaged.

In 2012, Denzel Washington portrayed a pilot who had a drinking problem and who was able to crash land a plane and save lives in Flight. A year later, Liam Neeson is there to save the day.

Better to watch this film after a flight rather than before it. Audiences outside Europe might have a wry smile when there is so much in the dialogue about how this is such a tiring long haul flight from the US to London – as long as six hours!

NYMPHOMANIAC, VOLUME 1

Denmark, 2014, 150 minutes, Colour.

Charlotte Gainsbourg, Stellan Skarsgård, Shia La Beouf, Stacey Martin, Christian Slater, Connie Nielsen, Uma Thurman, Saskia Reeves.

Directed by Lars von Trier.



An enormous amount of word-of-mouth about this film. A lot of it veering towards the scandalous as well as the sexually prurient. After all, just look at the title. And then there is the factor of the writer-director, the extraordinarily eccentric but creative Danish director, Lars von Trier. Over the decades he has made a wide range of films, at one stage focusing on his Dogme principles of filming with cinematic purity and not relying on effects, lighting... This phase seems to have passed, although the different film styles that von Trier uses indicate his history of experimentation.

This is the first volume of the two-part Nymphomaniac. This first part was screened at the 2014 Berlinale. The second volume was promised for an occasion like the Cannes Film Festival. However, the two parts were screening together in special events soon after the screening in Berlin. In the months prior, an abridged version of the two parts was screened commercially.

One of the most controversial of von Trier's films was the *Antichrist*, 2009. Many considered it too confronting with his treatment of the death of a child, the tensions between husband and wife and some sadistic and gruesome behaviour. However, the film could be seen as a psychological, psychosexual study and judged accordingly.

Nymphomaniac is definitely a psychological study, a study of sexual condition that has dire consequences for the nymphomaniac herself as well as the people with whom she comes in contact. This is very clear from the first volume.

The film opens with a dark screen, some noises of water falling, gradually shows us a dark street in a Scandinavian town and a man going to the local store who then discovers a woman lying on the street. He offers an ambulance but she refuses and he takes her to his home, allows her to shower and gives her a cup of tea. He, like the audience, wants to ask questions and she agrees.

What follows is an over two hour interchange between the man and the woman, flashbacks as she tells her story, starting from her infancy and sexual awareness, playing with a companion, her love for her doctor father and aware of the seeming indifference of her mother. Then with a close friend, she begins her nymphomaniac behaviour, the two of them trying to seduce as many men as they come across, having a bet about how many they can seduce during a train journey.

One of the key things is that one of the girls realises that love can be involved, whereas the nymphomaniac herself has no experience of love, no real emotions at all, a cerebral understanding of her condition and the compulsion to act out. This is visualised as she goes to work, is fired from her job, takes up with a married man and clashes with his wife, meet up again with the young man who, indifferently, took her virginity and is now an executive.

A brief synopsis does not do justice to how all this is presented on screen. A great deal of it is presented as realism. However, as von Trier has done in other films, he introduces diagrams and formulas represented on screen, details for parking a car which detach the audience in some ways from what is going on, or makes them think about the meaning.

In the abridged version there are some graphic sequences, but in the full versions, some explicit sexual activity is presented, sometimes in brief close-up. Information during the final credits indicate that the professional actors did not participate in these sequences but body doubles were used.

Charlotte Gainsbourg, who appeared in *Antichrist* and *Melancholia*, is Joe, the young woman who is telling her story. Stacey Martin appears as the younger Joel in the flashbacks. Stellan Skarsgaard is the man listening to the story.

Shia La Beouf is the young businessman. But two key performances are impressive: Christian Slater as the doctor-father of Joe, especially in the sequence where he is dying in hospital; and the other is the wife of the executive who leaves her for Joe. She is played expertly by Uma Thurman who gives a performance of 'hell hath no fury...', bringing her two children to confront her husband and Joe, acting in an extraordinarily demented and moody fashion, a show-stopping performance, to be welcomed amongst all the sexual behaviour.

This review is only of Nymphomaniac Volume 1, some of the advertised cast have not yet appeared and the plot will lead us up to the point where Joe is confiding in the listener, exercising a kind of therapy for herself and for the audience.

OUT OF THE FURNACE

US, 2012, 106 minutes, Colour.

Christian Bale, Woody Harrelson, Casey Affleck, Sam Shepard, Forest Whittaker, Tom Bower, Willem Dafoe.

Directed by Scott Cooper.



This is a film which depends on word-of-mouth from audiences.

Many audiences seeing the film will find it too grim, its outlook too bleak, some of its violence too confronting, and will advise others not to go to see the film. On the other hand, film buffs who appreciate well-made films, no matter how depressing in their presentation of character and society, will recommend other buffs to see it.

The setting is an industrial area in the countryside of Pennsylvania as well as the hills of the state of New Jersey. The look of the film is wintry, iron-grey in its tone. The factories look ugly, inside and out. And the action of the film takes place in some squalid settings, especially for bare-knuckle fights, bars and clubs, and dingy houses. Commentators have noted that it is a depressing picture of the United States since the world financial collapse and a picture of the desperation of people struggling to make a living, as well as people who are exploiters and their victims. The title indicates the theme, people trying to escape from the furnace but still in the fire.

The film was written and directed by Scott Cooper who made the interesting film about travelling singers, Crazy Heart.

Apart from the effectively bleak photography and the use of the locations, the film has a fine cast. Now in his middle age, former child star, Christian Bale, has proven himself a considerable actor (Oscar for The Fighter, award nominations for American Hustle). Here, he is an ordinary man, struggling to make a living, looking out for his younger brother (Casey Affleck) who is about to go out and serve in the Middle East wars. Carelessly drinking and driving, he is responsible for the death of a child in a car accident. He serves his time and then comes out to re-establish his life. His wife (Zoe Saldana) has left him for the local police officer (Forest Whitaker). His brother has returned from his service and is a changed person, for a desperate worse. He has been involved in bareknuckle fights, trying to pay off other debts to a small-time entrepreneur (Willem Dafoe).

But, right from the beginning of the film, we have been alerted and warned. The film is introduced at a drive-in, where Woody Harrelson is brutally violent towards a woman and some of the patrons of the drive-in. Then he disappears from the film only to be reintroduced in an even more violent and brutal manner.

By this time, the audience will realise that Out of the Furnace is going to be something of a revenge film with a touch of the vigilante. And that it is the Christian Bale character, despite pleas and warnings, who will do the confronting, trying to achieve some kind of justice.

In most ways this is a film to be admired rather than enjoyed, the dirty mirror, so to speak, reflecting the downside of 21st-century American society.

ROBOCOP

US, 2014, 117 minutes, Colour.

Joel Kinnaman, Gary Oldman, Michael Keaton, Abbie Cornish, Jackie Earle Haley, Jennifer Ehle, Jay Baruchel, Samuel L. Jackson, Marianne Jean-Baptiste.

Directed by Jose Padilha.



By the end of the 1980s, RoboCop had not only been a film with sequels, it had become a word that was part of the English language. This was the cop who was part human and part machine. He was unleashed on to a criminal world and made his substantial physical and metallic presence felt, a crusade eliminating crime in American cities. He was played by Peter Weller.

While the concept might be much the same in 2014, there is a great deal of difference in the technology available, for the armour for RoboCop himself, for machines doing similar work, like drones, and for the information available to RoboCop as he goes on his mission of cleaning up Detroit.

The film starts on an interesting, somewhat satiric tone, with Samuel L. Jackson as a right-wing television compere of his own show, The Pat Novak Show. He is prone to rant and rave, and takes up the drones and machine capacities for surveillance and for keeping law and order. He has a reporter in Tehran where the drones seem to have everything under control, until some terrorist suicide attacks. Cut immediately from Tehran and a move to discussions about legislation to support the drones, support for the company which has been making them, OmniCorp, and its head and an attack on the Senator who is sponsoring a bill to outlaw them. So it can be seen that there are political issues, big business issues, the ethics of this kind of fighting machine – more especially so when the issue of the RoboCop is announced.

In the meantime, there is a lot of crime in Detroit, especially in drug dealing, manufacture and distribution. We are introduced to a number of Detroit police, undercover, overt, indicating problems with deep cover and corruption. One of the police, Alex (Joel Kinnaman), is under some suspicion because of the death of his partner. He is determined to target and bring to justice the main drug villain in the city. Since he is going to be the Robocop, it is inevitable that we see an attack on him, a firebomb in the car at his home, which will have such effect on his physical condition that he is like a waking dead. But, he is considered the best opportunity for developing the RoboCop.

The film has a strong cast besides Joel Kinnaman, with Michael Keaton as the president of OmniCorp, plausible, sinister, and finally ruthless. Gary Oldman is the doctor who has been able to help patients with artificial limbs to continue their lives. It is he who is commissioned to develop the armour for the RoboCop and to help him function as human. Jennifer Ehle is Michael Keaton's assistant, all

businesslike and unemotional. Jay Baruchel is the head of public relations, a combination of shrewdness and being a nerd. Abbie Cornish plays RoboCop's wife.

Alex is dismayed to find himself in the depleted physical condition but finally agrees to his role. One of the big differences from 1987 is the technology available for him, the downloading into his brain of all the available data about criminals, DNA, fingerprinting, identification of criminals, which actually goes into overload. Once he goes into action, there is plenty for the action entertainment audience. He is on his motorbike, speeding around the city, using his inner screen to find and locate people, able to detect whether they are a threat or not, wreaking havoc ultimately on the drug boss.

But, is he able to be controlled? And what about his relationship with his wife and son? And what about changing the legislation in Washington and the lobbying of Congress men and women, OmniCorp's financial outlay for changing legislation, aided with more haranguing by Pat Novak on his show.

Obviously this is going to lead to a crisis, shootouts, ethical crises... While there is a happy ending for RoboCop, we are still left with Pat Novak at the end, almost a parody of commentators from Fox News and other right-wing outlets in the United States, urging the audience to develop law and order, militaristic attitudes for preserving their way of life.

Action, science fiction, futuristic imaginings, ethical issues, and a critique of some extremist media commentators.

ROMEO AND JULIET

UK, 2013, 115 minutes, Colour.

Douglas Booth, Hallee Steinfeld, Paul Giamatti, Damian Lewis, Natasha Mc Elhone, Stellan Skarsgaard,

Directed by Carlo Carlei.



Romeo and Juliet has been told many times in film. It was a star vehicle for Leslie Howard and Norma Shearer, at an age much older than that of Shakespeare's protagonists, in the 1930s. The version in the 1950s with Laurence Harvey and Susan Shentall is not so well remembered. This is in contrast with Franco Zeffirelli's celebrated version, with Nino Rota's, in 1968, with Leonard Whiting and Olivia Hussey. Quite a different tone in Baz Lurhman's Romeo+ Juliet in 1996, a modernised version.

This interpretation takes us back to the Renaissance era, the time of the writing of the play. Visually it is most impressive, capitalising on the art and architecture of the period.

The play has been edited by Julian Fellowes (Gosford Park, Downton Abbey). He has shorn the text to fit it into a running time of under two hours, he has also added some 'Shakespearean' lines of his own.

The main difficulty with this version is in the performances, especially that of Hailee Steinfeld (strong in her Oscar-nominated role in True Grit). She does not look quite the part and her delivery is not very good indeed. Douglas Booth is Romeo, who has a striking screen appearance and is certainly better in his lines than Juliet.

Damian Lewis is interesting as Capulet and Natasha McElhone very good as Lady Capulet. Also effective is Stellan Skarsgård as the Prince of Verona. And Paul Giamatti is Friar Laurence.

The film was directed by Carlo Carlei whose other credits are very varied, including the dog comedy, Fluke, and the biography of Padre Pio.

TRACKS

Australia, 2013, 112 minutes, Colour.

Mia Wasikowska, Adam Driver, John Flaus, Jennifer Tovey, Robert Coleby.

Directed by John Curran.



Tracks is the film version of Robyn Davidson's book of 1978, detailing her 1977 trek from Alice Springs to the Indian Ocean, past Uluru, out into the deserts, encountering some small settlements as well as aboriginal women and men. She was 27 at the time and was sponsored by the National Geographic magazine. It was an outstanding achievement.

The film visualises the trek, inviting audiences to share something of the experience of Robyn Davidson, not an easy sitting back to watch a touristic episode, but rather to feel the heat, the desert rocks and sand, the isolation, the sometimes-monotony, the irritation at the photojournalists and their intrusions, the possibility of reflecting on what she was doing and its meaning.

This means that the writer, Marion Nelson, a first-time scriptwriter and director, John Curran, have to move between drawing the audiences in with spectacular photography (by Mandy Walker), a musical score by Garth and an interesting series of episodes during the trek as well as enabling the audience to experience the outer and the inner journey through the Australian deserts.

This also means that some audiences will be willing to surrender to what the film makers put before them. But it also means that some audiences will soon tire of the journey, find it less than interesting, possibly boring, and not find *Tracks* the engrossing film that they might have hoped for.

Mia Wasikowska, only 23 when she made this film, four years younger than Robyn Davidson herself, has had a distinguished career, even at a young age, from *Alice in Wonderland* to *Jane Eyre*, playing Australian characters and American characters. She communicates the character of Robyn Davidson, her determination, her willingness to spend long months in the outback with camel training, persuading her family that this was something that she must do, writing to National Geographic to enlist their financial support for the trek. Younger audiences might immediately identify with her. Older audiences will look at her with interest, perhaps remembering their younger adventurous days, or concerned with how this will all turn out for the young woman.

Before she sets out on her journey, she encounters a range of characters in the outback, especially Kurt, Rayner Boch, who works with her and the camels, and John Flaus as Sallay, who also trains and encourages her. Before she leaves, she meets Rick Smolan (Adam Driver), the photographer assigned to cover her journey. She is not too enthusiastic about him, realising that she likes to be by herself, away from built-up cities, out in the desert, out in nature, living her introverted journey.

Once she is on her journey, having been excluded from the camp at Ayer's Rock, because of her camels, and camping outside - and the audience relishing the beauty of the rock with her - the film relies on the beauty and range of the changing landscapes, the people that she meets, an old white couple who welcome and encourage her, the aborigines, especially the women who chant and invite her to dance with them, the elder who accompanies her through the sacred sites (after Rick Smolan has secretly filmed men's business but has been discovered and Robyn is to pay the penalty of his indiscretion by having to take a longer route around the sacred sites).

There are also dramatic episodes, the camels running away, beautiful drinking water, dry riverbeds, moments of despair. However, her attitude towards Rick Smolan changes, her allowing him to photograph her, sexual moments, and reliance on him to get rid of the photographers.

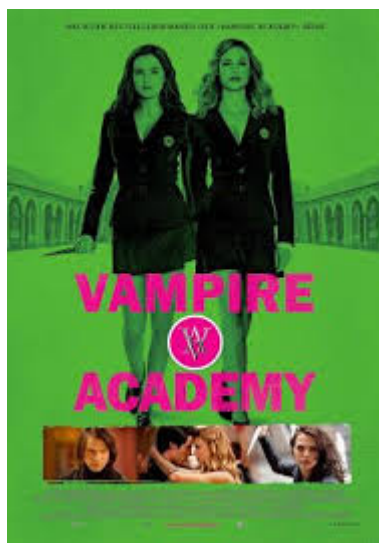
Tracks, of course, can serve as a symbolic journey for anyone, as we all move through our deserts, the isolation, and longings and ambitions, the moments of relief, the moments of challenge, the moments of despair.

VAMPIRE ACADEMY

US, 2014, 106 minutes, Colour.

Zoe Deutch, Lucy Fry, Gabriel Byrne, Joely Richardson.

Directed by Mark Waters.



A first alert to this film was the advertising tagline, 'They suck at school'. Had this film been a slight parody, a vampire academy instead of the police academy, this might have been the most clever part of the film.

But, there is more to it than that.

Based on a popular novel by Rachelle Mead, this is yet another contribution to the extraordinarily wide popularity of vampire stories in recent times, fostered by television's True Blood as well as the popularity of the Twilight series. This film lies somewhere in between, veering more towards Twilight than to True Blood.

Somewhere, in a rather unlikely United States, there is an exclusive mansion which is the home to the Vampire Academy, confined, it would seem, to older teenagers and their education, both classical and in vampire law and physical arts to combat enemies. At the opening, Rose (a more than

feisty and attractive Zoe Deutch) is guarding a more seemingly delicate student, Lissa (Lucy Fry). Lissa is actually a princess from a long line of vampires and is destined to be Queen – although she has fled the Academy.

When the group is captured and returned to the Academy, (St Vlad's!) there is an explanation, with technical names, of the various layers of vampire status, of protectors and of hostile vampires who are bent on destroying the more respectable ones (who are able to get their blood supply from willing humans who volunteer!). It is only the hostiles who can be killed by silver knives. Once back at the Academy, we meet the rather surly headmistress, Olga Kuryenko, and the rather ill provost, Gabriel Byrne.

There are the variations on high school enmities and friendships amongst the vampires, Rose being rather free because she is only part of vampire and decidedly human. A visit from the Queen, a rather absurd episode as she is dressed in robes and ermine, played by Joely Richardson, challenges Lissa to live up to her expectations.

After the high school episodes, and a school dance, there is some melodrama as one of the characters reveals a sinister side and abducts Lissa. Rose, and the guard, Dmitri, to whom she is more than attracted, come to the rescue.

A final glimpse at what looks to be a field of lost souls, of sinister vampires, indicates that there could be a sequel.

A WINTERS TALE

US, 2014, 105 minutes, Colour.

Colin Farrell, Russell Crowe, Jessica Brown Findlay, Jennifer Connelly, Will Smith, William Hurt, Eva Marie Saint, Kevin Corrigan, Matt Bomer.

Directed by Akiva Goldsman.



No, this is not Shakespeare. In some ways, far from it. But it is one of the oddest films to come around for a long time.

It is probably prudent for a reviewer to give a warning: anybody with any trace of cynicism should avoid this film. Even those who are not prone to cynicism may find it a bit too twee or fey.

Very early in the film, a character states that the light in the sky may be from an angel's wing as somebody changes from being a human to becoming a star. Not your usual comment. But the film continues in this vein, with the presupposition that everyone has a miracle within them, and that they need to be alert so that they can help another person with that miracle.

In looking at the list of strong actors in the cast, one wonders what it was that attracted them when they read the script. Colin Farrell is the main actor, first seen in 2014 sequence where he is rummaging in a box and finds a nameplate for a boat, City of Justice. Then the action goes back to 1895, to Ellis Island and a family trying to migrate to the United States only to be rejected because the husband has lung problems. They want their baby to have a happy life in the United States and lower him into a little boat, City of Justice, and set him towards the New York skyline. As one did!

Most of the action, however, takes place in 1916. This time Colin Farrell (with the strangest of hairdos, no credit to the credit for hairstyling) is a thief, being pursued on the New York docks by a ferocious looking Russell Crowe, as if he had stepped out of the Gangs of New York. Fortunately for Colin Farrell, there is a beautiful white horse standing by and he senses that this is a rescue. Indeed it is as he mounts the horse and it flies over the waterfront gate – later this white horse is going to do a considerable amount of flying.

Meanwhile a young woman is suffering from consumption, Jessica Findlay Brown, cared for by her anxious father, William Hurt, and her young sister. When Farrell enters to rob the house, he encounters the young woman and it is love at first sight. Again, pursued by Russell Crowe, he mounts the horse which leads him (as might be expected) to the country house of the young woman.

No more plot except that it has many tears and Russell Crowe wreaking vengeance on Colin Farrell.

Back to 2014, Farrell is still there in New York, but his memory has gone. He draws an image of a person with red hair on the pavement, we all assuming that it is the young woman of a century before. But not quite, some twists to the plot, and encounter with a little girl (with red hair) and her mother, Jennifer Connelly. And, sure enough, Russell Crowe is still about but wants to do a Wings of Desire kind of thing and becoming human to finally destroy Farrell.

And then there is a nice pleasure for movie buffs, Eva Marie Saint, 60 years on from *On the Waterfront*) appears as the old (very old indeed) version of the little girl from 1916 – and all the mysteries solved, a miracle, light, and another star in the firmament.

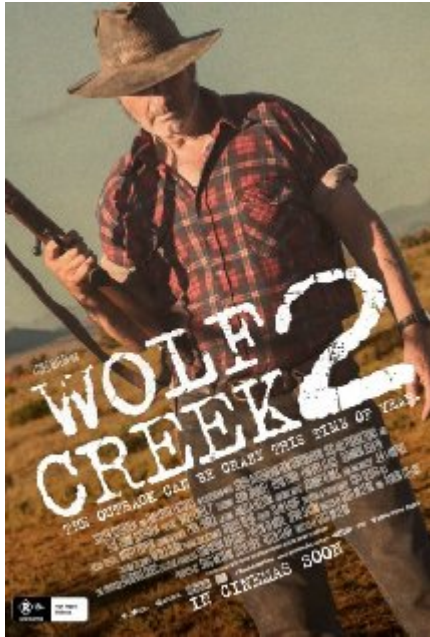
This is an adaptation of a novel by Mark Helprin, written and directed by the veteran Akiva Goldman, who has made some strong films (*A Beautiful Mind*, *Cinderella Man* – as well as *The Da Vinci Code* and *Angels and Demons*!) which means that it is a big surprise that he has written and directed this piece of fantasy.

WOLF CREEK 2

Australia, 2013, 105 minutes, Colour.

John Jarrett, Ryan Corr, Phillippe Klause, Shane Connor, Gerard Kennedy, Annie Byron.

Directed by Greg McLean.



Wolf Creek 2 is in the same vein as the original, which received a great deal of acclaim, critically and from the public. For those who liked the original, the expectations were high, and the hope for more of the same. For those who did not see the original, this film has prologue where Mick Taylor confronts two policeman who want to fine him for speeding on an outback road, just for the fun of occupying themselves, and meet a grizzly end. Here is Mick Taylor, back again.

As with the first film, the landscapes are important, filming in South Australia and the highlighting of the crater of Wolf Creek. Again, as with the first film, the targets of Mick Taylor's sadistic venom are overseas tourists. This time there is a couple from Germany who are treated brutally. But the main target is a young British man, caught up in the plight of the German woman by accident, and experiencing the full vicious animosity of Mick Taylor.

At times, this is a horrible film to watch, especially the treatment of the German tourist and, at great length, some sadistic antics of Mick Taylor as he tortures the young British man, Paul (Ryan Corr). The treatment of victims is different in this film, Mick Taylor playing games with his worried captive, the young man trying to prove his knowledge of Australia by singing Tie me Kangaroo down, Sport, Mick joining in with great gusto, all verses. (Mick had already been shown running over kangaroos with glee.) There are more songs, with Mick bailing out in disgust when his victim starts to sing the national anthem and there are the usual jokes about 'girt by sea'. Then there is an Australian quiz, with sardonic references to Who Wants to be a Millionaire and the inability to phone a friend! Dennis Lillee and Don Bradman become a key to whether Paul will have a finger severed for each mistake that he makes.

More Australiana with Dame Nellie Melba singing over the final credits.

The torture genre was popular in the first decade of this century, even being referred to as 'torture porn'. There is something in this accusation – but, as always, it depends not on what is being presented but how it is presented, and this is always debated according to audience sensibilities, offended by visual torture or able to accept it as part of the genre and storytelling.

It is a fact that there have been killers who abducted and murdered tourists. How this should be treated in fictional films is always a moot point. Greg McLean has opted to tell this kind of story twice and, whether we like it or not, this is become part of Australian cinema history.

BERLINALE SIGNIS REVIEWS

'71

ALOFT

AMERICAN HUSTLE

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

BETTER ANGELS, THE

BLACK COAL, THIN ICE

CALVARY

DARKSIDE, The

GRAND BUDAPEST HOTEL, The

HISTORIA DO MEIDA/ HISTORY OF FEAR

IN ORDER OF DISAPPEARANCE/ KRAFTIDIOTEN

JACK

KREUZWEG/ STATIONS OF THE CROSS

LITTLE HOUSE/ CHOISAI OUCHI

LOVE IS STRANGE

MACONDO

MO JING/ THAT DEMON WITHIN

MONUMENTS' MEN, THE

N – THE MADNESS OF REASON

NO MAN'S LAND

NYMPHOMANIAC, VOLUME 1

PRAIRA DO FUTURO/ BEACH OF THE FUTURE

STRATOS/ THE STORM WITHIN

THINGS PEOPLE DO

THIRD SIDE OF THE RIVER, The

TO SINGAPORE, WITH LOVE

TWO FACES OF JANUARY, The

TWO MEN IN TOWN

UNFRIEND

VIHARSAROK/ LAND OF STORMS

ZWISCHEN WELTEN/ INBETWEEN WORLDS

'71 Competition

UK, 2014, 100 minutes, Colour.

Jack O'Connell, Paul Anderson, Sean Harris.

Directed by Yann Demange.

The title indicates the year, 1971.

The location is Belfast, the times of the Troubles. At one stage, a map is shown of the city, indicating the dividing lines, especially the Falls Road, between Catholics and Protestants. The sympathies of this film are not with the militants on either side of the divide.

In fact, the focus is on the British soldiers who occupy Northern Ireland. We are immediately drawn into their training, the young men away from home who have to have military expertise if they are to keep the peace and if they are to keep the enemies away from each other. There is very little judgement made about the fact that the British are in Ireland. It is considered a fact and the men have to do their duty.

Along with the British troops, there are special branches who work somewhat undercover, making contacts with locals on both sides to get information – and can tend to be unscrupulous as to how they get in the information and protect it, even to being willing to kill British troops to save their contacts. Sean Harris is convincing as Browning, the head of this agency.

On an ordinary morning, aware that there are militias on both sides, the British decide to search for weapons amongst the Catholic streets, the men protesting, the mothers and sisters pounding the foot paths with garbage tins in protest. The treatment of the Catholics is very rough.

What happens is that two of the British, very young men, are separated after they hold the line against protesters. And one of them is shot, the other, Hook (Jack O'Connell) has to make his way back to headquarters, a very difficult journey during the day and into the night, eluding capture, hiding in a lavatory, high finding a pullover to disguise himself, trusting himself to a young boy who seems to have some kind of command, wounded in a pub explosion and cared for by a Catholic doctor and his daughter – ultimately having to escape when the provisional IRA are in pursuit.

This creates a lot of tension, even for audiences who have seen several of these Troubles films including Paul Greengrass's *Bloody Sunday* and Pete Travis's *Omagh*.

The film was made by French-born director, resident in England, Yann Demange, maker of documentaries. This is his first feature film.

'71 was awarded a commendation by the ecumenical jury at the 2014 Berlinale.

ALOFT Competition

Canada, 2014, 112 minutes, Colour.

Jennifer Connelly, Cillian Murphy, Melanie Laurent, Oona Chaplin, Peter McRobbie.

Directed by Claudia Llosa.

Aloft is the work of Peruvian director, Claudia Llosa, who achieved some international and festival fame with her film *La Teta Asustada*, winner of the golden Golden Bear in Berlin, 2009, and the Academy award nominee for Peru. This time she moves to Canada.

Filmed in English, with settings in Manitoba, it stars Jennifer Connelly. At the opening of the film, she is a mother with two sons, one who is terminally ill. The two boys seem to get on well together. She has night shifts at work and boards, she and her children with her father-in-law.

The screenplay shift ground when the mother takes her two sons to see a healer in the forest, a crowd gathering, taking stones with numbers on as a lottery to get in to see the healer. The older boy, an expert with falcons, has taken the falcon without his mother's permission and it gets loose and flies into the grove where the healer is operating. The mother hurries in and, by chance, touches the forehead of the boy who needs to be healed – and he recovers. The healer, part charlatan, partly sincere, part alcoholic, tells the woman that she has a gift and that she should use it for healing.

At one moment in her work, the two boys are sitting in the car, the older boy becoming more resentful of his mother and his brother, and drives the car with tragic consequences.

The film moves forward 20 years, focusing on the older boy, still working with the falcons and a renowned expert, married with a child. However, he still seems morose and angry. He is played by Cillian Murphy.

The forward drive of the plot is the arrival of a journalist, Melanie Laurent, who wants to interview the son but also wants to track down the mother who now works in a very remote part of Manitoba. It is winter, they fly to the north, travel by bus but are prevented from going further because of the lake which is iced over. Nevertheless, the journalist perseveres and gets permission to see the mother. And it will be a moment of truth as the mother meets her son for the first time in decades.

The title of the film obviously refers to the falcons but audiences will be trying to apply it to the experience of the mother and the son.

It can certainly be said that the film creates quite a wintry atmosphere, and the isolation of the northern town. But, with the intense performances, audiences will be drawn into this drama of strained relationships, of anger and resentment, of healing and forgiveness.

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST Special screening

France, 2014, 112 minutes, Colour.

Lea Seydoux, Vincent Cassel, Andre Dusollier, Eduardo Noriega.

Directed by Christoph Ganz.

Beauty and the Beast has been seen in many film versions.

The classic version is that by Jean Cocteau. There have been television versions with stars like George C.Scott. For the general public, the Disney version of 1992 is probably the best known.

Director Christoph Ganz (*Brotherhood of the Wolf*) has decided to make an adult version – even though the context is a mother telling children a bedtime story. He has relied on special effects and the film was made on the sound stages of Germany's Babelsberg Studios. And it is quite a lavish production, in its period settings, costumes and decor. There is a sea port, taverns, homes in the

country, and a huge castle on a mountain in the woods.

The film focuses on a merchant, Andre Dusollier, a merchant, whose ships are wrecked, although one survives and he has to use it to pay his debts. In the meantime he has a reckless son who is squandering his money. He searches for him in the port and comes up against a dangerous adventurer, Perducas, played by Eduardo Noriega.

On his way home, the merchant is lost in the snow, comes across a castle and finds lavish food there for him to eat. He also takes a rose for his youngest daughter, something which enrages the owner of the Castle, the Beast.

Allowed to return home, the merchant finds his children dissatisfied with their home in the country, except for Belle, who tends the garden. She returns in her father's place to confront the Beast. What follows is the familiar material of Belle beginning to understand the Beast, discover a great deal of his story, find compassion for him. As he allows her to return home for a day, she promises to come – or else, he will die.

Complications set in. Perducas is pursuing the extravagant brother for him to pay his debts. The brother takes Belle's horse and rides towards the castle in order to get more jewels such as the one he found on his sister's dress. But Perducas, who relies on a friend who is an expert tarot cards but has not revealed the full truth, goes in pursuit.

The finale consists of an attack on the Castle, its defence by two huge statues and the mysterious growths of tree limbs which can envelop people, especially Perducas. Belle is able to make her way into the castle on time, the Beast comes back to his normal appearance – which the audience has often seen in flashbacks where he is in love with his wife, goes to hunt the golden deer which his wife urges him not to because, when he kills, it is revealed that she is the golden deer, a nymph of the forest. Hence his becoming the Beast.

The film actually ends with a happy ever after, the reader of the story being Belle with her husband outside working in the garden. Lea Seydoux is charming as Belle and Vincent Cassel is a strong beast.

THE BETTER ANGELS Panorama

US, 2014, 85 minutes, Black and white.

Jason Clarke, Diane Kruger, Brit Marling, Wes Bentley, Robert Vincent Smith.

Directed by A.J. Edwards.

Most definitely, an arthouse film release.

The writer-director, A.J. Edwards worked as an editor on some of the films by Terence Mallick. Obviously he found those films congenial with their strong visuals while not caring so much about plot development. This is particularly the case here, a story of Abraham Lincoln when he was a teenager, back in Indiana, working hard and living in a log cabin.

The angels of the title are Lincoln's birthmother and his stepmother, both having a strong influence on him in the film suggesting ways in which his character was developed by each of the women. His birthmother, who died when Lincoln was nine, is played by Brit Marling, his stepmother played by Diane Kruger, a woman who helped the boy who had taught himself to read and write to find more knowledge. Both have a strong screen presence but they are presented more as icons rather than

developed characters. Lincoln's father is played by Jason Clarke, something of a rough and hard man, making demands on his son and on his wives.

There are also a number of characters throughout the town, particularly Wes Bentley as a teacher. This Illinois community is quite small, isolated, the children gathering for some education, some religious meetings, but most of the work is hard. It would seem very difficult to imagine that a president of the United States, let alone Abraham Lincoln, could emerge from this kind of background.

One suggestion about his future is a sequence where a group of slaves, chained, marched through this isolated community.

Filmed in black and white, with artful angles on people, on the many trees, on the huts and buildings, the film is often quite beautiful to look at.

Which means that the film is something of an essay on Lincoln's youth, a poetic portrait of a place and people, but not a narrative that audiences might be looking for.

BLACK COAL, THIN ICE/ BAI RI YAN HUO Competition

China, 2014, 106 minutes, Colour.

Liao Fan, Gwei Lun Mei.

Directed by Diao Yinan.

Black Coal, Thin Ice, unexpectedly the winner of the Golden Bear at the 2014 Berlinale. The lead actor, Liao Fan, won the best actor award.

Audiences do not see many Chinese films of this kind. While there is a sense of social realism, it is basically a police and detective film, using the conventions of the genre in a Chinese context.

The film takes place in two eras. It opens in 1999 in a provincial city where a policeman is trying to reconcile with his wife but she chooses to divorce him. Then a dismembered limb is discovered in a coal truck in an assembly line. Police think that they have some suspects, go to arrest them but are shot by the suspects. One of the policeman dies, the other is wounded and withdraws from the police force, taking up a security job while he heals physically and psychologically. There are no more clues except a connection with a laundry and a woman who manages it.

There is a transition to 2004 and a similar case appears. The former policeman wants to rehabilitate himself as a person as well as a detective and takes on the case despite warnings from a colleague. Once again, the woman at the laundry is involved. The detective makes her acquaintance, draws her out, then finds himself attracted to her. She has been seen burying ashes in the sand at the base of the tree, questions are raised about her dead husband, and it all becomes quite complicated.

An important scene takes place at a skating rink, one of the skaters moving off and murdering with his skate. The detective follows, get some clues as to the identity of the murderer, the woman is arrested and interrogated.

At the end, there is a fireworks display, giving rise to the Chinese title of the film, Fireworks in Daylight, although the English title indicates both periods of the plot, the limb found in the coal as well as the skating and the allusion to thin ice.

Audiences used to detective thrillers, especially American versions, will find this film very interesting for comparisons.

CALVARY

Ireland, 2014, 100 minutes, Colour.

Brendan Gleeson, Chris O' Dowd, Kelly Reilly, Aidan Gillen, Isaach de Bankole, Dylan Moran, Marie-Josée Croze, M. Emmet Walsh, Orla O' Rourke, Domhnall Gleeson, Pat Shortt,

Directed by John Michael Mc Donagh.

As can be seen from the title, this is a film rooted in the gospel story and in Catholic faith. It is one of the best films on priests in recent years. It was written and directed by John Michael Mc Donagh, whose screenplay reveals quite detailed knowledge of the church in Ireland and which brings the plot to contemporary life – even though, one hopes, that the principal events of the film would not happen in real life.

A key film on the life of a parish priest was Robert Bresson's version of the novel by Georges Bernanos, *Diary of a Country Priest*. *Calvary* is the diary of an Irish country priest of the 21st century. It can be noted that Brendan Gleeson gives a totally persuasive performance as the priest. And the setting is on the Irish Atlantic coast, 38 km from Sligo according to a road sign.

With the focus of the title, it is clear that this will be a film about suffering, or that the priest will be a significant Christ-figure, a victim of his own Calvary, an innocent victim, atoning for the sins of others.

This is made very clear from the opening sequence, the priest sitting in the confessional, a man coming into the box and declaring that he has been a victim of a priest's sexual abuse, that it happened over many years, that it has ruined his life. And then he makes a threat that he will kill this priest on the following Sunday, not because he is a guilty man, but because he is innocent and that will make his death more significant.

Since the initial theme is that of clerical sexual abuse, *Calvary* has to be seen in the context of the revelations of recent decades, of the government enquiry, of sentences for guilty clergy, and the criticism of church officials for not understanding the crisis and for not acting on it well. This gives a powerful framework for this week in the life of the parish priest, considering what he has been told, preparing for his possible death. The accuser could be anyone in the village, although the priest has recognised his voice.

While this is the framework, the rest of the film shows the priest going about his ordinary ministry in this parish. He is a late vocation, a widower who decided on priesthood after his wife's death. We are introduced to his daughter, who has attempted suicide, but has come to visit her father and talk things over with him. Which means he is a priest of some life experience, of family life, even though he reflects that he was something of a failure – and a drinker.

The action of the film is basically the priest visiting different people in the parish, a woman who does his washing, is separated from her husband, the local butcher, and is having an affair with the local garage man. She is not averse to other relationships, especially to the atheist and mocking doctor in the local hospital. But, as with the other characters, she is able to speak frankly to the priest and he is able to speak frankly with her. It is the same with her husband, the butcher. There is a young man

in the village, rather prim and proper, awkward in his manner, who comes to the priest to discuss his ambitions, his personality, his sexual problems, his future. Other people he visits include the man from the garage, the local policeman and his rather exhibitionist son, a local landowner who is alienated from his family, drinks a great deal, and confesses that he cares for nothing and no one. On the lighter side, there is an old American author who welcomes the priest, getting food from him, but wanting a gun just in case he gets ill and needs to leave this world.

A significant accident occurs with the death of a foreign visitor. The priest anoints the dead man, comforts his widow, encounters her at the airport when he is inclined to leave the village and avoid his imminent death. It is the words of the widow as well as his watching two workers slouching over the dead man's coffin, that indicate that he should go back face to face what will come.

The priest is very fond of his pet dog and is devastated when he finds the dog's throat slit. And this follows his church being burnt down by the accuser. It is clear that the priest is moving towards Calvary. In moments of agony, he takes to drinking, returning alone to his spartan room.

This statement will not reveal who the would-be killer is or whether he goes through with his threats or not – it is the priest's preparation and readiness which is more important than what might happen. However, one significant question for the priest is whether he wept at his dog's death – and whether he wept at the plight of the victims of sex abuse. A key question for the church, hierarchy and laity.

John Michael Mc Donagh does have a key idea, revealed early in the film, when his daughter asks the priest about virtues. He replies that forgiveness has been underrated – something which pervades the ending of the film.

Calvary is well worth seeing, the story of a priest and his own agony and Calvary in a contemporary situation, showing contemporary problems, illustrating the response of contemporary parishioners and non-believers. The writer-director has intelligently combined problems with a portrait of a genuine, if struggling, 21st-century parish priest.

THE DARKSIDE

Australia, 2013, 94 minutes, Colour.

Deborah Mailman, Aaron Pederson, Claudia Karvan, Bryan Brown, Marcia Langton.

Directed by Warwick Thornton.

Cinematographer-director, Warwick Thornton, and his production company, asked aboriginal people to send in their experiences in the form of ghost stories. Over 100 were submitted, and a dozen or more were chosen to be filmed.

A number of the stories used prominent actors to speak the words of the stories that had been sent. Amongst them were aboriginal actors including Deborah Mailman (with Marcia Langton in the background) and Aaron Pederson. Their powerful simplicity keeps our attention.

Non- Aboriginal actors also recount some stories the stories, Claudia Karvan, Bryan Brown, Sasha Horler.

The focus is on straightforward storytelling, though some of the stories have action, for instance a family driving along the road in the Northern Territory seeing a little girl, going back to her, finding

that she had disappeared.

Quite a number of the stories are single takes, some of them quite long, with the storyteller simply speaking to camera. One of the most effective is the final story where a young woman in a hospital corridor recounts her experiences both with calm and with emotion.

In one sense to call these stories ghost stories is a misnomer, at least for Western audiences who are used to hauntings and spooky stuff. These stories are 'spooky' in a different sense, more along the lines of ESP or a sense of presence which cannot be explained rationally. They also raise questions about the nature of body – spirit – soul.

Aboriginal people, with the centuries-old understanding of the world and of human beings, lead more rational people into questions about this world, this life, the afterlife.

One of the more exotic stories is that with Claudia Karvan, a white woman drawn into an aboriginal experience, the playing of the didgeridoo, the invitation to dance, a whirling imaginative experience, a sense of aboriginal presence, of elders.

Western audiences are invited to reflect on the past with a story where the researcher goes to the National Film and Sound Archives where she finds that this was previously the Institute of Anatomy, where the bones of aboriginal men and women were kept as specimens and studied. Her field of investigation changes and she delves into this eerie reality of a correlation between film and bones.

But, most of the stories are not told in this exotic way. Rather, the audience is invited to listen, to look, to feel, to share, to puzzle.

THE GRAND BUDAPEST HOTEL Festival Opening, Competition

US, 2014, 100 minutes, Colour.

Ralph Fiennes, Tony Revolori, F. Murray Abraham, Edward Norton, Jude Law, Saoirse Ronan, Tom Wilkinson, Harvey Keitel, Jeff Goldblum, Adrien Brody, Willem Dafoe, Matthieu Amalric, Lea Seydoux, Jason Schwartzman, Bill Murray, Owen Wilson, Bob Balaban.
Directed by Wes Anderson.

The Grand Budapest Hotel is quite an entertainment. It is the work of writer-director, Wes Anderson, who has developed a strong reputation since the 1990s and his initial films, *Bottle Rocket* and *Rushmore*. This reviewer has not found his films in recent years quite to his liking, especially *The Darjeeling Limited*. A past favourite has been *The Royal Tenenbaums*.

But, here is a film which should entertain most audiences. Specialists will enjoy the Wes Anderson imagination. Audiences coming in unawares may well be taken up by its humour and its quirkiness. The quirkiness can be seen even in the construction of the film: starting with a young woman going into a cemetery and sitting by the monument to a famous author and reading the book which is the title of the film; the narrative then recedes to the 1980s with the famous author doing an interview straight to camera but interrupted by his little boy; there is a further receding in time, a younger version of the author going to the Grand Budapest Hotel in 1968 for his health and meeting the owner and spending time listening to his telling the story of the hotel and his own involvement; further receding to 1932 where most of the action takes place, the vitality of the hotel in its time, the clientele, and, particularly, the concierge, Gustave H.

Anderson also uses different cameras and different ratios to present these different times, the 1932 stories using the traditional box screen.

There is quite an eclectic cast for the film, many of whom have work with Anderson in his previous films. But the centre is Ralph Fiennes as Gustave H. It one of his best performances, tightly controlled, a concierge who knows all the rules and all the manners – but also knows how to manipulate the rules for the whims of the guests while keeping his dignity (except when he surprisingly bursts into some swearing).

The other central character is young refugee from the Middle East, Tony Revolori in a very fine performance, as Zero Moustafa who becomes an apprentice to the concierge. He also shares in many of the adventures – which include getting mixed up with the rapacious son of an elderly woman who was devoted to Gustave, as well as the son's murderous assistant, and the stealing of a painting which was bequeathed to him. This leads to police chases, arrests, and Gustave's time in jail as well as arranging an escape.

Part of the entertainment is that the audience has no idea where all this is leading, entertaining episodes building on each other without predictability.

It is difficult, sometimes, even to recognise some of the cast, especially Tilda Swinton made up to be the 84 year old benefactress, Jeff Goldblum as the lawyer, Harvey Keitel as the prison leader. Other actors are easier to recognise and more quickly, sometimes with very brief appearances like those of Bill Murray, Owen Wilson. And Willem Dafoe proves that he can be one of the most sinister villains on screen. On the more gentle side is Saoirse Ronan is young chocolate maker who falls in love with Zero. Tom Wilkinson is the older author, Jude Law the younger. And F.Murray Abraham is excellent as the older Zero who is narrating the story.

It all takes place in a fictional central European country, reminiscent of The Prisoner of Zenda. It also has a fictitious parallels to the Nazis and the SS, led by Edward Norton, which gives some sinister tones to the proceedings.

Come to think of it, it might be well worth sitting through The Grand Budapest Hotel again.

HISTORIA DO MEIDA/HISTORY OF FEAR Competition

Argentina/Germany, 2014, 80 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Benjamin Naishtat.

The History of Fear perhaps would be better titled The History of Phobias.

This brief film is set in a gated area in Buenos Aires, a helicopter flying over the site at the opening of the film warning people of something impending. Then there are glimpses of people doing ordinary things in their homes, the old and the young, the married, children out in the park.

Gradually the atmosphere changes, the power goes out, there seem to be weird sounds.

The interpretation of the people in this community is that there is something threatening. Their wariness and phobias increase. They fear the sounds and think that there are animals threatening them. They are wary of young people and their behaviour.

The film builds up an atmosphere of tension, partly in the dark, older people with some emotional collapse, the puzzle about what the nature of this menace to them and their way of life actually is.

The film is exploring the detached middle-class of Argentinian cities, separating themselves by having gated communities. Their barriers are self-made – especially in fear of disruption of their lives and, of course, of their possessions.

The director notes that several years earlier during the Argentinian economic crisis, politicians actually exploited people's fears in order to foster a general feeling of insecurity.

The film might have some impact in Argentina and Latin American countries which have similar experiences. But, the film will not travel well outside its country of origin except for festivals and, perhaps, some art-house cinema release.

JACK Competition

Germany, 2014, 103 minutes, Colour.
Ivo Piertzker, Georg Arms, Luise Heyer.
Directed by Edward Berger.

Jack is a plain name for a fairly straightforward German slice of life.

Ivo Piertzker is excellent as Jack, a 10-year-old boy who takes a lot of responsibility for his younger brother. He has to because their mother, although she has great love for her children, is quite self-centred and irresponsible, leaving her children for days on end while they have to fend for themselves – or Jack has to fend for both.

The film shows some very happy times. However, the little boy scalds himself in a hot bath while Jack is making him a meal, the result being that they have to go to social services and it is decided that Jack should go into an institution for young children. It is very hard for him and he suffers considerable bullying, despite the warmth of many of the staff. When he is involved in hitting his opponent, he decides to run away. There is no sign of his mother, although she speaks with affection on the phone. He collect his little brother and the rest of the film is about their trying to cope, wandering around the city, Jack involved in trying to steal some binoculars from a store to give to a boy at the home. They sleep in cars until ousted by security. They go to a friend of their mother but decide that they have to fend for themselves. Ultimately, they find their mother at home and are overjoyed. She, however, is full of excitement about a man she has met and whom she could marry.

Jack has to decide whether they should stay with her leave.

The film is plainly made, emphasis given to realism, and the performances are most persuasive in this context. And, of course, the film is a plea for concern about wayward parents and the effects on their children.

KRAFTIDIOTEN/IN ORDER OF DISAPPEARANCE Competition

Norway, 2013, 105 minutes, Colour.
Stellan Skaarsgard, Pal Sverre Hagan, Bruno Ganz, Peter Andersson.
Directed by Hanns Petter Moland.

Irony title? An unusual for a film from Scandinavia, especially from Norway. This is a further collaboration between Stellan Skarsgård and director Hans Petter Moland.

The title is to be taken literally because there is a rather high body count and each time someone, or a group, dies, the death notice comes up on the screen. So, this is a thriller with touches of a black comedy.

It is winter in Norway and there are vivid scenes of snow and ice, with the central character, declared that the opening of the film as citizen of the year, driving the snow ploughs to clear the roads. In the meantime, down at the airport, a group of drug dealers accost two of the workers, including the son of the citizen of the year. He gets the news to come to the morgue with his wife and identify his son who was found dead on a street bench in the city, allegedly dead from a drug-overdose. The parents deny that this was the case.

The film then turns into something of a vigilante-pursuit of the criminals – with a verbal reference in the film to Dirty Harry, but the plot is more in the line of Charles Bronson and Death Wish.

The father proves himself to be something of a detective, finding out one piece of information, attacking the person referred to and killing him, but getting another name before the death and so on.

In the meantime, the drug chief, a rather crazed young man who goes by the name of Count and who has inherited this business from his father, is bewildered by the deaths and disappearances of his henchmen. It is suggested that this is the work of a group from Serbia who are challenging the Count. This leads to another subplot, the clash between the Serbs and the Count's men, and several deaths and death notices. The father goes to see his brother who formerly worked for the Count's father but who is now married to an Asian wife who insists that he move out of the world of crime. The Count does get some information about the surname of the killer, Dickman, and assumes that it is the brother, has a talk with him – and another death notice.

Which means that the father has to do something drastic as regards the Count. The Count is a estranged from his wife but devoted to his young son – and the father decides that he will abduct the boy. The trouble is that the Serbs decide to do the very same thing. This leads to a showdown, a big shootout, but with the old Serb leader (Bruno Ganz), the father triumphs. The Count (who looks something like a Scandinavian version of Richard E. Grant) is still raving at the end.

Had this been an American film, many European critics would have dismissed it as typical. But, since it is a Norwegian film working the genre, they responded to it very favourably.

Serious, comic – and often tongue-in-cheek.

KREUZWEG/ STATIONS OF THE CROSS Competition

Germany, 2014, 107 minutes, Colour.

Lea Van Acken, Franziska Weisz.

Directed by Dietrich Brüggemann.

The title refers to the traditional devotion to the passion of Jesus, the Way of the Cross, 14 steps of contemplation from Jesus being condemned to death by Pontius Pilate to his burial.

This German film, screened at the 2014 Berlinale, winning the main jury prize for screenplay and the ecumenical award in the main Competition.

The film opens with a priest, young, clerically dressed, teaching five children about the sacrament of Confirmation which they are about to receive. His words are plain and clear. He then says to them that the church has had 2000 years of tradition – and then asserts that along came the Second Vatican Council which ruined everything. He is critical of such things as Communion in the hand, female altar servers, music, a worldly spirituality.

We are being taken into the life of a group which resembles the Society of St Pius X, followers of Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, here called the Society of St Paul. What the film has to offer is a portrait, according to the writer-directors, of a traditionalist Catholic Church, often extreme in its attitudes, fostering an austere spirituality, an isolation from the mainstream which it fears and condemns.

At the centre of the film is the young girl, Maria, part of the Confirmation class. She is urged by the priest to greater holiness, her hoping that she could be a saint. But this requires a great deal of asceticism on her part, not protecting herself against the cold, not eating, much praying – with the motivation that her little brother, who has not spoken, will be able to speak because of her mortification. Maria becomes the character who goes on her own stations of the cross. This is emphasised by the priest who points out that the children are now to become warriors of Christ, warriors for Christ, battling themselves and evil in the world. To be fair, he does point out that the children's battle is also for good in the world.

Maria is an intelligent girl and makes friends with a boy at her school who invites her to sing in the choir at his own church. She is tempted, but his choir includes some rock music and her mother is horrified. In fact, the film's focus on Maria's mother shows us a woman who is extremely rigid in her perspectives, fearful of temptations in her daughter's life, very critical of her when they walk in the mountains, go shopping, buy a dress for her Confirmation, humiliating her at the table after Maria pretends that her friend is a girl and then confesses and admits this to the family.

This means that the audience is very sympathetic to Maria while not understanding the devotion in her motivations. It also means that the audience is quite unsympathetic to the mother, even at the end when she is so haughtily hostile to the doctors and nurses, but decides that her little girl is a saint and should be beatified. In these days of awareness of abuse of children, psychologically as well as sexual, it appears that the training of Maria, the encouraging of her penances, assuming that she understands these matters as an adult, is a warning against spiritual abuse.

Mainstream Catholics and mainstream Christians will be dismayed at this particular portrait of Catholicism, its joylessness, its awareness of God as punishing more than loving, its focus on the sufferings of Jesus without looking to the resurrection, its rigidity of belief, intellectual understanding of faith without a personal pastoral dimension. Life is governed by puritanical attitudes in the Jansenist tradition in the Catholic church.

There is one friendly character in the film, the au pair from France, Bernadette, who brings to the household something of a more humane and sympathetic perspective on life, a support for Maria, offering some alternative way of looking at life, Maria relying on her more than the mother that she strictly obeys.

There is a Spanish film of 2010, *Camino*, which has some similarities to *Kreuzweg*, the story of a little girl who is ill, a member of Opus Dei as is her family, who are unrealistic in her medical treatment,

even brutal in their devout approach to religion, wanting her to be a saint.

Members of the society of St Pius X may find the film too critical, but mainstream viewers will find that this particular community, its beliefs and its spiritual practices are brought to life.

THE LITTLE HOUSE/CHIISIAI OUOCHI Competition

Japan, 2014, 137 minutes, Colour.

Haru Kiroki, Takako Matsi, Hidetaka Yoshiaka.

Directed by Yoji Yamada.

The Little House sounds a rather twee title for a film about Japan in the 1930s and 40s. Yet, it is a quiet and rather restrained film about people who lived during that era.

The film opens in the present, a funeral for an elderly lady. Her relatives, especially a grand-nephew, go through her things and find her diary which the nephew had urged her to write. There are flashbacks to the events in the diary, often with a return to the sequences where the lady is writing and the nephew is working with her.

From a provincial town, rather plain, not expected to marry without effort, she goes as a maid to a family in Tokyo where she is very well received, becoming part of the family. On the surface, all is well. However, the wife of the family is attracted to a young man, a worker in her husband's company. She begins an affair with him, noticed by some of the neighbours, but not by her husband. The family have plans to find a wife for him as well as for the maid. The maid herself is attracted to the young man who is unable to go for war service because of his eyes. As the war grows more severe, not seen on screen until the final firebombings of Tokyo, he is drafted for service.

When the Japanese suffer privations during the war, it seems inappropriate for a family to have a maid, and she returns to her family.

The nephew and his girlfriend discover that the young man had written a book and that there is a museum in his honour, 20 years after his death. They investigate and discover the old man who is the young boy of the family and who knew the maid well. They give him an unopened letter that his mother wrote at the instigation of the maid to the young man - but it was never delivered.

There is a beauty and gentleness in the presentation of these themes, and some self-criticism of the Japanese and their warlike attitudes and presumptions for World War II.

Haru Kiroki won the best actress award in Berlin, 2014.

LOVE IS STRANGE Panorama

US, 2014, 94 minutes, Colour.

Alfred Molina, John Lithgow, Marisa Tomei, Darren Burrows, Charlie Tahan.

Directed by Ira Sachs.

A rather unfortunate title for a very gentle film. The love presented here is not accepted by many individuals, communities, even countries. It is same-sex love. However, this description does not quite do justice to the treatment of the theme in this film. It is a film that can be watched, calmly

and with emotional interest, by most adult audiences. The emphasis is on loving emotion and commitment and does not dwell on the sexual behaviour of men in this kind of commitment.

The film does open with a same-sex marriage ceremony. The two participants have been together for 40 years. They are played, with energetic verve, by John Lithgow and with a gentle honesty by Alfred Molina. It is to the credit of these two actors that the film is emotionally persuasive, no matter what the moral stances of the audience. The other credit is to the writing by director Ira Sachs and his cowriter, Daniel .

The film takes for granted the relationship of the two men, Ben (Lithgow) a gallery manager and a painter, and George (Molina) a music teacher and choir conductor at a local Catholic school. As regards George and his presence in the school, the principal and staff, including priests, are aware of his relational situation. However, once he participates in the public union, the diocese feels that this public statement is not compatible with his role in the school and he is dismissed. The scene where he discusses the situation with one of the priests, a friend, does raise the issues of governments accepting same-sex ceremonies and the witness that that this gives to students in the school.

George's losing his job changes the situation for both men, their not being able to afford their apartment. There is a meeting of their relatives and friends who all have an idea of what they should do for both men. The upshot is that Ben goes to live with his sympathetic nephew Elliot (Darren Burrows), the nephew's wife, a writer, Kate (Marisa Tomei) and their teenage son, Joe (Charlie Tahen). George goes to stay with two gay friends, both policemen.

Much of the film shows, sometimes with humour, sometimes with wry feeling, the joys as well as the difficulties of these arrangements. In fact, Ben talks incessantly, shares a room with Joe much to Joe's chagrin, especially when he wants privacy and working with a fellow-student on projects from school. Kate is sometimes driven demented by Ben's incessant talk. On the other hand, George, a more simple and introverted soul, is content with his lot, even when his hosts put on a noisy party.

There is some solution for the two, even as they have to make arrangements to meet, coming from their different homes. There is a fine scene after they attend a concert where they reminisce about their past, Ben confesses to some failures in the relationship, George exercises his good-nature and patience.

There is a pleasing conclusion to the film, with some sadness, especially with Joe who has found dealing with Ben rather difficult, coming to George and treating him as a confidant for his questions about life.

Love is Strange is a very wide-audience friendly film about two gay men.

MACONDO Competition

Austria, 2014, 98 minutes, Colour.

Ramasan Minkailov, Aslan Elbiev, Kheda Gazieva.

Directed by Sudabeh Mortezaei.

Macondo is an impressive and often moving film. It is set in the Simmering district of Vienna, near the airport, the motorway and the river, Danube. Within it is the district of Macondol, with 3000 inhabitants from 22 different countries. The characters in this film are from Chechnya, war refugees, and from Somalia.

The documentary director Sudabah Mortezaei (Children of the Prophet) moved into the district and had auditions for the central role, opting for amateurs rather than professional actors. 11 year old Ramasan Minkailov is completely credible in the central role of the boy who has to support his mother, idolises his father killed in the war, having to care for his two rowdy sisters.

One of the problems for the refugees is that the authorities advise that they should have evidence of the father's death so that they can receive benefits from the state. There is no death certificate. Another difficulty is that Ramasan gets involved with some of the rougher boys in the district, going out at night, entering into a construction site, being pursued by the police.

Yet, Ramasan is a fine boy, if only he had the support and the opportunities. These come with a man who claims to have been a friend of his father, bringing the father's watch for Ramasan. At first he is like a father-figure to the boy, but the boy is still wary and becomes more alienated from the man. When Ramasan is caught by the police and interrogated, the man offers an alibi but Ramasan turns on him and calls him a liar.

In a final interview, a supervisor approves the state of the apartment, is satisfied with the family's behaviour and it seems they will be allowed to stay. After this, Ramasan goes to the man's house but is ignored. He later returns again while the man is fixing the radio and he begins to help him... Good ending to the film, a happy ending, but not emphasising or over-emphasising it.

The film offers interesting insights into the plight of refugees, difficulties with authorities, the pressures on them to conform so that they will be able to stay in a country.

MO JING /THAT DEMON WITHIN Panorama

China, 2013, 112 minutes, Colour.
Daniel Wu, Nick Cheung.
Directed by Dante Lam.

That Demon Within is an arresting police drama from veteran director, Dante Lam. Lam directed several police dramas, using the tradition that was established in the Hong Kong action thrillers from the 1980s.

This thriller is one with a difference, indicated by the title. It opens with a focus on demonic masks, a group of thieves wearing the masks and reciting a ritual to the Demons and stating that they would confront the police. And attempted robbery ensues but the police have surveillance and one of the criminals, after killing some police, is wounded himself and goes to hospital.

He is in need of blood and one of the officers knows that he has the same type and offers help. When the chief of police arrives, he is upset at the collaboration of the policeman.

The film is then the story of this policeman, a rigid personality, sometimes causing upsets in the areas where he works, being questioned by internal affairs and by psychologists. He becomes obsessed with pursuing the criminal that he helped, and suddenly finds himself in surveillance on the other members of the group. It follows with some dire results.

The internal affairs officer asks her sister, a psychologist, to treat the policeman and she hypnotises him. This leads back to his grandmother, his harsh police father, an episode where someone is burnt

alive and he feels responsible. The psychologist comes to the conclusion that he is schizophrenic, hears voices, is dealing with the criminal he helped – but in his imagination.

Ultimately, the film reaches a climax with the policeman himself, the internal affairs officer, the corrupt policeman, police in pursuit as well as some of the criminal gang.

It ends with a fiery apocalyptic climax. However, there is a postscript in which there is a flashback to the childhood of the policeman, the work that he did, kindly, but there is the dramatic, fiery and explosive ending.

THE MONUMENTS MEN Special screening

US, 2014, 120 minutes, Colour.

George Clooney, Matt Damon, Bill Murray, John Goodman, Bob Balaban, Jean Desjardins, Cate Blanchett.

Directed by George Clooney.

The Monuments' Men is very much a George Clooney film. Not only did he co-write it, he directed it and is the star. And he has gathered round him a very strong cast including Matt Damon who has worked with him many times and Cate Blanchett who worked with him in *The Good German*. Along with the stars, he also has some comic actors including Bill Murray and John Goodman. And, for good measure, he has the Oscar-winner for Best Actor of 2011, Jean Desjardins. There is a nod to the popularity in the United States of *Downton Abbey* with the presence of Hugh Bonneville.

The plot is interesting, a variation on war films, a more polite and well-mannered *Dirty Dozen*, for instance. The focus is on the art treasures that the Nazis were stealing all over Europe, especially those from France and Belgium, including the famous altarpiece in the Cathedral in Ghent and Michelangelo's *Madonna from Bruges*. German soldiers are invading the sacred places, interrupting the clergy, even killing them when they find that they are hiding the art treasures.

A concerned group approach President Roosevelt for permission to track down and recover the art treasures. He makes the important point of asking whether the saving of these treasures is worth a human life – with the answer that this is the historical and cultural heritage that is important for recovery after the war and for people's cultural identity. It is interesting to note that President Truman asks the same question at the end of the war.

George Clooney portrays Stokes, the officer in charge of the operation and he has permission to recruit art experts, who are eager to enter into war action since they have been rejected because of physical disabilities. Matt Damon is Granger, who works at the Met in New York. Bill Murray is an architect. John Goodman another expert. They are put through some rigorous physical training, a bit difficult for people of John Goodman's build and age! But this is a good opportunity for them to bond. They are joined by Hugh Bonneville, who has had his own personal difficulties in England, but is considered indispensable for the project. Once in Europe they are divided into teams of two except for Granger who goes to liberated Paris to track down a woman who worked in the *Jeu des Paumes* during the war years and is now considered a collaborator. She is played by Cate Blanchett.

There are several war action sequences, involving snipers, landmines, working undercover, and discovering that a lot of the art has been saved in a variety of mine shafts in Germany. With the approaching end of the war, some German squads are destroying the treasures. So, it is a race against time with some tension as the war ends, the Russians advance in Germany and the American

group has to track down the most famous of the famous treasures.

While the film is quite serious in its theme, the writing is often quite humorous, American-style jokes, deadpan quips that give a kind of jaunty air to the film. For most audiences it will be a quite acceptable blend of action, adventure, with comic touches.

N – MADNESS OF REASON Forum
Belgium, 2014, 102 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Peter Kruger.

This is an arty and artful documentary, focusing on the life of Raymond Borremans, 1906 – 1988. He was a Frenchman who left Europe in the 1920s and made Africa his home. After exploring a great deal of Africa, he settled in Ivory Coast as his second home.

Flemish director, Peter Kruger, has explored Borremans' life, not merely a biography, but a study and a portrait.

The film employs a double narrative, the French narrative by veteran actor, Michael Lonsdale, the African commentary and narrative by Wendyam some Adele girl. The French narrative offers information but raises many questions, many issues, many of them quite abstract and seemingly portentous (with a touch of the pretentious-sounding).

However, there are beautiful vistas of several African countries and of the Ivory Coast.

Borremans studied butterflies and other elements of nature, and these are visualised. He also wrote songs, one of which is presented in a luxury hotel lounge with a local singer and ensemble. He also wrote an encyclopaedia of the Ivory Coast and there are details of his compiling it, writing it and publication eventually in his later life.

All the way through, there are ruminations about the meaning of life and life in the context of the African continent.

Of the, there is a focus on the history of Ivory Coast, its establishment and its prosperity, the exploitation and the poverty. Symbolic of this is the Basilica of Our Lady of Peace at Yamoussoukro. It is a metre higher than St Peter's in Rome on which it is based. The narrative asks questions of the Ivory Coast President who created this – and his seated memorial is in the foyer of the basilica.

This leads to the realities of the civil wars at the beginning of the 21st century, the sides, refugees from other countries, security borders, the destruction, the effect on the people and their poverty.

It also leads to considerations of global sameness, capitalism and consumerism in the 21st century, as well as the hedonism that has developed everywhere, clubs – and pornography.

The portrait of Borremans is interesting and challenging, the film is very interesting as a portrait of Ivory Coast as seen by an expatriate of the 20th century.

NYMPHOMANIAC, VOLUME 1 Special screening

Denmark, 2014, 150 minutes, Colour.

Charlotte Gainsbourg, Stellan Skarsgård, Shia La Beouf, Stacey Martin, Christian Slater, Connie Nielsen, Uma Thurman, Saskia Reeves.
Directed by Lars von Trier.

An enormous amount of word-of-mouth about this film. A lot of it veering towards the scandalous as well as the sexually prurient. After all, just look at the title. And then there is the factor of the writer-director, the extraordinarily eccentric but creative Danish director, Lars von Trier. Over the decades he has made a wide range of films, at one stage focusing on his Dogme principles of filming with cinematic purity and not relying on effects, lighting... This phase seems to have passed, although the different film styles that von Trier uses indicate his history of experimentation.

This is the first volume of the two-part *Nymphomaniac*. This first part was screened at the 2014 Berlinale. The second volume was promised for an occasion like the Cannes Film Festival. However, the two parts were screening together in special events soon after the screening in Berlin. In the months prior, an abridged version of the two parts was screened commercially.

One of the most controversial of von Trier's films was the *Antichrist*, 2009. Many considered it too confronting with his treatment of the death of a child, the tensions between husband and wife and some sadistic and gruesome behaviour. However, the film could be seen as a psychological, psychosexual study and judged accordingly.

Nymphomaniac is definitely a psychological study, a study of sexual condition that has dire consequences for the nymphomaniac herself as well as the people with whom she comes in contact. This is very clear from the first volume.

The film opens with a dark screen, some noises of water falling, gradually shows us a dark street in a Scandinavian town and a man going to the local store who then discovers a woman lying on the street. He offers an ambulance but she refuses and he takes her to his home, allows her to shower and gives her a cup of tea. He, like the audience, wants to ask questions and she agrees.

What follows is an over two hour interchange between the man and the woman, flashbacks as she tells her story, starting from her infancy and sexual awareness, playing with a companion, her love for her doctor father and aware of the seeming indifference of her mother. Then with a close friend, she begins her nymphomaniac behaviour, the two of them trying to seduce as many men as they come across, having a bet about how many they can seduce during a train journey.

One of the key things is that one of the girls realises that love can be involved, whereas the nymphomaniac herself has no experience of love, no real emotions at all, a cerebral understanding of her condition and the compulsion to act out. This is visualised as she goes to work, is fired from her job, takes up with a married man and clashes with his wife, meet up again with the young man who, indifferently, took her virginity and is now an executive.

A brief synopsis does not do justice to how all this is presented on screen. A great deal of it is presented as realism. However, as von Trier has done in other films, he introduces diagrams and formulas represented on screen, details for parking a car which detach the audience in some ways from what is going on, or makes them think about the meaning.

In the abridged version there are some graphic sequences, but in the full versions, some explicit sexual activity is presented, sometimes in brief close-up. Information during the final credits indicate that the professional actors did not participate in these sequences but body doubles were used.

Charlotte Gainsbourg, who appeared in *Antichrist* and *Melancholia*, is Joe, the young woman who is telling her story. Stacey Martin appears as the younger Joel in the flashbacks. Stellan Skarsgaard is the man listening to the story.

Shia La Beouf is the young businessman. But two key performances are impressive: Christian Slater as the doctor-father of Joe, especially in the sequence where he is dying in hospital; and the other is the wife of the executive who leaves her for Joe. She is played expertly by Uma Thurman who gives a performance of 'hell hath no fury...', bringing her two children to confront her husband and Joe, acting in an extraordinarily demented and moody fashion, a show-stopping performance, to be welcomed amongst all the sexual behaviour.

This review is only of *Nymphomaniac* Volume 1, some of the advertised cast have not yet appeared and the plot will lead us up to the point where Joe is confiding in the listener, exercising a kind of therapy for herself and for the audience.

NO MAN'S LAND/WU REN QU Competition

China, 2014, 117 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Ning Hao.

This is one of those films that has to be seen to be believed!

As the credits begin, we are in a desert, a bird-handler pursuing falcons – to the accompaniment of the musical score which obviously pays homage to spaghetti westerns. In fact, spaghetti westerns is the clue. The look, the colour grading, the musical score, the stances of the characters, the dangers and the violence are all reminiscent of the classic spaghetti westerns.

After the capture of the falcon, there is a car crash and a pursuing policeman is killed. Then we are in court, with a young, quite arrogant lawyer making the defence of the poachers. He is dressed in suit and tie, quite a contrast to the look of these people in the north-west of China, at the edge of the Gobi desert. But this does not last long!

The smart lawyer, persuades the poachers to give him their car as part of his payment. Which is what they wanted, because they have concealed the falcon in the car and plan a hold-up to get the bird and then to sell it on to the international dealers. Great plan, but, of course, it does not work out this way – at all.

Part of the disaster for the lawyer occurs early on, when he irritatedly overtakes a truck with two local drivers who do not take kindly to his behaviour, spit on his windshield and then break it. The consequence of the break means that the plan about the falcon goes completely awry.

The film-makers and we, the audience, all have our tongues placed firmly in our cheek for the further adventures of the lawyer who finishes up being an absolute wreck and dishevelled. He tries to get help at a local service station, managed by isolated eccentrics, who have a young woman imprisoned for sexual purposes. Doesn't spoil the plot to say that she gets away and hides in the lawyer's car.

In the meantime, the drivers of the truck are in pursuit, the main poacher is in pursuit, the man who caught the bird in the first place has been injured and thought to be dead – but, of course, he is not, and so on the action on the highway continues.

The film would not be a tribute to the spaghetti westerns unless there was a kind of good, bad and ugly finale, the shootout, with explosions and fire, all spectacularly done.

The plot is complicated, there are quite a number of twists, and there are also quite a number of deaths. But, to let the audience out of the cinema a bit more gently, there is an epilogue that is rather sweet considering all that we have watched beforehand.

This is one of those films which will get something of a cult reputation as people enjoy it and make the Italian-Chinese [?](#) connections.

PRAIRA DO FUTURO/ BEACH OF THE FUTURE Competition

Brazil/Germany, 2014, 106 minutes, Colour.

Wagner Moura, Clemens Schick, Jesuita Barbosa.

Directed by Karim Anouiz.

This film featured in the 2014 Berlin Film Festival. It was well received by Brazilian critics and some locals but did not have a strong impact on wider audiences.

In theory, it should have made a better impression. The film opens strikingly with motorcyclists on the coast of Brazil, driving through the roads and sand, the two riders then going into the ocean for a swim, one getting into difficulties and drowning, the other rescued, and the film focusing on the lifesaver.

Very quickly, the gay theme is introduced as the lifesaver and the survivor have a sexual encounter. One of the main difficulties for the film is that there seems to be very little, almost no chemistry between the two central characters, so that their sudden relationship does not convince – and this is true of the later sequences, even though they are meant to be quite intimate and the two falling in love. Brazilian actor Wagner Moura plays the lifeguard and German actor, Clemens Schick plays the survivor, (the two Germans had served together in Afghanistan and were returning home after travels to work together in a garage, the man who died having a wife and child).

The German calls the Brazilian a coward for not leaving his family and coming with him to Germany. The lifesaver has strong family bonds, with his devoted mother and with his younger brother who is introduced to the German and is attracted by the cars. He goes to Germany and, when challenged, does not go to the airport.

Germany seems very cold to the lifesaver – and there is no beach to hand. While the two maintain their relationship for some time, it is clear that the Brazilian is uncomfortable, has some regrets in leaving his family, but has decided to make a new life away from them all.

Years pass. The relationship has broken though the two men see each other. What makes a difference for the last part of the film is the arrival of the younger brother from Brazil, now a late teenager, spending two weeks searching for his brother and eventually finding him, attacking him for leaving home, and missing the death of their mother.

There is some reconciliation between the younger brother and the older brother who now works in an aquarium, cleaning the glass for the exhibits. He also meets the German who takes him under his wing after a clash and a rough sexual encounter with a girlfriend.

We presume that, eventually, the three will become friends, the Brazilian will revive something of his life, the German will continue the friendship and the young man, actually following the example of his brother, leaves Brazil and finds a new home.

STRATOS/ THE STORM WITHIN/ TO MIKRO SPIRA Competition

Greece, 2014, 137 minutes, Colour.

Vangelis Mourikis.

Directed by Yannis Economidis.

As the film opens, we see a man hiding and being provided with food by someone from a village. He returns to his hiding place and then we see a nondescript man sitting there – who then shoots the man. He is Stratos.

Stratos works as a baker by day but takes on a number of hit contracts, his contact being an anonymous man called The Painter. During the film we see a number of these hits. But then, the motivation becomes clearer as Stratos wants to raise money to free from prison Leonidas, who had saved his life previously. However, he is betrayed by the wife of the prisoner and his close friend to whom he gives the money.

This embitters Stratos who continues his work but moves towards vengeance on those who betray him. He has a kindly touch for the young daughter of a friend whom he takes for a special meal, along with his disabled contact. They enjoy themselves – and then he takes them into a tunnel where he kills them as well.

What is left? We see The Painter getting some young men, obviously setting up a contract for the killing of Stratos – which happens as he sits alone on the bench. While the beauty of the Greek countryside and mountains is apparent, this is, indeed, a pessimistic film.

THINGS PEOPLE DO Panorama

US, 2014, 109 minutes, Colour.

Wes Bentley, Vinessa Shaw, Jason Isaacs, Keith Carradine.

Directed by Saaar Klein.

Things People Do is a variation on the American dream story – which, so often, turns into a nightmare.

The setting is New Mexico, Albuquerque and its outskirts, dry environment in desert surroundings.

Bill (Wes Bentley) is an insurance man and we see him making his living, talking persuasively to clients. He seems to have a happy home, a devoted wife, a loving son. His in-laws are another matter, his father-in-law (Keith Carradine) continually putting him down, talking critically about his work. This exasperates him and he appeals to his wife, but she says that her father is the only family she has.

A recreation that Bill enjoys is bowling, joining a group of friends, letting their hair down. When one has a slight accident, a man who has been watching offers his help. He turns out to be a detective,

separated from his wife and family, with a drinking problem. He is played with some geniality as well seriousness by Jason Isaac.

But the dream is not what it seems. Bill is fired from his job because he is not making sufficient money. He is unable to pay his mortgage and the bank officials are severe on him.

Back in the 1930s, the response to the failure of the American dream was for men and women to become criminals, especially robbing banks. But it is the 21st century and Bill decides to rob some of his clients, some of the people whose private lives are somewhat disedifying. He builds up some financial resources.

In the meantime, the detective is working on the case, getting information, able to build up something of a portrait of the robber – whom he recognises. Because he likes Bill, he talks with him about his situation, empathetic because he is losing his wife and family, alerting Bill that he needs to stop the robberies and find a safer and surer path for his life.

The director worked as editor for some of Terence Mallick's films, Israel-born but with a career in the United States.

THE THIRD SIDE OF THE RIVER Competition

Argentina, 2014, 98 minutes, Colour.
Alian Devetac, Daniel Veronese.
Directed by Celina Murga.

Where is the third side of the river? An island in the middle? An island of uncertainty?

This film shows an Argentinian family, which turns out to be a second family while the father has another wife and child. But this child is at home in the second family, playing with the children, helped by the older brother when he is bullied at school.

The film focuses on the older brother, Nicolas, played by Alian Devetac, a non-professional performer who is very convincing in the role of a 16-year-old, devoted to his family, but very suspicious of his father. He experiences a number of dilemmas, his father wanting him to take an apprenticeship in his clinic so that he will have access to studies and a career. The father also owns a ranch and takes his son to see it, hoping that he will manage it.

The film also shows the mother, loving her husband but aware of his fickleness. A teenage daughter is about to turn 15 and all her hopes and attention is focused on her party.

Nicholas is an introvert so it is not immediately evident what is going inside his mind and his heart – but, at the end, when he sets the barn of the ranch alight and jumps on the back of a truck to go to..., the film has proven itself an emotional and psychological exploration of a teenager.

TO SINGAPORE, WITH LOVE Forum

Singapore, 2013, 70 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Tan Pin Pin.

To Singapore, With Love is not one of those omnibus films with many directors telling stories about the city that they love. Rather, this is the sentiment of a number of political exiles, some since the 1960s, some since the 1970s, who still wish to go back to their home, where they grew up, Where they fought for political freedom before their exile.

Documentary maker, Tan Pin Pin interviews a number of these exiles who live in London, in Malaysia, in Thailand.

Her interviews are very telling and the interviewees come across very powerfully, as characters in themselves, in their memories of their protests and their arrests in the past decades, and as peaceful persons in the present, still longing to go home.

One particular focus is on activist, Francis Khoo, with footage of his activities, often exuberant, devout Catholic, writer of songs, protest leader who married his fiancée a few weeks before his internment. And she was to follow. She is one of the most impressive presences on screen, Ang Swee Chai, a physician who went into exile in London with her husband, at times finding things very difficult, but eventually winning respect and becoming a surgeon. She has been particularly active since in setting up a medical aid foundation for Palestinians. She is interviewed several times, is seen with her family, and makes a deep impression by the integrity of her life and witness to her beliefs.

Another character, rather lively, is the Tan Wah Piow. He interviews well and there is footage and imagery of his protests as well. Again, he lives in exile in London. He is the author of several books and a launch in Kuala Lumpur is a feature of the film.

The third central character is Ho Juan Thai, another activist, older than the others, who remembers the days of the past, has a great desire to go back to Singapore, and can only visit with his elderly mother when she crosses the Causeway into Malaysia.

While there are not many scenes of Singapore, except looking across from Malaysia into the city, the impression of Singapore is very strong, its history, the strict legislation under Lee Kwan Yew, and the repressive measures on protesters, especially in 1963 when a number were exiled, in the mid 1970s and again in the 1980s.

The film has as its focus Singapore, but could easily be the same story for many other repressive countries, far more repressive than Singapore itself.

This is a timely film for remembering the developments in Singapore as well as the repression in the latter part of the 20th century.

THE TWO FACES OF JANUARY Panorama

UK/US, 2014, 96 minutes, Colour.

Viggo Mortensen, Oscar Isaac, Kirsten Dunst, Daisy Bevan.

Directed by Hossein Amini.

The Will Faces of January is based on a thriller by novelist, Patricia Highsmith. Instant film circles, she is best known for the adaptations of her novel, strangers on a train, by Alfred Hitchcock, and the various versions of the Tom Ripley story, a talented The Talented Mr Ripley, the René Clement version, Purple Noon, with Alain corrected all Delon and Anthony Minghella's, The talented Talented Mr Ripley, with Matt Damon.

The screenplay has been written by its first-time director, Hossein Amini, whose screenplays are as diverse as *Jude*, *The Wings of the Dove*, *Drive*.

The settings are quite exotic, Athens, the Parthenon and the market, Crete and the historical site of Colossus, and Turkey. And the cast is quite significant, Viggo Mortensen as a financier from New York, Kirsten Dunst as his much younger wife travelling with him, Oscar Isaac as an American to a guide in Athens.

The film takes place over only a few days, starting with people wandering the Acropolis, the suspicions of the financier about the guide and his wife checking him out, finding him credible and their joining him for a tour of the market as well as dinner. The audience knows that the guide has worked a financial trick in the buying of a bangle, so he is the first one under suspicion.

When the couple returned to the hotel, a private detective accosts the financial financier and reveals that he has been involved in very shady deals and, with another name, his spending the money on the continent. When difficulties follow, and the guide appears at the hotel to return the lost bangle, the plot becomes quite complicated, and the 3 to get false passport and go to Crete. While there, the financiers hold on life is lessened by his continued drinking, suspicious of his wife and her relationship with the guide, leading to violence.

The action culminates in Turkey, the final words of the financier altering the direction in which the film seem to be going.

An interesting entertainment but, with its narrow focus, does not have quite the punch that a more popularised version would have.

TWO MEN IN TOWN Competition

US, 2014, 115 minutes, Colour.

Forrest Whitaker, Brenda Blethyn, Harvey Keitel, Ellen Burstyn.

Directed by Rachid Bouchareb.

Two Men In Town is from Paris-born director, Rachid Bouchareb. He has made some fine films, including two with SIGNIS and Ecumenical awards: *Little Senegal* and *London River*. However, this film is not as good, even though the director does create an interesting New Mexico environment.

The film is an American adaptation of the 1973 thriller, *Two Men in The Town*, based on the work of novelist and director, Jose Giovanni, who had himself experienced French prisons. The original starred Alain Delon, Jean Gabin, Michel Bouquet, with Gerard Depardieu in a supporting role.

It is difficult to pin down who the two men of the title are. One should be the central character William Garnett, played with his usual intensity by Forrest Whitaker. On the other hand, he interacts with two men in the town: the sheriff, played by Harvey Keitel, and the Mexican who trades on the illegal refugees, played by Luiz Guzman.

For most of the film, Whitaker wears a suit and tie, shedding them only when he goes to work with cattle on a farm. This means that he always looks dignified, reinforced by his conversion to Islam and his continual prayer after he is released from jail. He had difficulties as a youth, dealing in drugs and petty crime. But he has gone to jail for the murder of a deputy, something for which the sheriff

cannot forgive him. In himself, a sometimes kindly man, the sheriff is angry that Barnett is free while his deputy is still dead, and he takes the opportunity to harass the ex-prisoner.

The part for Luis Guzman, or the way it is written, is very irritating. During the past, he worked closely with Garnett. Now, after 18 years, he wants to hire him again to control his operatives in Mexico. Garnett refuses because he wants to live a decent life, have a family – reinforced by his encounter at a bank with a teller, Teresa (Delores Heredia).

The other central character is the parole officer, an excellent people performance by Brenda Blethyn, both down-to-earth and sympathetic. She had worked with Bouchareb on London River.

The film is strong with the performances and with the re-creation of the New Mexico environment. However, the screenplay is all is not always credible in its charting the interactions of all the characters. Yet, given the director and the cast, the film was not without interest.

UNFRIEND Panorama

Philippines, 2014, 93 minutes, Colour.

Sandino Martin, Angelo Llagan.

Directed by Joselito Altarejos.

This film was directed by Joselito Altarejos who has developed a reputation in his home country, the Philippines, for directing dramas which focus on homosexuality and gay relationships. The film has been produced by the Philippines most famous contemporary director, Brillante Mendoza, many of whose films also focus on homosexuality and gay relationships. And this is definitely the case with Unfriend.

The central character is David, a 15-year-old, whose mother has migrated to the United States and he lives with his caring grandmother – although she spends most of her time watching religious programs on television, cooking and going to church. The film takes place over only a few days but we realise that David is an intense teenager, sexually aware, and passionately infatuated with an older friend.

The friend leaves David, wanting to give him some space. That is not what David wants at all. He talks with mother on Skype for Christmas, thanking her for the money that she has sent which he uses on Internet connections, one of his passions, especially Facebook. His grandmother wants him to go to mass with her for Christmas, but he is reluctant. And even more reluctant when he actually goes, listens to the sermon which offers conventional comments about Christmas, but begins to use his iPad to his grandmother's annoyance. He then wants to go to the toilet – and makes his escape the mass. Back at home, there are Christmas songs and a Christmas meal.

However, David's obsession grows. He goes out to a club, picks up a young man at the club and goes to the roof for a sexual encounter. Then he goes to buy a gun.

He contact his friend and they agree to meet in a mall. He seems somewhat demented, playing with his drink and a straw, the friend seeming calm even casual.

With no communication in sight, except for the huge screens all around the mall where people can watch one another, David takes the gun, stands at a screen where he can see his friend, a camera on him, and he shoots himself. In a comment, the director suggested that one of his main themes was the obsession with social media, and exhibitionism, even to killing oneself on screen.

In one sense, this film is visually more restrained than the other films of the director. In another sense, it is far more intense in this portrait of obsessive relationships than his other films.

VIHARSOROK/LAND OF STORMS Panorama

Andras Suto, Adam Varga, Sebastian Urzendowski.
Hungary, 2014, 106 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Adam Csaszai.

Land of Storms begins like a sports film, a coach with the pep talk for his team, playing in Germany. They train, they communicate in the dressing room, in the showers, they watch pornography in the dressing room... The focus is on the Hungarian player who is good at football, but it is later revealed that the reason that he is playing is because of his father and his father's big career.

In a shower sequence, the player begins a fight with his roommate, alleging that he is looking at him. This suggests that there will be sexuality themes in the film. And, indeed, they become the main subject.

The player goes home to Hungary, sets up in a farm that he has inherited, trying to manage by himself and thinking to repair it and to keep bees. One night, his motorbike is stolen but he pursues the thief and confronts him. The thief is a young man from the village, doing a trade apprenticeship, living with his mother and caring for her. He returns and offers to work on the repairs with the footballer.

The audience is not thinking that the footballer has a homosexual orientation but it manifests itself in his encounters with the young man. And the young man is bewildered, liking what he has experienced, but finding it, in the context of his very religious village, something that he cannot deal with. In a moment of frankness, he tells his mother who actually informs the young men of the village with whom he plays football. The young man is a churchgoer, devoted to his mother, but when he is beaten up and burnt by his friends, he leaves his mother and goes to live with the footballer.

In the meantime, the footballer has communicated with his friend in Germany who then comes to visit. This makes for emotional complications, the visitor wanting to stay with the footballer, the footballer feeling that he should stay with his workmate because of what he has suffered. For a while, it seems that the three manage together but eventually the visitor returns to Germany.

Up till the final moments of the film, we assume that it is a sympathetic look at two men, their attraction, the relationship, gay sexuality. But in the final moments, there is a hugely melodramatic turn and we realise that this is a film against homophobia, as manifested by the mother, by the friends in the village, and by the young man himself who cannot deal with his own sexual orientation and attacks the man he loves. This means that the audience leaves the theatre jolted by these realities of homophobia.

ZWISCHEN WELTEN/INBETWEEN WORLDS Competition

Germany, 2014, 98 minutes, Colour.
Ronald Zehrfeldt, Mohsin Ahmady.
Directed by Feo Aladag.

Audiences have seen many films about the American presence in Afghanistan after 9/11, the search for Osama Bin Laden, but few films about soldiers from other countries serving in Afghanistan. The Danish film, *Brothers*, is something of an exception (and was remade with the plot transferred to the United States). Audiences have not seen many films about German soldiers serving in Afghanistan. So this makes *Inbetween Worlds* distinctive.

We are immediately introduced to a runner on the beach who turns out to be Jesper, who has served already a term in Afghanistan, but is still grieving the death of his brother there. He has been asked to return by the authorities to take command of a small group.

The Afghanistan sequences are quite striking in the beauty of the mountains as well as of the desert. We see the army base with all its equipment. But we go out on an expedition with Jesper, trying to liaise with a local tribe against the Taliban. The German group does quite well, although it has some colonialist attitudes of which it is not aware, but which are made clear by the local leadership. The Germans are also restricted in what they can do in terms of helping the locals, especially when they are attacked.

The other central character is a young man from the city, a translator who can be relied on for his work – although, according to the subtitles, he makes very smooth and diplomatic a lot of the conversations. He is concerned about his sister who is studying at the University but subject to criticisms and attack, having to wear the Burka when she goes to her studies. The young man wants to rescue her and bring her to the camp where she can act as a cook. Riding on the motorbike, they are attacked, and the sister is shot.

This raises another dilemma for Jesper, headquarters urging him not to bring the woman in for medical attention, his focusing on the more personal aspects of the war and defying the commands.

The film was directed by female director, Feo Aladag, who made an impression with her film *Die Fremde*, a Turkish- German drama. While she brings to life the battles in contemporary Afghanistan, she brings a great deal of feeling to the characters and the situations, especially with Jesper and his being caught-martialled.

The final image of the film is a Stop sign at a railway crossing – and a surprisingly jolting ending.

REVIEWS MARCH-APRIL 2014

AMAZING SPIDERMAN 2, THE RISE OF ELECTRO

ANY DAY NOW

ARMSTRONG LIE, The

BLUE RUIN

CAPTAIN AMERICA: THE WINTER SOLDIER

CUBAN FURY

DIVERGENT

EXIT FROM MARRAKESH

FADING GIGOLO

FAITH CONNECTIONS

GORE VIDAL: THE UNITED STATES OF AMNESIA

HALF OF A YELLOW SUN

HANNAH ARENDT

HEALING

INVISIBLE WOMAN

LEGO MOVIE, The

LIVING IS EASY WHEN YOUR EYES ARE CLOSED

MINISCULE: THE VALLEY OF THE LOST ANTS

MAN OF TAI CHI

MR MORGAN'S LAST LOVE

MR PEABODY AND SHERMAN

MUPPETS MOST WANTED

NEED FOR SPEED

NOAH

NYMPHOMANIAC VOLUME 2

ONLY LOVERS LEFT ALIVE

OTHER WOMAN, The

OUT OF THE INFERNO

POMPEI

RAID 2, The

RIDE ALONG

WADJDA

THE AMAZING SPIDERMAN 2, THE RISE OF ELECTRO

Andrew Garfield, Emma Stone, Jamie Foxx, Dane de Haan,

Directed by Mark Webb.



Audiences seem to have had a glut of Spiderman films in the last 10 years or more, three films with Toby Maguire, directed by Sam Raimi, which, on the whole, were very popular. So, it was a surprise that Hollywood had re-booted Spiderman and begun another series. Whatever the reasons, here he is – again.

One of the key things that this sequel does is to give some explanation about Peter Parkers' parents. In the previous film, it was shown that they disappeared, taking secret material with them, and not heard of again. This was something that made Peter Parker brood about his parents and himself. This time the film has quite an elaborate explanation of what happened, the work of Richard Parker with spiders and with human tissues, the exploitation of his work by his partner, his having to get away quickly with his material, taking his wife, farewelling his son as a little boy and leaving a video message for him. It shows the Parkers in a plane escaping, but coming to a sad end. It is only later in the film that Peter himself begins to make investigations to discover what happened and to find his father's video.

In the meantime, he is involved in all kinds of exploits, confronting a truck with nuclear material, participating in havoc in Manhattan traffic, arriving just in time for his graduation, but missing the

vaedictory speech by Gwen (Emma Stone). But Aunt Mae (Sally Field) is there to congratulate her nephew.

A bizarre character is introduced in the form of a scientific nerd, Max (Jamie Foxx). He is devoted to Spiderman and encounters him briefly. Gwen, on her way to work, also encounters him, a quietly courteous man who talks to himself. But, accidents happen. He falls into a vat of electric eels and absorbs their electricity, transforming into an arch-villain, with an extraordinary special effects look, wanting to confront Spiderman, and wreaking havoc on New York's electricity system, communications, air traffic control...

So, that is the first confrontation that Spiderman has to deal with.

In the meantime, Peter and Gwen are seeing each other, in love.

Then, on to the scene, comes his old friend and schoolmate, Harry Osborne (Dane de Haan), with a terminal illness but with a determined belief that getting a transplant of blood from Spiderman will cure him. He is remembering his father's work with Peter's father. Harry becomes more obsessed, asks his friend Peter for help, which puts Peter in rather a dilemma. However, Harry has an injection and turns into a monster, the Green Goblin, building up to a second confrontation with Spiderman. And just when you thought everything is resolved, there is quite a shock at the end – which publicists hope will not be revealed so that audiences will experience it in its fullness.

Then the film does go on for another 10 minutes, introducing yet another villain with Paul Giamatti's face and voice but enclosed in a monstrous creation. This means that the last 10 minutes are in fact the trailer for the next episode.

This makes this sequel something of an interim chapter – with The Amazing Spiderman 3 to look forward to.

ANY DAY NOW

US, 2013, 98 minutes, Colour.

Alan Cumming, Garrett Delahunt, Isaac Levy, Frances Fisher, Gregg Henry, Don Franklin, Mindy Stirling.

Directed by Travis Fine.



In retrospect, some of the details of situations or character may not be as credible as they seem while seen on the screen. Nevertheless, while the film is there, it is often very, very moving.

It takes up quite a number of issues and gives the audience plenty to be emotional about and to try to understand. We are accosted, so to speak, at the opening when we realise that this is Alan Cumming as Rudy, performing as a drag queen in a club. During his number, he notices a very straight, up-and-down man has moved into the club. They talk, relate sexually, are approached by the police. When it emerges that Paul (Garrett Dillahunt) works for the DA's office, it is clear that same-sex relationships will be a key issue for the film. The setting is 1979.

When Rudy goes home, a dingy place where he finds difficulty in paying the rent, he finds a boy with Down Syndrome, neglected by his slatternly mother. Another issue, the life of and care for a boy with Down Syndrome.

Rudy approaches Paul's office for legal help, Paul is immediately unresponsive. However, the two men are attracted towards each other and Paul finds a solution, with the mother signing away the right to care for her son during her imprisonment and the two men looking after the boy. His name is Marco and he is portrayed with great sympathy by Isaac Levya. Another issue, temporary adoption and fostering, especially by a gay couple.

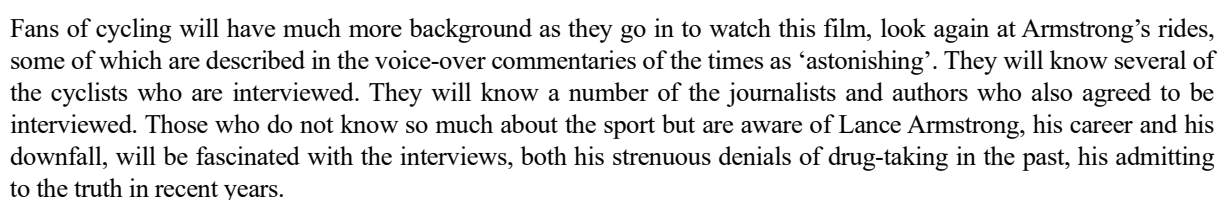
Because Marco is so sympathetic (it might have been more credible for the plot and the challenges for Rudy and Paul had he had some difficulties, temper tantrum, for instance, or become ill), audiences will really respond to the parenting by the two men and the response of Marco. They involve him in a school for special students, with a very sympathetic and affirming teacher.

Life wasn't meant to be easy, and difficulties arise for the two men, especially in their going through the courts to gain custody. Initially, the judge (Frances Fisher) is wary of Paul's challenge for her to listen sympathetically. She is handicapped by the attitudes of the times. The prosecuting lawyer (Gregg Henry) is aggressive, seemingly homophobic in his detailed interrogations of Rudy, his work, his behaviour, in exposing Marco to his way of life. Paul acts as the defence.

The film is not as predictable as one might have thought, leaving the audience with some emotion

There is quite some humour in the film, along with the pathos. *Any Day Now* offers an accessible story to audiences to help reflect on the issues.

Lance Armstrong, Frankie Andreu, Betsy Andreu, Johan Bruyneel, Michele Ferrari, George Hincapie, Daniel Coyle, Phil Liggett, Bill Strickland.
Directed by Alex Gibney.



Most audiences, looking at the earlier interviews, will be completely baffled as to how Armstrong could have said the things that he did, keeping a straight face, defying interviewers, even ridiculing a number of them. How he could be incomplete public denial seems not only mysterious but incredible.

Alex Gibney has directed a number of very impressive documentaries including Enron: the Smartest Guys in the Room, the Oscar-winning Taxi to the Dark Side, about American torture in Afghanistan, and the film about Americans sexual abuse by clergy in Sins of the Fathers, Silence in the House of God. In this present film he has been able to bring together his earlier footage for the more triumphant-intended documentary as well as sequences outing Armstrong and his deception.

The film does give the opportunity to give something of Armstrong's background, growing up in Texas, with a single mother, highly competitive at school and in cycling, moving in the 1990s to some championships which led to his entry into the tour to France of 1999, his winning and the subsequent six wins to 2005. He himself often quotes his sense of competitiveness, his desire to win, and certainly his desire not to lose. He is praised as being determined, but denounced as being domineering and dominating.

For those not in the know, the frequent and lengthy excerpts showing Armstrong riding and his tactics will seem too long – though they seem necessary in building up this portrait of Armstrong. On the other hand, the many vistas of the multitude of cyclists in various scenic spots in Europe are most arresting.

This time the film opens with the interview with Oprah Winfrey and Armstrong answering her directly. It continues with the interview with Gibney. It is in this context that the film then retraces Armstrong's career.

Of great interest are the very many interviews with fellow cyclists, who give their impressions of Armstrong as a person, as a character, as a cyclist. Very significant are the 2005 interviews with Frankie Andreu and Betsy Andreu, his wife, who are quite blunt about Armstrong's use of enhancing drugs – which, at the time, he vigorously denounced. Of great interest also are other comments by cycling journalists, authors of books about cycling, one of them highlighting Armstrong's previous partnership with George Landis, and his falling out with him leading to Landis also denouncing him.

Perhaps it is not a balance to what Armstrong has done, but there is some effective footage in the film, showing him at the time of his experience of cancer and the chemotherapy and its brutal consequences. It also shows his foundation, his travelling the world to raise millions of dollars for children with cancer, his visiting the wards and being with the children. In the 2009 footage, especially when the official organisations suddenly send personnel for blood and urine tests, he is seen with his two daughters. A human touch.

In the film which runs just over two hours, there is a great deal of material – and quite a long time to look at Armstrong himself, his face as he denied drug-taking, his face as he talked with friends and clashed with enemies, his face as he finally spoke the truth. And audiences will be still puzzling about how such a high flier could have kept the deception going for so long and then fallen so far.

BLUE RUIN

US, 2013, 90 minutes, Colour.

Macon Blair, Devin Rattray, Amy Hargraves, Eve Plumb.

Directed by Jeffrey Saulnier.



Blue Ruin is an unexpectedly successful Gothic drama. It received quite some critical acclaim and was screened in the Director's Fortnight at Cannes. Unfortunately, the small-budget did not lead to wide distribution, but it was seen in specialised circumstances.

The screenplay is able to lead the audience on, introducing the central character as wild and hairy, having a bath in the home of absent owners. He flees and the audience probably thinks the worst of him, scavenging in garbage for food, going to his old blue Pontiac car and living in it – but also seen reading. His name is Dwight.

When a policewoman comes to the car, we assume that he will be arrested. On the contrary, he seems to be well-known and is given information, with great sensitivity as the woman takes him to a police station, to tell him that his father and mother's murderer is being released. We wonder what he will do.

He cuts his hair and shaves his beard, looking completely different from what he was at the beginning. He then goes and kills the ex-prisoner. This continues the feud between the family and Dwight and his family, his going to see his sister to make sure she was away from home while he waited for them to attack. In the attack, he takes one of the prisoner's brothers and puts him in the boot his car, while he himself is wounded in the leg by an arrow – which leads to his buying equipment to sever the end of the arrow, but having to go to hospital after he collapses from lack of blood.

He then continues his fight against the family because they are in pursuit. Dwight lists the help of an old school friend who gives him a gun, and saves his life when he is about to be killed. Then he has to confront the women of the family, one of them particularly vicious.

The film is well above average for this kind of drama, well written and performed, stylishly photographed and edited. Macon Blair, who appears in practically every scene, is quite persuasive as Dwight. Director, Jeffrey Saulnier, wrote, directed and photographed the film.

CAPTAIN AMERICA: THE WINTER SOLDIER

US, 2014, 137 minutes, Colour.

Chris Evans, Scarlett Johansson, Samuel L. Jackson, Robert Redford, Anthony Mackie, Cobie Smulders, Emily Van Camp, Frank Grillo, Toby Jones, Jenny Agutter.

Directed by Anthony Russo, Joe Russo.



Captain America: the Winter Soldier is the second in the series of Marvel comics on Steve Rogers, Captain America. Audiences were introduced to Captain America in the initial film of 2012, the story of Steve Rogers, a small weedy character who was transformed into Captain America. Captain America had been wounded in World War II but frozen until he was needed, thawing in the 21st century. Captain America has been popular – but the way that he is written, the all-time good guy, always doing the right thing, means that he is a less complex character and lacks the charisma of other characters, for instance, of Anthony Mackie as his friend, Sam.

In this film, Captain America is getting up-to-date with the 21st century, especially the Internet and technology. He is called to a mission where pirates have captured a ship and taken hostages, including some officials of SHIELD. His partner in this enterprise is the former KGB agent, the Black Widow, Natasha, played by Scarlett Johansson, obviously relishing the opportunity to get into the action. They are under the control of Nick Fury, played as in the other films by Samuel L. Jackson. He

is now subordinate to the official, the Secretary, played by Robert Redford. Audiences will be surmising that Redford will turn out to be the villain and, of course, this is the case. It is interesting to see Redford agreeing to be in one of these blockbusters. And his villain is very urbane, quite phlegmatic, even in the face of defeat and death. He is not one of those ranting and raving villains.

The film begins with conversation and then moves to bam-bam-bam. This is the pattern of the whole film, conversations, then fights, conversations, then fights... There are car chases through the city, there are fights in space vehicles and on the them - all building up to a final split-second climax.

Harking back to the first film and the establishment of Hydra during World War II and its continuance into the 21st century (even to Gary Shandling having a walk-on role as a rogue Senator), the principal issue is fascism, a belief that there is a superior ruling class and all the rest of the populace should be subservient, that those in authority know best, that they can destroy what they consider weak in order to control, allegedly for the common good. At a time when there are wars in very many parts of the world as well as extremist governments, the message of Captain America is worth exploring.

For those who've seen the original film, there is an interesting unexpected twist which brings some drama to the whole proceedings and some complexity for Steve Rogers.

Fans will enjoy this particular episode, but it lacks something of the oomph of such films as for Thor and, especially, the Iron Man films.

1. The popularity of Marvel comics, characters, plots, good versus evil?
2. Captain America, the first film, establishing his background, World War II, the confrontation with Hydra, action capacities, frozen, his thawing? His personality? Insertion into the 21st century?
3. The title? The irony of it referring to Bucky? His role in the past? Friendship with Steve? His death, his wife, the transformation, working for Hydra, working for Pierce? His becoming Winter Soldier? To confront Captain America?
4. The contribution of action, stunts, special effects, fights, flying, his shield and defence, the technology?
5. SHIELD as being infiltrated? Hydra and its history? The pirate attack? Nick Fury and his, plan, the call to Steve Rogers and Natasha? The secrecy? Secretary Pearce? The plane, Rogers diving without a parachute? Arrival on the ship? The fights? Natasha arriving? Taking control? The hostages? The mystery?

6. The opening, Steve and Sam, running, the introduction, Sam later sheltering Nick Fury, the invitation to join in the mission, his own equipment flying, battles? Commitment to the future?
7. Nick Fury, his command in SHIELDED, his participation in other Marvel stories? Samuel L. Jackson and his style, the chase, his being caught, his relationships with Pierce, his being blocked out of all communication? His being sheltered by Sam? The pursuit, his seeming death, in hospital, secret, his emerging, the confrontation with Pierce?
8. Natasha, her background as the Black Widow? Her work with SHIELD, picking up Steve, going to the ship, her personality, her being discovered by Arnim Zola? The warehouse in New Jersey and her finding it? The explosion? With Nick Fury? The plan, working with Steve? The disguise as the member of the Council, fighting, her being poisoned, giving the poison to Pierce?
9. Pierce, Robert Redford as villain, urbane, phlegmatic, credible, control, the encounters with Nick Fury? With the Council? At home, with the Winter Soldier, shooting the maid? The plan, his motivation, confronting the Council, fascist, control of the world, his death?
10. Pierce's henchman, seemingly with Captain America, against him, leading the pursuit, the antagonism, the fight in the vehicle? His death? The group of those loyal to Pierce?
11. The agent, guarding Fury, at his home, at the office, the rebellion against the Hydra forces?
12. The pursuit, Steve taken, in the ambulance, the agent and her control? Helping with the escape? Her controlling the communications with Steve at the countdown? Steve getting his uniform from the museum?
13. The climax, the time running, fights, the vehicles in the sky, the weapons fired against them, Steve and his changing the files? His falls? Success at the last minute?
14. Bucky, his seeming to recognise Steve, programmed by Hydra, Pierce and his control, the fight with Steve, Steve rescuing him?
15. The trailers during the final credits? Anticipating the future and the sequel?

CUBAN FURY

UK, 2013, 98 minutes, Colour.

Nick Frost, Chris O'Dowd, Rashida Jones, Ian McShane, Olivia Colman, Rory Kinnear, Alexandra Roach.

Directed by James Griffiths.



No, this is not a drama of the 1950s revolution led by Fidel Castro. No, this is not an action film about protesters, exiled from Cuba, angry in Miami. In fact, it is about salsa.

This is also a story with the moral of not worrying about one's weight and appearance, that many things are possible, including winning salsa competitions. The man with the weight is Nick Frost, co—writer and co-star Simon Pegg of Shaun of the Dead, Hot Fuzz, Paul, The World's End. So, he has a strong reputation for comedy – and this is his film, the idea, writing, starring, dancing.

'Fury' is probably far too strong a word for the title. Bruce, Frost's character, does have a lot to complain about. But not 'fury'. As a boy, he won many salsa competitions, pairing with his sister, Sam. On the verge of a big win, he was chased by a group of bullies and became so down that he opted out of dancing altogether, much to the anger of his trainer, played by Ian McShane.

Now that he is an adult and weighing more than he should, he is the butt of jokes, especially the nasty teasing and sexual innuendo from his co-worker, Drew, (Chris O'Dowd). When the new boss, Julia (Rashida Jones) comes from the United States, he is partly smitten, but when she crashes into him as he is riding his bike, he is completely smitten. Then he discovers she does salsa, and he starts to move back towards the dance floor, encouraged by his sister.

Of course, this is quite predictable film, but that is why people enjoy it. The put-upon Bruce tries to stand up for himself, gradually doing it more and more, pushed by his old teacher, exasperated by his experiences with Drew who even mocks him for making a cassette for Julia's car and then passing it off as his own work for her.

Frost doesn't always look gainly on the dance floor, but he has what his trainer calls *corazon*, heart. This keeps him going despite some humiliations and Drew and others even mocking the idea that he could dance, let alone salsa. However, at the lessons, he encounters a fellow-dancer, Bejan, from the Middle East, who is quite camp in dress, manner, an irritant for Bruce until he gradually gets to know and like him – and we get to know and like and are highly amused by.

As the film moves towards its climax, Bruce and his sister partner for a competition. But then Julia turns up and she happily dances with him.

Probably best to say that the film is rather slight, but often comedies that are light and slight are entertaining, as is this one, and, of course, the moral to be self-confident and not be put off by those who think they are smart, but are actually making fools of themselves all the time. We are on Bruce's side.

DIVERGENT

US, 2014, 138 minutes, Colour.

Shailene Woodley, Theo James, Kate Winslet, Ashley Judd, Tony Goldwyn, Miles Teller, Miles Teller, Jai Courtney,

Directed by Neil Burger.



For a PR savvy producer, *Divergent* may not be the immediate choice for a popular film title. However, with Veronica Roth's series of novels, *Divergent*, *Insurgent*, *Resurgent*, the word takes its place prominently in the world of young adult novels and films. By the time of *Divergent*, there is a tradition with the *Twilight* series, that *Hunger Games* series, following in the footsteps of Harry Potter.

Audiences will notice a great number of similarities between *Divergent* and *The Hunger Games* series, prominently the central character being an energetic and resourceful young female. The men are in supporting roles. And, in the case of *Divergent*, the malevolent authority figure is also female.

Shailene Woodley, so effective in her performances in *The Descendants* and *The Spectacular Now*, is Beatrice Prior, who chooses her personal name, Tris, as she enters into her equivalent of hunger games, training in the action of *The Dauntless*. The overall supervisor Jeanine, is played by Kate Winslet.

Once again, this is a futuristic story, in this dystopian world, 100 years after a devastating war and focused on the city of Chicago. For organisation's sake and keeping the peace, the population is divided into five factions, with homeless rejects from the factions, the faction-less. The factions are: Abnegation (selfless), Amity (peaceful), Candor (truthful), Erudite (intelligent) and Dauntless (brave), based on their personalities.

But there are individuals who do not fit easily into these categories, transcend several of them, who are viewed with suspicion as undermining the system. They are the Divergents. It is no surprise to find that Tris is a Divergent.

Tris comes from a family of the abnegation faction. This faction is in charge of ruling the city, her father (Tony Goldwyn) is an official and her mother (Ashley Judd) is a Divergent. Her brother chooses Erudite.

A great deal of the film is taken up by the training of *The Dauntless*, ultra-tough methods, ruthlessly applied by the commander, Eric (Jai Courtney). His second in command, Four (Theo James) is a more ambiguous character with whom Tris forms bond. Needless to say, Tris overcomes her limitations and becomes one of the key *Dauntless*.

As might be suspected, there are rumblings in some of the factions, resenting Abnegation being the rulers. This is fermented by Jeanine and her technical program to eliminate abnegation from its key role. This leads to factional uprisings and violent confrontations with the *Dauntless*.

While the main focus in this film is the training of *The Dauntless*, the action is leading to insurgency which paves the way for the sequel, *Insurgent*.

Those who've read the novels will be eager to see the films. For those who have not read the novels, the film may be an interesting introduction – but more for the young adult targeted audience rather than the adult audience.

FADING GIGOLO



Certainly an offbeat title. And the premise of the plot is rather suspect, though treated more gently than might be expected.

We are introduced to two characters, one in his middle age, the other older. They are played by John Turturro and Woody Allen.

Fioravante (Turturro) is a quiet character, who works in a flower shop and is an expert as at floral designs. He is helping his friend, Murray, packing up books because people are less interested in books these days. Murray has visited his doctor for a dermatology procedure and the issue has come up about sex, relationships and a menage and Murray has the bright idea that his friend, Fioravante, might respond to such requests and start a career as a gigolo. Murray is eager to be his agent – and even more eager not only to have an agent's fee but, as waitresses do in restaurants, share tips.

This might not be the story an audience would like to watch – but, it is treated with more humanity than might have been expected, raises issues of sexuality and relationships, and does so with some humour.

There is little given about Fioravante's background or why he should agree to take on this role. Seeing him with a number of clients shows his sympathy, kindness and regard for women. One is played by Sharon Stone, initially shy, but wanting revenge on her husband. Another is played by Sofia Vergara, who is in for the experience. But one woman he encounters is a widow from the strict Jewish community in Brooklyn, who stirs emotions in him as well as in herself.

It should have been said earlier, that the role of Murray is very much a typical Woody Allen character, full of anxious remarks, full of one-liners, keeping the audience very much amused with his worrying character and his style. And suddenly it is revealed that he has an African-American wife and several children with whom he is a tender father.

This brings in the Jewish community, very strict in its regulations, Murray not fitting into their ideals. Liev Schreiber is one of the local equivalent of police, keeping an eye on everyone's behaviour, even to arresting people and bringing them before a bench of Rabbis for judgement.

This means that there is a lot of comedy about groups in New York City, humour about this Jewish community, for instance, serious young Rabbis-in-the-making, refusing to be interested in or coached in baseball – but some relent!

The screenplay was written by John Turturro, who also directs, so it is a vehicle for himself, his character, his moral behaviour, his concerns, the experience of being a local gigolo and its repercussions for himself and his moral perspective.

And different New York story.

FAITH CONNECTIONS

India, 2013, 115 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Pan Nalin.



Faith in general? Or a particular faith? The answer is Hinduism. And the focus is on a particular religious celebration, pilgrimage, gathering of 100 million people, the Kumbh Mela.

Film director, Pan Nalin, tells us at the opening of the film that he was urged by his father to go on this pilgrimage, to bring home something of faith, as well as faces and stories. And this is what he has done, roaming among the pilgrims, talking with them, exploring their faith and devotion, as well as finding all kinds of faces which offer portraits of contemporary India (and probably past India) as well as a range of differing stories.

It should be said that the film is visually most arresting. Just seeing the massing crowds and crowds, old and young, men and women, is sometimes overwhelming. But, to prevent the film from being too overwhelming, the director pauses very often, holds his camera on an expressive face and lets the audience contemplate, identifies a range of people from yoga practising experts to parents who have lost their children to some children themselves.

The director arrives by train, joins the throng, keeps moving. The key religious ritual is that of, using the word of the subtitles, a 'dip' in the confluence of three rivers where the celebration is held. This motif recurs during the film, people going into the river, washing, dipping, experiencing something of the sacred.

Audiences will have seen other world religious pilgrimages – which tend to be more orderly in their conduct, a visit to the Vatican, a pilgrimage to Lourdes, and, in the Muslim world, the image to Mecca for the Hajj. This celebration is a kind of mixed-gatherum, more perhaps akin to a crowded music festival, some groups focusing on one experience, individuals going searching, watching a Guru in extraordinary yoga contortion positions, reverencing images of the gods, quietly recollected.

The main narrative focuses on a young boy, who gives the impression of a worldly-wise street kid, glibly talking about being a Mafia gangster, committing murders during the day, arbitrarily choosing four intended killings, police and anyone he comes across. Someone remarks that the boy has seen too many movies – probably an understatement. He is cheeky, moves around amongst the people, swaggering. But a religious man, a Sadhu, semi-adopts him, trying to take care of him, shelter him, feed him, urge him away from his violently melodramatic imagination. At the end of the feast, he disappears, and the main searches for him, ultimately finding him living in a quiet village. There is an interview with his father, and the boy declaring that he himself wants to be a Sadhu, The influence of good example? A worthwhile ambition?

Another holy man adopts an abandoned child, making strong comments about Indian youth that (sounding like youths from other cultures) only interested in sex, drugs, their own self-centred lives. There is also comment about young girls becoming immediately pregnant than abandoning their child their children when they are born.

On the other hand, there is a lot of talk about ganja, smoking marijuana and linking it to spiritual experience.

Not everything in the film is religious. Quite an amount of the footage is about the logistics in managing 100 million people. There are glimpses of lines and lines of people sitting, waiting for the serving of food. There are the police, trying to manage traffic and movement. And there are quite constant images of the centre for Lost and Found, children straying away from families, husbands and wives separated, a full-time job for a large staff.

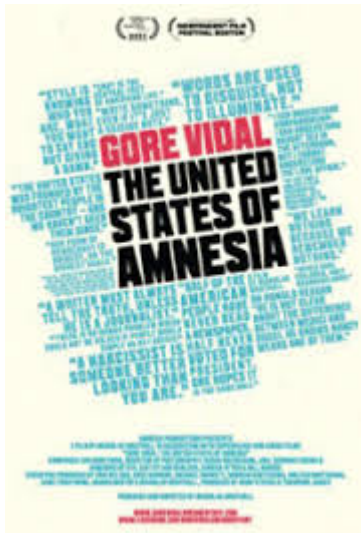
Which means then that the audience is immersed in the Festival, in the traditions of Hinduism, in the ordinary life of Indian people, colourful, surprising, sometimes dismaying. There is no explicit faith connection to other world religions, but audiences of different faiths or no faith will have the opportunity to contemplate and reflect on the phenomenon, so ingrained in millions of people, of faith and devotion.

Gore Vidal: THE UNITED STATES OF AMNESIA

US, 2012, 83 minutes, Colour and Black and white.

Gore Vidal,

Directed by Nicholas Wrathall.



If you are a fan of Gore Vidal, even when you don't agree with him, this documentary is a must.

It is a fairly complete portrait of Vidal himself, from his birth in 1925 into an aristocratic American family to his death in 2010, a life brimming with activity, writing, talking and chronicling American history.

The film uses a great deal of footage of each period, from the affluence of the 20s into the 30s, World War II and the Navy, Vidal's literary career from his novels in the 1940s to the controversy about Myra Breckenridge and his important series of novels on American history. We see footage of J.F. Kennedy in the 1960s as well as the Vietnam war. Vidal was a political and cultural commentator from the 60s and was most uncomplimentary about Ronald Reagan in the 1980s.

Vidal was very involved in theatre, especially with his play *The Best Man*, revived in the 2000s, and with screenplays including *Ben Hur*.

He stood for the Senate in 1960 but was unsuccessful.

Vidal bought a house in Italy, a beautiful mansion on a very beautiful coast and lived there for many decades with his partner. On the death of his partner, and his becoming elderly and ill, he moved to California, regretfully leaving Italy but certainly not opting out of life back in the United States. A scene towards the end of the film has him watching and commenting on the Obama election.

Vidal moved in many circles in the United States, political, cultural, in the entertainment business and was an actor in quite a number of films.

Among a lot of the issues about which he had much to say was that of homosexuality, including his own, and his relationship, a platonic one, with his partner, though permissive as regards other relationships.

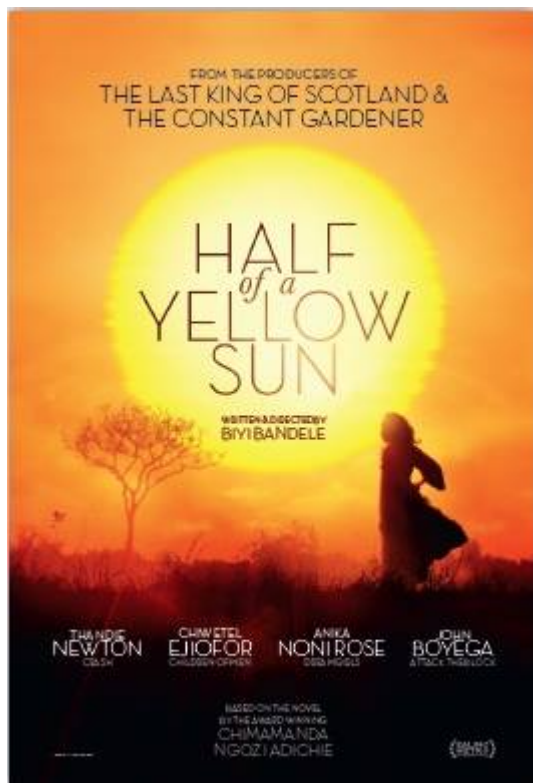
Throughout the film there are various quotations from Vidal, many paradoxical and witty, many satirical, many quite incisive on American life – in what he named, and is the title of the film, *The United States of Amnesia*.

HALF OF A YELLOW SUN

UK/Nigeria, 2013, 111 minutes, Colour.

Chiwitel Ejiofor, Thandie Newton, Anaka Noni Rose, Joseph Mawle, John Boyega.

Directed by Biyi Bandele.



Good question. What is actually the half of a yellow sun?

The answer is that a half the sun was the symbol, emblem, on the flag of the fledgeling nation, Biafra. But, after the 1960s, Biafra has faded from many memories – except the memories of citizens of Nigeria and emigrants leaving Nigeria from which Biafra seceded in 1967 and which was conquered by the Nigerian army and reincorporated into the nation. These years were tragic for the citizens of the new country, many killed in a warfare, in the air raids, were placed in camps, and experienced starvation.

This drama offers an opportunity for worldwide audiences to learn something of this part of Nigerian history. It opens with great fanfare on the day of Nigerian independence in 1960, local celebrations and a visit from Queen Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh. But, Nigeria was an artificial creation by the British government and its colonial mentality, gathering together a number of tribes which, if not enemies of the other, left with them in some tensions. This artificial creation, as with so many of the countries of western Europe and Central Europe, would lead to bitter conflict, to armed conflict.

One of the advantages of this film is that it incorporates a great deal of film footage from the 1960s. This enables the audience to see some of the participants in independence, in the subsequent governments and military, coups. There is footage from television coverage, including reporting from author Frederick Forsyth, and from the newsreels screened in the cinemas.

The star of this film is Chiwitel Ejiofor (12 Years a Slave), born in London of Nigerian parents. This is an opportunity for him to return to his roots, this struggling time in Nigeria which meant that his parents emigrated to the United Kingdom. He plays an academic, comfortably off, teaching at a university, in a relationship with a woman who was also an academic. She is played by Thandie Newton, also born in the UK, but with a Rhodesian background.

As the film opens on Independence Day, we see her wealthy family entertaining one of the new ministers, but also vying for financial contracts, and the Minister eyeing the daughters to see what benefit he could gain. The two daughters, twins, then go to a club where one of them (Anika Noni Rose) encounters an Englishman, working in the colonies but aiming to be a writer, and they begin an affair which leads to their partnership. He is played by Joseph Mawle (who had played Jesus in the 2008 BBC series, The Passion).

These characters live in the part of Nigeria which was to become, for such a short time, Biafra. The first couple live in a university town, but the professor is heavily influenced by his tribal mother, who comes from her village with a servant and encourages her son, plying him with drink, to make the servant pregnant. This does not quite have the effect that she intended, but it does change the couple's lives. The other couple live in Port Harcourt and look after the business interests of the family. When trouble breaks out, the well-to-do parents moved to England.

The first half of the film establishes the characters, their situations, the new country with its independence, but the inevitable trouble with ambitions, tribal clashes, leading to violence – and a surprisingly shocking massacre at an airport.

The second half of the film is concerned with the war, its effect on people in Biafra, the mass movements out of areas which were being bombarded. Some of the sequences, especially with cars trying to get along roads which are continually being bombed, bring home something of the effect of the war.

By 1970, Biafra no longer existed – which throws light on the subsequent history of Nigeria, tribal rivalries, and the clash between Christians and Muslims.

In some ways the film is fairly straightforward, with its story of relationships, prosperity, hardships. But, seen in the context of this part of Nigerian history, it reminds us that history needs to be relived so that later generations are aware of what has happened.

HANNAH ARENDT

Germany/Israel/Luxembourg, 2013, 113 minutes, Colour.

Barbara Sukowa, Janet Mc Teer,

Directed by Margarethe von Trotte.



Hannah Arendt was a significant thinker in her time. She had written on the Origins of Totalitarianism and was appreciated as a philosopher. Jewish, she had escaped with her mother from Germany in the late 1930s to the United States and became an American citizen. She lectured in New York and was esteemed as a woman of depth and intelligence.

This is a film which is of interest to those who know about Hannah Arendt, her life and career. It will also be of interest to those who know little about her but want to find out her contribution to 20th century thinking. If an audience is not interested in Hannah Arendt and her work, they will find this sometimes detailed look at her and her philosophy hard going, or too-hard going.

The director, Margarethe von Trotte, has had a long career in film but has concentrated so many times on significant women and women's issues. Her leading lady for Hannah Arendt, Barbara Sukowa, has appeared in several of the director's films playing, amongst others, Rosa Luxembourg and Hildegard of Bingen. Here she creates a very strong impression as Hannah Arendt.

The principal focus of the film is Hanna and on Adolf Eichmann, his being taken by Israeli agents in Argentina, his extradition to Jerusalem and his trial, where he was held in a glass cage, and ultimately found guilty of the charges and hanged.

Hannah Arendt asked the editor of the New Yorker to report on the trial. Her husband, Heinrich, was against her going. But, wanting to ground her philosophical reflections in facts and experience, she was determined to go. The film has some brief scenes of the trial, Hannah sitting in the benches, working in the press room watching the television screen, and some actual television footage of Eichmann himself, the prosecutor and the judge. There are several re-enactments, as well as footage, of some of the witnesses and their emotional response to the treatment of the Jews and the Holocaust. Looking at Eichmann, we see a small man, very ordinary-looking, a bureaucrat rather than any charismatic leader. This was to be the core of Hannah Arendt's comments on the trial.

After the publication of the articles in the New Yorker, there was a groundswell against Hannah. Jewish authorities and many of the Jews, whether they had read her articles or not, felt that she had betrayed her people, especially with her comments about the complicity, witting or unwitting, of some Jewish leaders with the Nazi authorities and so being responsible for more deaths of Jews. For many this was incomprehensible, leading to hostile phone calls, letters and death threats.

But Hannah Arendt was a strong character, accused of arrogance (which is displayed in the film) and a lack of feeling. However, influenced by the philosopher, Martin Heidegger, with whom she had a relationship when she was a student, rejecting him when he affirmed Nazism and later visiting him to ask him to make a public apology, she was a philosopher who was also passionate, invoking 'passionate thinking'.

The dramatic finale to the film is a lecture she gave at the New York New School, in the presence of the University officials who wanted her resignation, and to a full room of students. It is here that she speaks the phrase which most people know, even if they do not know who originated it, 'The Banality of Evil'. Eichmann was an ordinary man, a bureaucrat, not a man with a vision or leadership qualities, but someone who obeyed orders because he believed in the authority and that the authority should be obeyed, passing on his orders to others who fulfil them while he was detached, not even knowing necessarily what the consequences were. This is a particularly important message at any time, but particularly now, where communications and social media give us immediate the

Perhaps this film is more of a visual lecture about Hannah Arendt than an inventive cinema experience. But, to the extent that it portrays Hannah, her ideas, and the controversies about the Eichmann trial and her reporting, it is worth seeing.

HEALING

Australia, 2014, 115 minutes, Colour.

Hugo Weaving, Don Hany, Xavier Samuel, James Leonard Winter, Tony Martin, Robert Taylor, Jane Menelaus.

Directed by Craig Monahan.



This is a film one could heartily recommend to a wide audience. It is a beautiful film. It is a humane film. Is a film of hope and, as the title declares, of healing.

Writer-director, Craig Monahan, has not made a great number of films. He had success with his film, The Interview, 1998, about police and a criminal. It featured Hugo Weaving and Tony Martin who both appear in this film.

And, again criminals are an important part of the film. Hugo Weaving plays an officer in a Victorian prison. Don Hany plays a murderer serving an 18 year sentence. What brings them together, dramatically? The answer is birds.

Appearing during the opening credits are beautiful and moving sequences of an eagle in flight. In fact, throughout the film, there are many sequences of flight, eagles and owls, as well as close-ups of the faces and profiles of the birds. For these alone, many will find Healing well worth seeing. One of the birds, who is later named Yasmine, crashes into a fence. Matt Perry (Weaving) who has been looking after birds with his wife and setting them free for the wild, gets in touch with authorities at the Healesville Sanctuary for the healing of the birds.

Perry comes to the idea of setting up cages and a sanctuary area in the prison where the inmates could actually look after the birds and assist in their healing and re-training.

One of the prisoners, originally from Iran, Victor, (Don Haney) shows an affinity with the birds and is commissioned to look after them, starting with Yasmine. He has been assigned a room (rather than a cell) which he shares with two young prisoners, the lazy Shane (Mark Leonard Winter) and the reclusive Paul (Xavier Samuel). Other prisoners help build the project.

While life is generally quiet in the prison, there is Warren (Anthony Hayes) who dominates the other prisoners and is dealing in drugs. He has a hold over Shane and tries to dominate Victor. Shane gradually understands the training of the birds and defies Warren – and after going to his twin brother's funeral, accompanied by Perry, he decides to build a pathway amongst the cages in memory of his brother. In the meantime, Paul, secretive about his crime and his background, responds well to the birds and their training.

Another aspect of the plot is day leave for Victor, to see his estranged son but the day fails and Victor seems to be back where he started, with Perry suspicious of him.

However, Glenys (Jane Menelaus) who is in charge of the birds at Healesville, trusts Victor and pressures for the authorities to return him to working with the birds. The attempt to free Yasmine for the wild fails and she goes to Healesville.

While the film shows the healing of the birds, they are a symbol, of course, for the healing of the prisoners, with respect for them as persons, sensitivity to their problems, enabling them to walk free when their time has been served.

There is a very pleasing finale with the birds at Healesville Sanctuary.

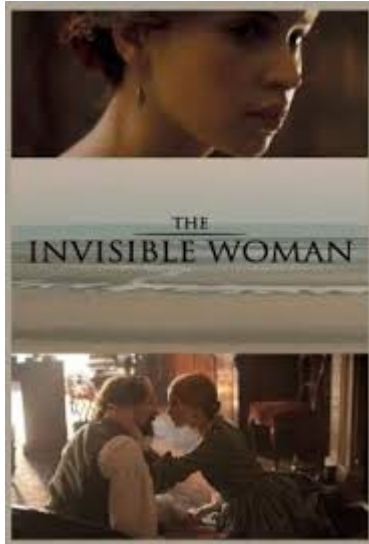
This is quality Australian film-making, drawing on the talents of a wide range of technicians as well as of the cast and director.

THE INVISIBLE WOMAN

UK, 2013, 111 minutes, Colour.

Ralph Fiennes, Felicity Jones, Kristin Scott Thomas, Tom Hollander, Joanna Scanlan, John Kavanagh.

Directed by Ralph Fiennes.



While *The Invisible Woman* might sound like a science-fiction sequel to *The Invisible Man*, it is nothing of the kind. Which means that it is probably an unsatisfactory title, although it derives from the book by Clare Tomalin. The invisible woman this time is Ellen Lawless Teman, the mistress of author, Charles Dickens.

For audiences interested in Dickens, not only his books and celebrity but his private life, this film will be of great interest. For those less interested, it may prove tedious, even boring. The reason for this is that the film takes us back into the 19th century, immerses us in England in the latter part of the century, at Margate on the coast, in London. The costumes and decor, production design are meticulous in their re-creation. The language and the dialogue is that of the period, that of Dickens.

It is also the style of film-making that will entice or repel. It is the very antithesis of the contemporary fast-based action film and slick and rapid editing. Here we have long takes, a kind of portraiture for the characters, filmed from different angles, with screen compositions with characters at the side of the screen helping us to observe them as well as their background. Many of the sequences are long takes, dwelling on the characters and situations. On some occasions there is a musical score, but very often the long takes are presented in silence for our contemplation.

The screenplay is by Abi Morgan, who wrote such films as *The Iron Lady* and *Shameless*. The direction is by Ralph Fiennes, his second film as director (after his *Coriolanus*). He is clearly a man of fine taste in the way that he has created his world, the world of Dickens and of Nellie Turner.

And he himself plays the central role, Ralph Fiennes' performance being recognisable but different, through the effect of his hair and beard style, that of the portraits of Dickens himself. He has the opportunity to put on a play and star in it, be a celebrity to his many fans, read some of his work, and be the author in the public eye. But he also has the opportunity to be the private Dickens, the husband with the large number of children, separating from his wife, wooing Nellie Turner, falling in love with her, sharing his life with her, grieving over the death of their child, finally installing her in a house in London so that he could keep his relationship with her but also his public image.

This means that the film does depend on the performance by Felicity Jones as Nellie. We first see her after Dickens' death, married, walking the beach at Margate, putting on a play in the local school. These scenes recur but the main focus is on her past, her life with Dickens. We readily believe that Felicity Jones is Nellie. She is supported very strongly by her mother, played by Kristin Scott Thomas, a more genial role than she usually plays.

Something of the contradictions of the Victorian era and its formalities and properness is suggested by this relationship, as well as the relationship between Wilkie Collins (Tom Hollander) who does not believe in marriage and lives with his partner and child – something which Nellie is shocked at.

An important focus for the film is that of Dickens' wife, Catherine, portrayed as a rather large and dowdy woman, mother of his many children, seemingly unresponsive to him, realising his life of celebrity and being present at so many functions. But, Dickens falls out of love with her and, in an extraordinary gesture, sends a letter to *The Times* explaining the rumours about his relationship with Nellie and his separation from his wife, seemingly oblivious to the pain that this latter causes her. Joanna Scanlan portrays Catherine perfectly and has several very moving scenes which make an impact, where she has to take a birthday gift to Nellie on behalf of her husband and speaks plainly to Nellie about him. The other sequence is her son reading out the letter in *The Times* and her weeping.

For those who are absorbed by this story and filmmaking, there is much to reflect on, a different era, its code of morals, private lives, as well as the genius of Dickens as an author and his celebrity in his times.

LIVING IS EASY WITH YOUR EYES CLOSED

Spain, 2013, 107 minutes, Colour.



Javier Camara, Natalia de Sofia, Francisc , Jorge Sanz, Ariadna Gil.

Directed by David Trueba.

The title comes from John Lennon's song, Strawberry Fields. And John Lennon is a significant presence in this film.

The time is 1966. The place is Almeria in southern Spain. It is a comparatively quiet summer, school is in and we meet Antonio, a teacher of English, using the lyrics of John Lennon's songs, especially Help, for his students to learn and pronounce English. But, John Lennon himself is in Almeria for the filming of Richard Lester's How I Won the The War, one of Lennon's few screen appearances. Antonio not has not only has a great desire to meet Lennon and talk with him about his lyrics, but he sets out on a special mission to meet him.

Antonio is played engagingly by Javier Camara, star of several of Pedro Almodovar's films, a standout in his Talk to Her.

Living is Easy then becomes a road movie, significant for Antonio but also for two hitchhikers he encounters. We have seen one of them at a home for unmarried mothers, severe in treatment in taking the babies from their mothers when born, but touches of kindness for this girl, Belen. She decides to go to stay with her money and so goes on the road, avoiding a man who has suspicious attitudes towards her and driving off with the genial Antonio. He also sees a teenager on the side of

the road. We have seen him in the context of his family in Madrid, a kind mother with her many children, a severe father, a policeman. He has decided to run away.

With the sun shining brightly and with vistas of the sea, it is a cheerful journey. When Antonio books into a rather dingy motel, with a squat receptionist who speaks a dialect that nobody understands, he gets a room for Belen and persuades the friendly owner of the restaurant and bar, a refugee from Italy for the sun with Bruno, his son disabled with cerebral palsy, to employ the young boy part time.

By this time we are all eager ourselves to see John Lennon and to see whether Antonio can get on to the film set. There are various drawbacks and it would be a pity to spoil the plot outline by mentioning whether he sees Lennon or not. In the meantime, there are problems at the bar, some locals trashing it and bashing the young boy, as well is a sexual encounter, a 'rites of passage' kind of thing, between the boy and Belen.

Whatever has happened with John Lennon or not, Antonio has had a significant journey and has had a good influence on Belen and the boy whose father comes to take back home.

It is at this juncture that the lyrics of the song are spoken – a wry Lennon comment on what has happened.

This is a very pleasing film, with interesting characters, an interesting quest – and frequent touches of humour and good nature.

MINISCULE: THE VALLEY OF THE LOST ANTS.

France, 2013, 89 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Helene Giraud, Thomas Szabo.



This is a pleasing film, mainly the little children, and for their parents accompanying them would be able to explain some of the details about insects.

It is also an example of French animation, based on the television series of 2006, miniscule dot Miniscule dot. The animation is fairly straightforward, but very attractive. Much is made of the beautiful French countryside, the mountains, the grass on the hills, the trees and woods, the roads through the mountains. It is only the beginning that any humans appear, a husband and wife having a picnic on the grass, she heavily pregnant. During the meal, labour pains come on and they have to hurry away in their car, leaving some of the picnic goods on the blanket on the grass.

In the meantime, we are treated to the birth of little ladybirds, their parents looking on, helping them to flex their wings and then helping them to fly. One of the ladybirds becomes one of the main characters for this film.

With the food is left of the blanket, especially a box of Cuban sugar, it is a signal for the insects to come out. On the good side, are the black ants. The film, like a documentary, shows great deal about the ants, their size, the hierarchy and command, the ants working as a group, in unison, scenes of their their marching, going over the ground, finding the, the attempts to carry it and take it back to their nest. The plot shows the ladybird becoming friendly with one of the ants.

On the voluminous side, after the red ants. Once again, the film shows them in great detail, their nest, their working together, their leadership, the approach to the sugar. the film builds up to a clash, but the Ladybird and the little black and are able to thwart the ambitions of the red ants.

This is the kind of story and documentary that nature channels show on television. and, the real thing is probably more persuasive than an animation story. However, the little children, the animation and the story will capture their imagination and help them in their discovery of the world of insects and their place in the world of nature.

MAN OF TAI CHI

China, 2013, 91 minutes, Colour.

Keanu Reeves, Tiger Hu Chen, Karen Mok.

Directed by Keanu Reeves.



What can one say about this film except that it is about martial arts, and the use of Tai Chi in martial arts bouts? Except, of course, to say that it was directed by Keanu Reeves – and he also has a starring role, a complete villain.

It is competently made, taking advantage of the martial arts actor and stunt performer, Tiger Hu Chen, and his strong ability to fight – even though, in his training with a Master of Tai Chi, he knows that he should be employing his inner energy rather than any fighting vengeance. However, he is persuaded to go into fights which are televised and the source of huge on-line betting revenue. When Keanu Reeves' security company puts his guru's building in danger, he decides to consent to fight in order to give the prize money to his mother and to fix the building.

This leads to a number of fights, the domination by Reeves, the setting up of a battle to the death with an Indonesian fighter. But our hero regains something of his conscience, especially when he is put in contact with a policewoman whose mission it is to arrest Reeves and destroy his company.

Probably of interest to non-Asian audiences because of the presence and work of Keanu Reeves.

MR MORGANS LAST LOVE

Germany, 2014, 116 minutes, colour.

Michael Caine, Clemencei Poesy, Justin Kirk, Gillian Anderson, Jane Alexander.

Directed by Sandra Nettlebeck.



After 50 years in films, Michael Caine can still get top billing. Here he is playing Matthew Morgan, an expatriate philosophy professor, who has lived in Paris in retirement with his wife but who is still grieving three years after the death of his wife from cancer. Interestingly, Michael Caine is playing a character who is his exact age, 78 at the time of filming.

The film opens with his wife's death and his stubbornness concerning the removal of her body. But, he has survived, going through various routines, somewhat alienated from his son and daughter who live in the United States. Perhaps not a great premise for an almost two hour film. In fact, it is, with the first hour gaining a light and happy touch, the second hour becoming more serious.

When Mr Morgan stumbles in a local bus, a young woman, Pauline, assists him, accompanying him home. She has a lively and attractive personality and when Mr Morgan sees her in a bus again, he gets out at her stop – and thus begins a most genial acquaintance and friendship. Mr Morgan starts going out more frequently, discovering that Pauline is a dance teacher, cha-cha and other lively dances. Slowly he becomes a participant. But, he has always had thoughts of suicide after his wife's death and he makes an attempt with pills, fails, and finds himself in hospital.

His son, Miles, arrives from America, finds his father embracing the young woman and thinks the worst, that she is a gold-digger after his father. He is an angry man, his wife leaving him, with his resentment towards his father and his poor parenting as well as seemingly preventing himself and his sister from saying farewell to their mother at her dying.

The sister also arrives, a much tougher character than her brother. This leads to many discussion sequences, the sister returning to America, the brother staying, antagonistic towards Pauline, not happy with her intervening to make peace. In the second half, after a sympathetic attitude towards Mr Morgan, we begin to see the other side of his life and behaviour, his inability to affirm his son, his

keeping his distance, and the perceived selfishness in keeping their mother's death from her children.

Clemence Poesy is charming as Pauline. Justin Kirk is Miles and Gillian Anderson is the sister. [But, Michael Caine's American accent sounds forced and reminiscent of his terrible accent, despite his winning the Oscar) in *The Cider House Rules*.]

Towards the end there is rather or too-sudden dramatic development, which the audience is not quite prepared for, but it paves the way for a resolution, for Miles, Pauline and for Mr Morgan himself.

This is a film for older audiences who will identify with Mr Morgan and his situation, with his wife and her terminal illness. It is a film for middle-aged audiences who have to think about their relationship with their parents and imminent old age and death.

MR PEABODY AND SHERMAN

US, 2014, 92 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: Ty Burrell, Max Charles, Alison Janney, Stephen Tobolowsky, Stephen Colbert, Leslie Mann.

Directed by the Rob Minkoff.



Mr Peabody is a beagle who introduces himself to the film audience as something more than a genius. Sherman is a seven-year-old boy with big glasses and spiky hair. He has been adopted by Mr

Peabody which means then we have a comic reversal of roles of 'every boy must have his dog – every dog must have his boy'!

This brightly animated film has been directed by Rob Minkoff, the director of that popular family film, *Stuart Little*. Once again we have tongue-in-cheek comedy about children and dogs.

Whether you enjoy this film or not will depend on whether your fancy is tickled by eccentric visits to the historical past – and by an enjoyment of puns. A lot of it will go over the heads of children who may enjoy the images nonetheless. Adults will be amused with some of the references from Bill Clinton joining Washington and Lincoln and making a brief comment about his pardons, and a scene where everybody supports Mr Peabody by exclaiming 'I am a dog' – with an image of a Kirk Douglas like Spartacus adding 'I am Spartacus'.

Mr Peabody has invented a time machine and off he and Sherman go so that Sherman's education can be fostered. They visit France at the time of the French Revolution, see a largish Marie Antoinette eating cake (and Sherman enjoying the cake as well). Robespierre is there and would later get his comeuppance. But Mr Peabody is one of the aristocrats and finds himself under the blade of the guillotine with Sherman watching in the crowd – but, luckily, he can escape with the time machine. There is a visit to Egypt and King Tut, a visit to Troy and being inside the wooden horse, with conversations with Agamemnon and co. And there is quite a long visit to the Renaissance, Mr Peabody discussing physics and other matters with Leonardo da Vinci (who is having trouble with his severe model for the Mona Lisa) while Sherman and his school friend, Penny, who has accompanied them, test out da Vinci's flying machine.

Where can it all end? There is a rift in time with all the historical characters turning up together – and some extras including Einstein – in the present with Mr Peabody trying to work out how to resolve the problem. It is Sherman who actually comes up with the final solution, driving the time machine backwards!

The main villain of the piece is one of the teachers at school who dislikes Mr Peabody and is severe with Sherman. She is Mrs Grunion and – and an interesting fate awaits her!

Ty Burrell voices Mr Peabody, Max Charles is Sherman. A good supporting cast of voices includes Alison Janney as the fearsome Mrs Grunion.

An entertaining story of a dog and his boy.

MUPPETS MOST WANTED

US, 2014, 101 minutes, Colour.

Ricky Gervais, Tina Fey, Ty Burrell, cameos by Tony Bennett, Hugh Bonneville, Jermaine Clement, Sean Combs, Rob Corddry, Mackenzie Crook, Celine Dion, Lady Gaga, Zach Galifiniakis, Tom Hollander, Salma Hayak, Tom Hiddlestone, Tony Jones, Frank Langella, Ray Liotta, James McAvoy, Chloe Grace Moretz, Usher Raymond, Miranda Richardson, Saoirse Ronin, Danny Trejo, Til Schweiger, Stanley Tucci, Christoph Waltz.

Directed by James Bobin.



With the new Muppets movie in 2012, the younger generation was introduced to those favourite characters of audiences who are now parents and grandparents, appreciating the Muppets, their television shows and their movies since the 1970s.

This one opens with the finish of the first film, the Muppets all back together again and enjoying the bonding, but left with a camera – and what better than to make another movie!

The plot for this one is a bit complicated – but enjoyable for all that, with a load of guest stars doing amusing cameos, from Christoph Waltz to Hugh Bonneville from Downton Abbey, to Salma Hayak and to a singing and dancing group, rehearsing I Need This Job from A Chorus Line (and Machete's

and Bad Ass's Danny Trejo of all people doing a solo recital!). That may be important for the adult audiences – the teenagers were happier with a cameo sequence from the singer, Usher, which may have been lost on the adults.

A villain played by Ricky Gervais, Dominic Badguy, persuades the Muppets that he would be an excellent agent for them, urging a world tour, encouraging them each to develop their own act, which they are eager to do. The only dissenting voice is that of Kermit who suspects something. But the Muppets believe Badguy and off Kermit goes, only to be arrested because he resembles the most criminal frog in the world, the Russian Constantine. Constantine is in league with Badguy and they are planning a series of robberies which will lead to the British Crown Jewels.

The road to London requires a number of other robberies and, therefore, the Muppets tour. It includes a first visit to Berlin, then a performance in Madrid (and it is enjoyable to see the television opening of The Muppet's Show in Spanish). Some of the acts are so noisy that they drown out the digging and explosions which Constantine and Badguy are involved in. And, to Kermit's later disappointment, the Muppets are taken in completely by Constantine's attempts at impersonating Kermit, even Miss Piggy.

In the meantime, Kermit is interned in a Gulag. His guard is Nadia, played by Tina Fey, songs, dances, Russian parody, comedy routines, obviously enjoying herself in this role. Kermit tries a number of escapes but Nadia is always ready because she has seen all the escape movies and knows the obvious attempts. Then she asked him to advise on the annual prison revue. This is where the song and dance routines come in, especially that parody of A Chorus Line. Ray Liotta is amongst the hoofers! Then it is off to Dublin and finally to London where Constantine, who has proposed to Miss Piggy, is going to stage a ceremony to cover the robbery.

Fortunately, in the meantime, Fozzie and Animal have hurried over to Russia to free Kermit to be back in time to thwart the wedding.

Most of the popular characters from The Muppet Show have a chance to appear and make their mark.

Watching the Muppets, most audiences will probably have a smile on their faces and get some laughs as well and be happy that here are the Muppets again, hopefully not for the last time.

NEED FOR SPEED

US, 2014, 123 minutes, Colour.

Aaron Paul, Dominic Cooper, Imogen Poots, Michael Keaton, Scott Mescudi, Rami Malek, Harrison Gilbertson.

Directed by Scott Waugh.



Some people have a need for speed. Other people have no need for speed. This will be the criterion on which people can make their choice as to whether they see this film or not. It is definitely for the need-for-speeders, mostly definitely not those who have no need for speed.

The niche audience for this film is probably teenage boys, young adult men, though there is quite some attention in the screenplay to make it attractive to young women. It is based on a computer game, plays like a computer game – best not to examine the screenplay minutely for credibility or consistency in detail, the speed and the adrenaline are the thing.

Everybody then makes a comparison with The Fast and the Furious – which a hostile reviewer dubbed 'The Fast and the Fatuous'. Perhaps it's too unkind to use this for Need for Speed, but it is a strong temptation...!

The stunts are everything, as well as the way they are photographed and edited, for maximum impact. There is a warning at the end that these stunts were supervised and would be too dangerous for anyone to try them on their own – but, unfortunately, the rush-to-the-exit-as-soon-as-the-credits-loom audience are on their feet, they will miss this salutary warning.

A couple of young men who run a garage in New York state of the main ones with the need for speed. Toby (Breaking Bad's popular star, Aaron Paul) is an expert at work, as well as driving. He is also in competition with driver, Dino, who turns out to be more than nasty, (Dominic Cooper). In the background is a millionaire whose adrenaline activity is hyper. He is played by Michael Keaton something in the way that he did 30 years earlier (hyper) when so many of his characters and their performances were frantic. He runs a secret and illegal competition, so we know that by the end Toby and Dino will have a confrontation. And they do.

However, there is some drama in the meantime, the young men having access to Mustangs with power to go over 200 mph. Something goes wrong during a race, Toby behaves well, Dino does not and Toby has to bear the consequences.

2 years later, Toby has the opportunity to drive in the secret race. Dino is already a candidate. But it does mean that Toby has to drive from New York to California in 44 hours – which gives a lot of opportunity for high speed, police chasing, helicopter guiding and pursuing, a range of American scenery, especially in the Colorado-Arizona area, plenty of stunt work. Toby is accompanied by Julia, Imogen Poots, a British expert in handling the sales of cars. It is her expert driving in the western states that is the film's reaching out to female audiences.

It is silly to be too critical of this kind of film. Motor fans will enjoy it immensely. Surprisingly, there is scarcely a swear word, no delaying over sex scenes and the nudity is by way of a joke! And, all things considered, it does achieve what it sets out to do, a night out for petrolheads (or whatever name is appropriate for the fans).

NOAH

US, 2014, 138 minutes, Colour.

Russell Crowe, Jennifer Connolly, Emma Watson, Ray Winstone, Logan Lerman, Douglas Booth, Anthony Hopkins.

Directed by Darren Aronofsky.



Noah has been produced as a big budget entertainment movie for world release. It is not a documentary, and it is not a visual aid to study of the book of Genesis.

The film is divided into two parts: the establishment of the character of Noah and his family, his sense of mission, the building of the Ark. This part plays very much like an epic movie, or one of those Marvel Comics movies. The second part has the family on the Ark, focuses on the character of Noah, especially his interior life, his doubts, his questioning of his mission. The way the film is written and performed may remind audiences of Greek tragedy, or of Noah being something like a King Lear. The popular audience will appreciate the first part of the film but might find the second part hard going. A more thoughtful audience will probably appreciate the second part, possibly wanting to forget the first part.

Religious audiences will immediately realise that God is not mentioned at all in the film. Rather, the makers have opted to use the term, The Creator. In fact, this alternative to God, works particularly well, reminiscent of the creation accounts and emphasising The Creator's intentions in making the world and all living things, including humankind. This leads to what could be called a subtext about creation, the environment, and ecological message. But, throughout the film, it is alluded to so often, and then made explicit, that it becomes something of an instruction about care for the world.

There is an interesting section of the film when Noah and family begin their Ark journey. Noah recites the key Genesis 1 text of the days of creation and there are visuals to illustrate each of them, a sequence that is very effective.

Noah has an enemy, Tubal-Cain, who has killed his father and defies Noah, offering another variation on the Genesis theme, when Tubal-Cain stows away on the Ark. He is given a speech, using the old

translations of Genesis 1, about the role of humans to subdue creation. He upholds old values of domination rather than respect for creation and the environment.

A particular difficulty is the variation on the Genesis text about the three sons of Noah taking their wives on board. This time only Shem has a wife, the rescued orphan girl. Noah has become so obsessed by this time that he threatens to kill the child if she is a girl and predicts that, if it is a boy, he will be the last of the humans to die. Ham has gone amongst the people to seek a wife to take on to the Ark, but is thwarted by his father, later resenting him (and giving support to the stowaway, Tubal-Cain). This means that the film raises the question of how the human race is to continue, the same question that is implicit in the story of Cain, Seth and their descendants and how children came to be.

This gives people the opportunity to discuss the Noah and Deluge story, what it meant in the times that the saga was created and handed on by word of mouth and finally written down, to discuss the religious and theological meaning of the Flood story as part of the basic relationship between God and humans.

As regards the film itself, the locations have the look of the prehistoric, and were filmed in the various terrains of Iceland. They are both interesting and exotic. The film also relies on computergraphics, especially for the animals assembling and going into the Ark, the flights of birds first, then the procession of animals, all computer-generated. While the film makers actually built an Ark, using the specifications in the book of Genesis, the flood and the sea of waters are also computer-generated. As, of course, are the Watchers, their building of the Ark, their defence against the enemies, the battle sequences and their ascension to the skies.

The sequence in the book of Genesis, chapter 9, where Noah drinks of the wines that have been cultivated and lies naked, drunk, and his sons respectfully move backwards to cover him, is included in this film, but immediately after the waters subside. Noah is still in confusion about his mission his behaviour and becomes drunk, with his sons covering him as described in the Bible.

The production design and the costume designers have opted for quite anachronistic choices, manufactured material, metal buckets and pipes, armour and weapons. And the choice for clothing looks a variation on the modern, a denim and leather look and something of an ancient T-shirt culture.

Russell Crowe gives a very dignified performance as Noah and Jennifer Connelly has dignity, looyalty and patience as his wife. On the other hand, Anthony Hopkins gives only a slight variation on his Welsh-accented genial performance as Methuselah. Ray Winstone, a little more subdued than usual, is a vicious Tubal-Cain. Emma Watson, post-Harry Potter, is the orphan girl. Most of the principal cast are not Americans and it is interesting to note that Jennifer Connelly and Logan Lerman as Ham use a more English accent.

Some audiences may think the film a winds down in the second half concentrating as it does on Noah, his interior life, his questioning of the commission, his relentless understanding of The Creator's intentions for destroying the world and wanting to remain faithful. This makes him something of a tragic figure, his growing older, less certain, mentally disturbed, even to wanting to destroy his son's child. He is like a tragedy figure, with a tragic flaw which will destroy him and those around him. As mentioned, it is something like a variation on King Lear.

The film-makers have counted on this being a commercial success. Religious audiences may well be interested. Audiences who have little interest in religion may not want to see the film. And with its striking differences between each part, word-of-mouth may well be cautious.

Noah is an entertainment, one might say of biblical proportions. But it is not a film that would be compulsory for students of the Bible.

NYMPHOMANIAC VOLUME 2

Denmark, 2013, 123 minutes (abridged version), Colour.

Charlotte Gainsbourg, Stellan Skarsgaard, Shia LaBoeuf, Christian Slater, Jamie Bell, William Dafoe, Jean-Marc Barr, Mia Goth.

Directed by Lars von Trier.



Nymphomaniac Volume 2 begins, of course, where the first Volume stopped. Joe (Charlotte Gainsbourg) is still talking with Seligman (Stella and Skarsgaard), the therapeutic conversation that she began when he rescued her from her injuries in the street.

There is something of a different tone in many of the sequences in this Volume 2. Joe is played in the flashbacks by Charlotte Gainsbourg, instead of Stacey Martin as previously. She is still with Jerome (Shia LaBeouf). They marry and have a child. But, as the years pass, Joe's psychology and sexual proclivities manifest themselves again.

A great deal of time is spent in Joe's encounter with K. When she loses all sexual feeling, she goes to visit K in his office, with the waiting room full of other women. The point of K's therapy is that it is sado-masochistic. With her various visits to K, and the long part of this film that is devoted to these visits, there is a certain prurient curiosity aroused in the audience, and at times the director seems to be indulging that curiosity, allowing the audience to pry. But, since this is not the usual experience of most audiences, there is a certain feeling of being repelled by this part of Joe's life.

Her loss of sexual feeling is extended to feelings for her son, when she leaves the child alone since the babysitter has not arrived. What follows is a sequence that parallels the episode in von Trier's *Antichrist*, the little child going to the window, on the windowsill, with the possibility of its falling to its death. The result is that she loses her child to her husband – but seems to manage without him.

The next new character, not in Volume 1, is L, played by William Dafoe, who runs a company that uses standover tactics to pressurise clients and to recover money from debts. Joe applies for a job and, for many years, is successful, not afraid to use violence or torment people – quite a powerful

sequence with Jean-Marc Barr as an unaware paedophile whom she taunts and tortures. These episodes have touch of grim nastiness to the tone of the film.

This is increased when K advises her to prepare her successor and she grooms a young girl, an awkward young girl with the lack of self-esteem, to be ready for the stand over job. Over the years, she is completely successful, but, in the vein of the film, there is a sexual relationship between the two women.

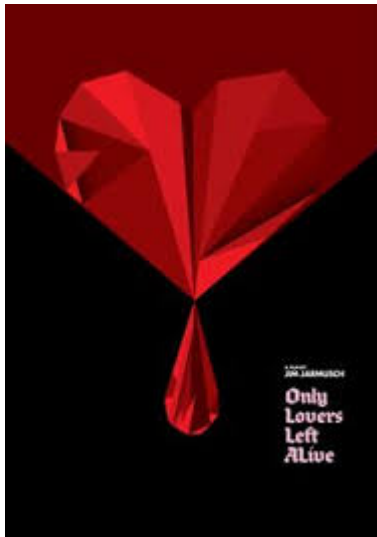
And then the story comes full circle, an unexpected situation and some violence.

This Volume is a little different in that there is an intellectual and artistic component, a number of references to Christian history, to iconography, to music, to Freudian psychology, digressions generally instigated by Seligman. The main difference for Joe is her story, told by her father (a welcome return from Christian Slater as the father) about everyone finding their own personal tree. There is a more lyrical and symbolic sequence where Joe scales a mountain, finds her tree in the glow of the sun.

It would be a relief to say that the film is climax is in this vein – but it is not and the dramatic ending is quite unexpected and shocking.

Nymphomaniac is certainly a cinematic achievement, and exploration of sexuality in so many of its forms, sometimes clinical, often therapeutic, daring in some of its explicit sequences, not the kind of film that mainstream audiences would be interested in or enjoy – it is a specialist film, the type of film that might be expected from Lars von Trier who is never restrained by inhibitions.

ONLY LOVERS LEFT ALIVE



In recent years, there seems to be a multi-presence of vampires in books, television programs, films. Is this a subconscious longing for readers and viewers for some kind of immortality? With many of the answers on offer, vampire immortality is not something to be sought. However, the two vampires in this film lead very comfortable lives, as long as the blood supply is readily available.

This is a vampire film for adult audiences. Teen audiences have been able to enjoy the Twilight series and popular comedies like Vampire Academy. Those with a taste for more violent stories have been amply catered for, especially with the television series, True Blood. But what about adults? There have been some adult vampire films but not so many. One of the much better adult vampire films, Byzantium, directed by Neil Jordan, failed to get cinema release in some countries. Actually, this reviewer would recommend Byzantium instead of Only Lovers Left Alive.

Jim Jarmusch is the writer and director here, an idiosyncratic film-maker for the last 30 years, working in a wide range of genres. While his story is rather simple: centuries-old married couple, one living in Tangiers, the other in Detroit, meet up again, each other's company, are disturbed by the visit of a free-wheeling sister who wreaks a bit of havoc, including draining her potential boyfriend, and is ousted, the couple deciding to return to Tangiers. And, in Tangiers, they have a great friend, Kit Marlowe, in fact the celebrated playwright, Christopher Marlowe (John Hurt).

The film was very stylish in its visuals, everything happening at night, the creative use of colour, camera angles, editing. The film was also very stylish in the range of the musical score, quite different styles of music as background to a variety of sequences. But the language... this is a great drawback for some audiences who have a more cultivated sensibility. but with the the proliferation of four letter expletives, some of the dialogue, especially from the husband, becomes irritating and tiresome – surely a film-maker like Jim Jarmusch has a wider range of creative vocabulary at hand instead of the lazy approach of four letter substitutes. This coarsens the impact of the film and the characters.

Tilda Swinton is the wife, a cultured woman, adept at speed reading and so absorbing a great deal of knowledge, as well as enjoying her friendship with Christopher Marlowe. Tom Hiddleston is the husband, the composer living in the Motown capital, adapting to contemporary musical styles, with a large number of guitars, many of them supplied by a young man in Detroit, Ian, played by Anton Yelchin. The troublesome sister, all 21st century attitudes, language and narcissism, whose last annoyance to the couple was in Paris 87 years earlier! is played by Mia Wasikowska.

There is a doctor in Detroit, played by Jeffrey Wright, who is not above supplying specialist blood for a cash price. Since there are literary allusions in the film, the couple being called Adam and Eve, there are jokes between Adam and the doctor with all kinds of literary references to various doctors, including Dr Faustus.

Which means then that the film is one of atmosphere rather than significant plot, a film that plays on vampire traditions and overturning them or parodying them – although, the quest for blood and survival remains very serious. Many will like this film – and, probably, many will not.

THE OTHER WOMAN

US, 2014, 109 minutes, Colour.

Cameron Diaz, Leslie Mann, Nikolai Coster-Waldau, Don Johnson, Kate Upton.

Directed by Nick Cassavetes.



Well, we know what we think and feel when we hear about that kind of woman. This time it is Cameron Diaz, playing Carly, a sophisticated and well-heeled lawyer. But, she is not quite as bad as we might initially suspect.

Somebody used the phrase 'deserving victim', a nicely precise description. Here it refers to businessman, Mark (Nikolai Coster-Waldau), whom we initially see romancing Carly. Everything seems wonderful, Mark genial and cheerful, Carly wondering whether this might be the real thing – and experiencing wry comments from her secretary,. And then suddenly, the audience sees him in bed – with his wife, Kate (Lesley Man). Mark is not nice, a two-timing philanderer.

Then Carly, believing that he has plumbing problems at home, turns up in her overalls with tools to help, only to encounter Kate. In several films, especially those directed by her real-life husband, Judd Apatow, Leslie Mann has been playing 40-ish wives with some kind of problems, often with the touch of hysteria. This time, with cause, she has more than hysteria.

Once upon a time in 1996, there was a very funny comedy, *The First Wives Club*, with Goldie Hawn, Diane Keaton, Bette Midler – and another group of philanderers. The film showed how the wives got together against their respective unfaithful husbands and became judges and jury to find ways of retribution. *The Other Woman* is not quite in the league of the 1996 film, but it has its interesting characters, vengeance and retribution situations (with Mark suffering quite a number of indignities but holding out as long as possible in his deceptions). And by 2014, dialogue and vengeance is more racy, raucous and raunchy than in 1996.

And just when it was a collaboration between wife and girlfriend, they discover Mark with yet another rather younger and beautiful woman (Kate Upton). She is immediately on side with the two women and they begin their work as three fateful furies.

As mentioned, Leslie Man is adept at this kind of role, her hysterics more than a little irritating at times – though one can understand how she feels. For 20 years, Cameron Diaz has shown versatility in her roles, from comedy to high drama. In this film she shows what a good sport she is, and how good she is at slapstick and physical comedy, having to do a fair amount of this in her quest. .

The film is enjoyable in its way, especially if you feel like sharing the vengeance on this current deserving victim, quite an amount of comedy and moralising, but not particularly memorable.

OUT OF THE INFERNO

China, 2013, 100 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Oxide Pang, Danny Pang.



When audiences think of a disaster film with a skyscraper on fire, they tend to think of The Towering Inferno. And they are right. However, The Towering Inferno was released in 1974, quite a time ago. Perhaps it is time for another towering Inferno film.

This one was made in China, situated in Guangzhou, quite a business city and centre in southern China.

The directors were the Pang Bros, responsible for some dramas set in Thailand, like Bangkok Dangerous, as well as some horror films. With this one, they show that they are able to work on a large scale, with a big cast, and with spectacular special effects.

We are introduced to two brothers at the beginning of the film, one opting to stay with the fire department, the other, the younger, going to a business company which specialises in technology to prevent fires.

4 years pass. The older brother is married, his wife pregnant, but he is dissatisfied in himself and not supportive of his wife, even to going to see an ultra-scan with her. The younger brother is quite an

executive and is on his way to a launch and a party celebration on the 40th floor of a new building. By chance, he meets his sister-in-law, on her way to the ultrasound, as he enters the building.

A worker is careless with a cigarette butt and throws it down, still alight. The sparks carry upward and soon the building is ablaze. Publicity notes indicate that the Pang Bros used real fire to create a sense of dread, fear and danger for the cast.

What follows is the expected panic, the saving of people, the use of new technology to fight the fire, some characters in danger, two young men stealing diamonds and killing the owner of their shop, the older brother leading the rescue but not taking his wife out first and the younger brother has to lead a lot of people to safety, even their swimming underwater, reminiscent of The Poseidon Adventure.

As a disaster film, Out of the Inferno is very watchable. However, it is surprising that the bloggers on the IMDb are generally quite negative towards the film.

The wider audience will probably enjoy it a great deal. (There are some warnings, especially with the careless worker and the cigarette butt but also an entrepreneur stocking dangerous chemicals, illegally, on the floor which is the refuge room.)

POMPEII

UK, 2014, 106 minutes, Colour.

Kit Harrington, Carrie-Anne Moss, Emily Browning, Kiefer Sutherland, Jared Harris, Jessica Lucas.

Directed by Paul W. S. Anderson.



Most audiences know that the city of Pompeii was destroyed by an eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 A.D.

Which probably means that audiences who go to see Pompeii will want to see the eruption and its consequences. They will not be disappointed because the special effects are quite special, and the sequence goes on for over 30 minutes. During the film, there are several overhead shots of what is brewing in the volcano, followed by various tremors, then the molten fire and lava are thrown into the air and then come down the mountainside – while there is quite an amount of ash, the main special effects are many, many fireballs which rain down on the city, on the people, on the harbour, on ships with people trying to escape the disaster not. As disaster movies go, this part of the film is quite effective.

But there is a whole story prior to the eruption. Audiences who have seen Spartacus as well as Gladiator will recognise a great number of similarities in Pompeii. Actually, it opens in northern Britannia with a Celtic people, experts in horsemanship, brutally conquered by the Romans under the leadership of the later Senator Corvus, played with laid-on arrogance and venom by Kiefer Sutherland. A young boy survives the massacre of the whole privilege and of his parents, only to be captured and taken to Londinium (explained as the capital of Britannia) where he trained as a gladiator, impressing a local authority (who looks a little like Frank Thring and gives a Thringish performance) who takes him to Italy, and to Pompeii.

The gladiator, Milo, is played by Kit Harrington, not well-known on the big screen, but with a huge reputation as one of the key stars of television's Game of Thrones. Pompeii may not be the answer to his big-screen ambitions, but will get him noticed, although he has to play a rather humourless role, bent on revenge, skilled at fighting as a gladiator, but a bit solid and stolid nonetheless. On his way to Pompeii, he has the opportunity to stand out, when Cassia (Emily Browning) is travelling in the carriage back from Rome and her horse stumbles and he is able to put it out of its misery. She is fascinated and attracted, though the soldiers in charge of gladiators are certainly not.

Cassia's parents, played by Carrie Anne Moss and Jared Harris, are interested in development of the city of Pompeii and are relying on the intervention of the now Senator Corvus, who has set his lascivious eye on Cassia. The ground is set for confrontations, gladiatorial fights, brutal treatment by the Senator. In the cells under the arena, Milo encounters an African champion gladiator (Adewale Akinnuoye Agbaje) who is about to get his freedom after his last fight. Milo warns him that this will not be the case and in the arena, when all the gladiators have to fight Roman soldiers, they see that this is the truth. Milo and Atticus defeat all the soldiers and are appreciated by the sadistic crowd. Cassia gives a thumbs up and is able to save their lives.

While the film does get complicated, the complications are different because of the eruption and the wilful and brutal behaviour of the Senator. And we're back at the eruption and, as many have pointed out, an ending which owes great deal to the end of Titanic!

This is a kind of film that it is easy to turn up one's nose at. its director is best known for making the Resident Evil series which is a recommendation only for horror fantasy fans. But, despite all this, this reviewer rather enjoyed Pompeii.

THE RAID 2

Indonesia, 2013, 148 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Gareth Evans.



The Raid was an extraordinary box office success right around the world. Director, Garth Evans, had moved to Indonesia and begun making feature films. With The Raid, he put the Indonesian film industry on the map. Which meant that the sequel was inevitable. Here it is.

The hero of the original film, Rama (Iko Uweis) is a martial arts champion, discovered by the director and used as the protagonist of his film as well as of this sequel. Iko Uweis also appeared in Keanu Reeves' martial arts film, The Man of Tai Chi.

The first film was strongly focused, most of the action taking place in the one building after the police squads arrived and moved throughout the building to confront thugs and gangsters. The screenplay offered a great number of opportunities for frequent fights. Sometimes the violence of the action was marked by many touches of brutality. This made the film offputting for some audiences.

This film opens on the same day as the first film ends, with the prologue showing an execution in the countryside and indication that gang warfare was building up. The chief of the operation chooses Rama to go undercover and infiltrate the major gang. Worried about the security of his

wife and family, Rama nevertheless obeys orders, is convicted of a crime, goes to prison where he encounters the son of the gang boss.

The Raid 2 is reminiscent of themes of The Godfather films as well as of stories of agents going undercover, like Donnie Brasco.

When Rama is released, he is given a job by the Indonesian Godfather and has to keep an eye on the man's son who is reckless and ambitious, wanting to take over from his father, in league with leaders of other gangs, antagonising Japanese gangs in the country.

While the plot outline is familiar enough, Rama is quite an interesting character, taking the opportunity, almost every 15 minutes in this 2 ½ hour film, to get involved in a tough fight, sometimes one-on-one, sometimes demolishing a whole gang. Various assassins turn up, an old assassin-retainer of the gang and a hammer-wielding blind woman. The Godfather plot is also interesting, the head of the Indian Indonesian Mafia-type family being urbane and suave, in control for 30 years, yet absolutely ruthless.

The film highlights the danger for Rama undercover, his need to check on the security of his family, his contacts with the chief who generally leaves him on his own.

In the climax, the son and the leader of a rival gang as well as a politician who is dining with them bargaining to get the biggest payoff, feel secure from any attack. They have underestimated Rama who, though wounded, is able to get through a gang of thugs as well as the son's main hired assassin and there is, as might be expected, slaughter all-round before the happy ending and the need for The Raid 3.

RIDE ALONG

US, 2014, 105 minutes, Colour.

Kevin Hart, Ice Cube, John Leguizamo, Bruce McGill, Laurence Fishburne, Tika Sumpter.

Directed by Tim Story



Ride Along is an American term, perhaps universal, for someone accompanying a police officer in his rounds. This is what it means here in this very American comedy.

Ride Along was extremely successful at the American box office – perhaps the reason that it had featured release in other countries around the world. While it is specifically geared to the American audience, especially the African-American audience, it is much more accessible than some of the other comedies, especially some in the past which have featured Ice Cube.

One of the pluses (perhaps minuses) for the film is the presence of comedian Kevin Hart. For some audiences, he will be particularly irritating with his patter and his stupidities. For others, he will be being hilarious. And, for others, he may be an acquired taste. Since he is going to appear in the number of films in coming times, his reputation and appeal will be tested.

He is the comic figure in this rather odd couple, playing Ben, the comedian, to Ice Cube's straight man. And Ice Cube plays it very straight indeed. His James is a straight arrow policeman in Atlanta, tends to go out on his own, trying to find and confront a big drug dealer, Omar. One entertaining piece of the film is that when Omar eventually turns up, he is played by Laurence Fishburne. James has a sister who is in love with Ben. James can't believe it and says he will only give his blessing if Ben accompanies him on a ride along.

The ride along provides most of the comedy as Ben makes out that he is a top policeman and gets himself entangled with bikie's, one of whom is woman whom he mistakes as a man; goes to a park to interrogate a boy about his criminal brother who gets the better of him; accosts a drunken man in the supermarket; and goes to a gun range and tries out guns beyond his capacities with kickback results.

When he discovers that he has been set up for jokes at his expense and destined to fail, he decides he will play along and goes to the next episode, ultimately finding out that it is real and that he was dealing with actual gangsters.

Of course, Ben is going to prove himself and this is the case when James confronts the drug gang and Ben steps in to handle the situation – which, whether we like Kevin Hart or not, is quite funny.

All's well that ends well, except the final boo-boo that is typical of Ben.

Anyone for Ride Along 2 – more than probably. (Actually, it is already listed in the IMDB for 2016!)

WADJDA



A very interesting film, a portrait of a young girl, precociously forward, with ambitions – which, however, are not considered appropriate for a girl growing up in Saudi Arabia. She is the watched from the title.

Saudi Arabia does not have the film industry and this is one of its first films, and the first to be directed by a woman, who did her studies in cinema at Sydney University. She had some difficulties in making the film, especially in associating with men in the workplace, she doing her direction from inside a van, watching a monitor, with walkie-talking communications with her cast. That she has made such a well-crafted as well is interesting film is to her credit.

M is this a significant film about life in Saudi Arabia, it is very significant as regards the place of women in society, the restrictions, the prohibitions for activities as well as for Communications, especially with men.

Watched of lives at home with her mother – and inside the house, there is a certain freedom, especially in dress, make up, conversation. But this changes when the women go outside, the importance of the woman covering herself, being cautious in the presence of men, and not being allowed to do such ordinary things as drive. watched has a great ambition at this stage of her life to have a bike and to ride it and to race her friend down the street. but, if the women come in the eye line of men working outside the house, they have to hide...

Watched it is at school, something of a mischief maker, but decides to learn more about the call Ryan and enter a competition about references” from the sacred book. There is prizemoney which he intends to use to buy the bike – but, when she wins, the teacher thinks it more appropriate for her to give the money as a donation for Palestinians.

In the meantime, her father who works away from home, is disappointed that his wife has not given him a son and is unable to do so, so he is in the process of marrying again and moving out of the house, despite his declarations of love for his wife and daughter. Again, women as victims of marriage traditions and expectations of others to have sons.

The film was very cheerful for most of the time despite the sad and sometimes grim undertones. watched herself may be engaged in the future in transitions in the status of women in her country. In the meantime, she offers an entertainment, the story of a young girl, and, especially for Western eyes, quite a different cultural experience.

REVIEWS APRIL-MAY 2014

52 TUESDAYS

BELLE

CANOPY

CHEF

CROSSING, The

*GARDENING WITH SOUL

DOUBLE, The

GODZILLA

GOOD VIBRATIONS

LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

MISSING PICTURE, The

NEXT KICK GOAL
TRANSCENDENCE
YOUNG AND BEAUTIFUL

GARDENING WITH SOUL

New Zealand, 2013, 96 minutes, Colour.
Sister Loyola Galvin.
Directed by Jess Feast.

There is no doubt that most audiences will feel all the better while watching this interesting and delightful film. And they will probably even feel much better by the time it has ended.

Over the years, there have been many documentaries which feature nuns reflecting on their lives, reflecting on religious life, reflecting on their place in the church. Audiences in the past were used to seeing such movie nuns as Ingrid Bergman in *The Bells of St Mary's* or Jennifer Jones in *The Song of Bernadette*. Catholic audiences were possibly surprised or exhilarated by nuns in different habits in the 1960s like Rosalind Russell in *Where Angels Go, Trouble Follows* or Mary Tyler Moore with Elvis in *Change of Habit*. In later years, many sisters have complained that screen presence of nuns, generally in antiquated-looking habits which never existed, is limited to background in airports, railway stations... In the 1990s, there was Whoopi Goldberg, masquerading as a nun in a witness protection program, singing and delighting everyone (including the Pope) with her singing and leading a choir in *Sister Act*. On the more serious side, Susan Sarandon won an Academy award for portraying Sister Helen Prejean and her prison ministry in *Dead Man Walking*. A fascinating half-century of nuns on screen from Ingrid Bergman to Susan Sarandon.

Sister Loyola, who is featured in *Gardening with Soul* lived her religious life as a Sister of Compassion through that half-century – and beyond. Serving as a nurse during World War II and then entering the convent, she is in her 80s as this film opens and turns 90 towards the end.

The Sisters of Compassion were founded by Mother Aubert, a woman of enterprise with an openness to people of all faiths and denominations. The sisters have communities in New Zealand, Fiji and worked in Australia, especially in Broken Hill.

Perhaps the first thing to note about Sister Loyola is what a livewire she is, sprightly and birdlike, working in the garden, cherishing the garden, not only the plants but also the preparation of compost, doing some heavy lifting, and enlightening us about the processes of growth, with images of beautiful flowers, shrubs, and what happens every year, from winter through to autumn, which are the headings of the action of the film.

Since this review is written by a non-gardener (after dismal failure in that job many decades ago in the novitiate), the impact of the garden and gardening was visual. Real gardeners will no doubt appreciate so much more, not just visually, but understanding and appreciating what Sister Loyola does, along with her helpers in the garden at the Home of, Compassion in Wellington, New Zealand.

As the title of the film also includes Soul. Sister Loyola is a wise guide in matters spiritual, indicating the depths of prayer and awareness of God over many decades, but able to speak in very practical terms, using garden analogies, using the seasons, but able to explain many aspects of spirituality to a wide audience, even those not familiar with spirituality terms and ideas. But Sister Loyola speaks from long experience. There is a beautiful sequences of the sisters at mass, distributing Communion, as well is the elderly sisters in the background, at prayer, at meals, and the joy of celebrating Sister Loyola's 90th birthday.

The director behind the camera (not always easy to pick up with the limits of the sound engineering of the film) asks Sister to explain her life, the possibilities of marriage but her grief at the death of a friend during the war, her work as a nurse, her vocation, the old-style, rather strict convent life, the practical changes to the habit and its materials and the decision to live in a more contemporary world in 'mufti'.

And Sister has sound things to say about the state of the church (mentioning the advantage of New Zealand being a long way from Rome!), of looking after children in the homes, on kindness and tenderness to babies and children (with some footage of a film from the 1950s). At the end of the film, some visitors who were children

in Compassion Homes, come to visit Sister Loyola and share their happy memories of their experiences with the sisters, which enabled them to have a life that they might never have had without the sisters.

Sister Loyola is also up-to-date with troubles in the Catholic Church, speaking strongly about the sexual abuse issues, using the word 'humanity' in her strong reflections.

For Catholics who are familiar with nuns, this film will be a most pleasant experience, being reminded of the best that they have known in their relationships with the sisters. Audiences not familiar with nuns will be charmed by the sprightly Sister Loyola, her sharp observations on life, her experience of living religiously and spiritually. Probably this will be the case for audiences 50 and over reminiscing about sisters. There may not be an immediate appeal to younger audiences – but should they happen upon Gardening with Soul, they might not be sorry.

A pleasing documentary that is very easy to recommend.

MISSING PICTURE/ L'IMAGE MANQUANTE

France/Cambodia, 2013, 92 minutes, Black and white and Colour.

Directed by Rithy Panh.

In the French version of this title, the word 'manquante' is more significant than the English 'missing'. Manquante means 'lacking', that the picture is not just missing, it ought to be there. And some of the missing pictures for this film are those in the footage taken in Cambodia in the 1970s, the era of the Khmer Rouge and the killing fields of Cambodia, which no longer exists.

Director Rithy Panh was born in Cambodia in 1964. A young teenager during the troubled times, his parents and family were killed and he himself went into exile in France. In his career as a film-maker, he won awards for his film Rice People in 1994, a look at children who said they received their rice from the UN and had never seen a rice field. He subsequently made quite a number of documentaries and the fiction, based on the novel by Marguerite Duras, The Sea Wall, in 2008.

The Missing Picture was a nominee for the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film for 2013.

The director supplies a voice-over, recalling his childhood, the appearance of the Khmer Rouge after quiet and cultural and literary times with his family. He shows some photos, incorporates footage taken during the period, especially from the propaganda films made by the Khmer Rouge. But, he is lacking pictures and footage of his family, especially the pathos of his father's hunger strike and death.

He goes on to explain the ideology of the period, the stamping out of individuality, the attempt to create a society in which everyone was equal – but, was doomed to failure, as young people who were specialists were destined for particular work and the soldiers and authorities lived more comfortably than the ordinary people. We know that thousands were killed, and we know the reference to the killing fields, especially after the striking film of 1984 of that title.

The special device for the film is the director's asking a friend to create clay models of persons, animals, painting them and the director using them to make tableau of particular scenes for which there was no photographic record. This means they offer a great pathos with audiences responding to the models and imagining what they stood for.

In retrospect, the regime of Pol Pot and the rule of the Khmer Rouge was a period of shocking brutality. This film reminds us that it should not be forgotten.

TRANSCENDENCE

US/UK, 2014, 119 minutes, Colour.

Johnny Depp, Rebecca Hall, Paul Bethany, Morgan Freeman, Cillian Murphy, Clifton Collins Jr, Kate Mara, Lucas Haas. Cole Hauser.

Directed by Wally Pfister.

This is a science fiction film, executive produced by Christopher Nolan, director of the Batman films as well as the ingenious Inception. The director, first time, is Nolan's director of photography, Wally Pfister.

The scenario takes us into the future, perhaps the near future, because so much of the world is recognisable here. But it begins ominously with Paul Bethany as Max, a brain scientist informing us that the Internet has been turned off some years earlier and the society has to a rather primitive state. He then goes on to explain what happened those years ago and what happened to his friends, Will and Evelyn.

Will is a leading scientist, working on experiments on the human brain and personality. His wife, also a scientist, assists him in that work but has a vision for improving the world. We hear lectures from them, they are well received, work is going on in their laboratories, a visit from army connections

and friends (Morgan Freeman and Cillian Murphy) – and then the laboratories explode and there is an assassination attempt on Will.

Will is played by Johnny Depp, in his serious vein in such films as *The Ninth Gate*, *Sleepy Hollow*, quite the opposite of *Willie Wonka* and *Captain Jack Sparrow*. Because of his advances in brain studies, his brain is able to be kept alive while connected to machines, even television monitors, which enables Johnny Depp still to give a performance via the screens. Evelyn is played by Rebecca Hall, devoted to her husband, anxious to keep his brain alive, collaborating with him, but beginning to wonder when strange phenomena are associated with people with injuries, almost instantaneous healing, and Will be able to be connected to them, present through them. As the crowds queue, Evelyn and we wonder what his intentions are, building up an ultra-strong group of healed humans, he controlling them, in an almost fascist-like way.

The rebels who were anti-artificial intelligence (but not against violence and assassinations in imposing their will) are still working against Will, prepared to sabotage his extensive underground laboratories, energised by a vast array of solar panels. Once again the army representatives, but this time not sympathetically. This creates an enormous dilemma for Evelyn, between her still strong love for her husband and the need to control his amassing power.

While Wally Pfister is able to direct his own director of photography to create beautiful images, his storytelling technique is quite slowly paced, even solemnly paced, which runs the danger of not enticing its audience to identify with the characters, the issues and the development of the drama. The musical score is fairly subdued, more soothing than invigorating. Ultimately, the plot developments are of sufficient interest to get most audiences involved even if not greatly enthused.

With the plot development of Will connected to technology, there are some echoes of the basic *Frankenstein* story, good intentions to create living creatures, but hubris taking over. There are many themes to reflect on, human life, the power of the scientist, the 'playing God' of those who wish to control life. And then there is the significance of the title. Will uses it to describe his developments in science and healing. The word indicates a surpassing of a previous state – and it also has religious connotations, of a power beyond the human, even of dignity.

Initial response to the film was not as enthusiastic as hoped for. But, it will take its place in the series of science fiction films which are not designed merely as big blockbusters.

REVIEWS MAY-JUNE

22 JUMP STREET
BABADOOK, The
BLENDED
CASTLE IN ITALY
EDGE OF TOMORROW
FACE OF LOVE
FAULT IN OUR STARS, The
FRANK
GABRIELLE
GOOD VIBRATIONS
GRACE OF MONACO
HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON 2
MALEFICENT
MILLION WAYS TO DIE IN THE WEST
OMAR
ONCE MY MOTHER
ROCK THE CASBAH/ ROCK BA-CASBA
ROVER, The
SEDUCED AND ABANDONED
TRIP TO ITALY, The
TWO FACES OF JANUARY
UNDER THE SKIN
X-MEN: DAYS OF FUTURE PAST
YVES SAINT LAURENT

22 JUMP STREET

US, 2014, 116 minutes, Colour.

Jonah Hill, Channing Tatum, Ice Cube, Peter Stormare, Wyatt Russell, Amber Stevens, Jillian Bell, the Lucas Brothers, Caroline Aaron.

Directed by Phil Lord and Christopher Miller.

They've moved across the street, away from the Korean church and now to a Vietnamese church where the statue of a Vietnamese Sacred Heart is prominent. But that is the most religious thing about this film, a sequel to 21 Jump Street which was, in turn, a movie version of the very popular television series of the same name which starred Johnny Depp.

The sequel is as good as, perhaps better, than 21 Jump Street. It is consistently amusing, sophomoric humour as someone remarked, but clever sophomoric humour. There is also a case for the often inept partnership between Schmidt and Jenco, undercover as brothers, almost parallel to their infiltrating a high school in search of drug dealers in the first film, but this time they have the advantage of being sent to College – and quite a few humorous sequences as they try out various courses in which they are not successful. This is done on purpose – and there is an urgent recommendation that audiences stay through the final credit sequences where sequel on sequel on sequel on sequel is suggested, the various institutes of learning where the duo could infiltrate and perfect their police work!

The film opens with one of those continuity sections as they do on television, the plot so

far... And then the move to 22 Jump Street, with a glance across the street and a big sign with 23! As they go into the new quarters, they remark that their chief's glass office looks like a cube of ice. And there is Ice Cube, grim as ever, calling them to account and sending them to College and later has an overwrought tantrum while having dinner with them. There is a new drug on the loose, Whyphy, and they have to track down the source of the drug because a young woman has died from an overdose.

Off they go to hold up a group of dealers, with Peter Stormare yet again a villain, only to find that the dealing is not with drugs but with special species, including an octopus that jumps onto the face of Schmidt, Jonah Hill.

Jonah Hill and Channing Tatum obviously enjoyed working together in the first film, and they have perfected their act, their combination, collaboration and timing. We have seen Jonah Hill do this kind of thing before, jokes about his size, his physical inabilities, his serious-mindedness, especially in his course at college as well as tracking down criminals. Channing Tatum, Jenko, plays straightman to Hill but it soon emerges that Tatum has a sense of humour, does deadpan very well, as well as many physical stunts. Is recruited for the college football team and is a great success, making friends with the star player and his rather rough associate, easy suspects for the drug dealing.

They have tracked down a student who lived opposite the dead woman and Schmidt forms a sexual relationship with her – and there is an unexpected and funny twist when he meets the girl's father. She has allowed the dead woman's roommate to move in, a deadpan and rather annoying and blunt-spoken young woman. We are glad when she moves out of the picture, but she does return.

There are football matches, a lot of attention given to a crowded Spring Break in Mexico, and various college shenanigans that young audiences will be familiar with and enjoy from many student vacation films.

However, the case is solved. Schmidt has an elaborate fist fight that he ways is the most uncomfortable he has ever had; there are car chases, highly effective stunt work, twists in the plot – and, all the time, continuous humour, some of it crude, some of its sophomoric, some of it both. Having made allowances for this, 22 Jump Street keeps a smile on the face of the audience, indulges expectations for action, and should prove a holiday hit.

THE BABADOOK

Australia, 2013, 92 minutes, Colour.

Essie Davis, Noah Wiseman, Daniel Henshall, Benjamin Winspear.

Directed by Jennifer Kent.

The first question is probably who is or what is The Babadook.

It turns out to be the character, charcoal black, in a book called Mister Babadook, the choice of the little boy in this film for some bedtime reading. He is six years old, has a propensity for monsters, a fascination and yet fear, checking in his cupboards before he goes to sleep as to whether any monsters are in his room.

His same Sam, played with extraordinary precocity and intensity by Noah Wiseman. He tells us that his father was killed in a car accident while taking his mother to the hospital for his birth, a sad thing that his birthday coincides with the death day of his father. His mother, Amelia, manages with him, loving him but finding him exasperating. She has a job in a hospital and relies on her sister, Clare, who has a daughter, Ruby, to mind Sam when things are difficult. Amelia is played by Essie Davis who gives an expert and powerful performance, ranging from normal to haunted and terrified.

Thus far, a different but ordinary life in suburban Adelaide.

Then comes the moment when Sam wants his mother to read Mister Babadook to him. This leads to some fears for the Sam, who becomes preoccupied with him, even setting up clothes and hat on the wall that look like him. The story also has quite an effect on his mother.

Amelia, in fact, is quite worn out and susceptible to fear. And the presence of the Babadook preys on her. The question is raised as to what is happening to her. Is anything happening in reality or is Amelia experiencing hallucinations, wild imagination, even projecting her fears on to her son onto others. The audience watches her collapse with apprehension, wondering what is really happening, listening to her change of voice, listening to her changes in personality, concerned about what is happening to Sam because of this behaviour.

So, it can be said, that The Babadook works well in the genre of hauntings and mental deterioration as well as a story of a child in some peril.

Jennifer Kent is a first time feature director and has done a very effective job of creating atmosphere as well as expert delineation of character. She doesn't tie everything up clearly by the end, allowing an audience to wonder about what really happened and whether it really happened.

BLENDED

US, 2014, 116 minutes, Colour.

Adam Sandler, Drew Barrymore, Terry crews,
Directed by Frank Coraci.

Who would have thought? Adam Sandler in a film that is geared towards a family audience, no coarse language - well, more than a little innuendo, but generally of the PG style. Perhaps he is making reparation for films like That's My Boy Grown-ups 2.

While this is a take-it-or-leave-it kind of comedy, it is a pleasant enough outing for most of the family, for the undemanding audience. Critics tend to be unkind to Adam Sandler, dismissing his broad and sometimes crass comedy, dismissing his popular entertainments – as if they were meant to be serious dramas as if that was what was intended by these films rather than simply being a pleasing pastime.

At the opening, we see Drew Barrymore as Lauren, a divorcee trying to cope with two sometimes impossible boys at home. She is on a blind date, doing a favour for a friend, with Jim, Adam Sandler, and the date is not going well at all, no chemistry between them. She

arranges for a phone call citing an emergency at home so that she can escape – only for him to do the same before she does!

Lauren's partner is about to be engaged to Jim's boss but is not looking forward to taking on five children. They have bookings for a holiday, for blended families, in the South African resort in City. Laura and Jim both get the idea of taking up the ticket – and both finally families find themselves in South Africa. On the one hand, there are all the clashes that we might expect but there are also episodes, especially with the children, where Lauren and Jim start to bury the hatchet. He becomes a pacifying funnel the-figure for the two boys. She is a listener for the girls, arranging a makeover for the older girl who was always mistaken for a boy, not wanting to take the place of their dead mother, with the middle girl constantly talking to the presence of her mother, making places in the table...

There are the expected sequences with the animals – and some jokes with them as well.

The film does serve as a promotion for this resort – but, it is very American in its extrovertedly heads extra vertically affluent style, an intrusive singing and dance combo being rather alienating with their frequent performances, and plenty of PG-rated look at raucousness and innuendo. One of the difficulties in looking at the sequences is that the Americans confine themselves to live within the resort and the game Park, no real acknowledgement of the 20th century history in South Africa and apartheid, the injustices of the period and the changes since. Blended is not meant to be a lecture, but it would have been strengthened by acknowledges South African realities instead of touristic fly-in, fly out.

While the outcome might be predictable, it does not take the quite predictable road, things being complicated when the two families return home. But, this is a film from families and so it ends very nicely. Interesting to notice that many critics, with their intense dislike of Adam Sandler, are unable to acknowledge this rather toned-down film for a broad undemanding audience.

A CASTLE IN ITALY

France, 2013, minutes, Colour.

Valeria Tedeschi Bruni, Louis Garrell, Filippo Timi, Marisa Tedeschi Bruni, Xavier Beauvois, Ande Wilms, Silvio Orlando.

Directed by Valeria Tedeschi Bruni.

Castle in Italy is a French drama, very French, with touches of the Italian. It was written and directed by actress Valeria Tedeschi Bruni. Much of the plot is drawn from the actress' own life, her own mother portraying her mother in this film, her relationship with an actor, Louis Garrell in real life as well is here on the screen, her brother who died of AIDS.

The film will probably appeal to those who like French drama. However, here the characters are rather unlikeable, given the erratic moods of the heroine herself. She portrays Louise - she has been an actress but not performing for 10 years, taking time off for herself. As the film opens, she is participating in the chant of a group of monks, shades of *Of Gods and Men*, whose director, Xavier Beauvois, acts in this film, portraying a friend of the family, fallen on hard times and begging for money, disrupting a funeral at the end of the film.

Louise, hurrying to the railway station meets the actor wandering in the woods after take in a film directed by his father. They exchange phone numbers and when the actress returns to the city, they begin an affair. It is complicated by the age of Louise who is desperate to have a child and undergoes some IVF treatments, the actor, to his distaste, persuaded to provide sperm. There is a bizarre, very Italianate scene, when Louise goes to a convent to sit on a special chair of a nun venerated there but jealously guarded by an extremely severe nun who interrogates people about their faith and their mass-going. Louise desperately breaks through to sit on the chair before being evicted. There is also a desperate scene in the clinic where an indifferent nurse does not listen to Louise's anxiety about a wrong tag on her arm. She does become pregnant and is very happy until a miscarriage and the breakdown of the relationship.

And the Castle of the title? It belongs to the family and there is need to sell the Castle for financial reasons or, to lease it to the locals, where the Mayor wants it to become something of a resort for visitors. Mother and daughter agree to the selling of their prized Breughel painting, which upsets the brother who is against any sale.

With the personal ups and downs of the characters, there is often change of moods, especially when the brother dies and during his funeral and in the subsequent gathering of people at the Castle where an old tree that has died is dug out and a new tree, quite huge, is planted in its place – symbol of the change from the old to the new and the future?

The film seems to be a collection of episodes about the characters rather than a well-thought-out screenplay and personal drama.

EDGE OF TOMORROW

US/UK, 2014, 113 minutes, Colour.

Tom Cruise, Emily Blunt, Brendan Gleeson, Noah Taylor, Bill Paxton.

Directed by Doug Liman.

If you are not a computer games player, give Edge of Tomorrow about 20 minutes and then you may enjoy it more than you expected. Those first 20 minutes are military minutes, aliens invading Earth, worldwide military trying to contain the invasion, troops coming from Asia towards Europe, troops moving across the English Channel towards France which has been devastated (some grim views of a destroyed Paris) as have other countries of Europe.

This is a Tom Cruise science fiction (his 2013 Oblivion was very interesting and enjoyable). He is Cage, an American in London, a PR man, who is commanded by the general (Brendan Gleeson) to go to the front. He refuses, but is arrested and sent to the military base where he is given the rough treatment, called maggot, put down, clad in huge armour, put on a plane where he has to drop with others, a bit like an airborne D- Day, on the Normandy beaches. When he lands, he confronts the Alpha Alien, and is killed. But he does not die, rather, in a scenario like Groundhog Day, he lands again at the military base and goes through the process again, again, again and again.

Each time he makes a bit more progress in his mission. The key is that he meets Rita, named The Angel of Verdun, because of her heroism in the battle there (echoes of World War I). Her photo appears on the side of London buses to promote patriotism and for recruiting. Cage encounters her during his mission and she tells him to contact her when he goes back to start

again. He does so and she puts him through his paces so that he is well-trained to continue with the mission, accompanying her. She has had the same experience as he but has lost her powers whereas he still has – to confront the Alpha Alien. They are helped by an eccentric but visionary scientist (Noah Taylor).

This may sound more than far-fetched. But, the screenplay is well-written, Cruise develops his character from reluctant PR man to very fit combat soldier and Emily Blunt, as Rita, can stand her ground against Cage as well as with him.

Most of the film develops the further steps in the narrative, step-by-step, returning to the start again and again, knowing better how to deal with the further steps until there is a confrontation, with rather spectacular special effects, between Cage and the Alpha Alien.

The film is geared towards the science-fiction and futuristic scenario film fans and should satisfy them – and, most of the critics around the world, liked it.

THE FACE OF LOVE

US, 2014, 92 minutes, Colour.

Annette Bening, Ed Harris, Robin Williams, Jess Weixler, Amy Brenneman.

Directed by Arie Posin.

The movie marketers tell us that the main audience for films is the 18 to 25 group and that most films are geared to this niche. This may be true Hollywood but is not true of many of the international industries. And it is definitely not true for this film. This is cinema for seniors, especially the over 60s (the age of the three principal actors in this film).

All during this film, audiences might be wondering why it has this generic title. Whose face? What kind of love? But, wondering in patience, will discover that it has quite a specific meaning and throws light on the later part of the film.

The film begins with grief, Nicky (Annette Bening) mourning the death of her husband who had gone swimming and, as she walks on the beach, finding his body. She loved her husband intensely and cannot come to grips with his death. It is clear that she has no closure in her grief.

5 years pass. Nicky seems to have recovered, has a good relationship with her daughter, Summer, who goes to study in Seattle. She also has a good relationship with Roger (Robin Williams), a good friend of her late husband and a neighbour. They talk together, have meals together but Nicky does not realise the crush that Roger has on her. He is a quiet personality and does not reveal his love until later.

The important part of the film occurs when Nicky goes into a museum which she used to visit with her husband but has neglected in the last five years. Suddenly she sees a man who resembles her husband, follows him, googles him to find that he is an artist and an art teacher. She intrudes into his class, but discusses with him the possibility of some personal tuition. He agrees.

The audience notices the resemblance immediately. And the artist, Tom, is played by Ed

Harris who played the part of the husband briefly at the beginning of the film. He falls in love with Nicky and thinks he has found the right woman in his life. He still keeps contact with his former wife (Amy Brenneman) who is supportive of him, especially because of his weak heart and her concern about his health.

With the similarities of face in the two men, we realise that this could be the meaning of the title. Nicky and Tom relate well together, begin a relationship, he very happy, she seemingly happy but slipping (intensely) sometimes into memories of her husband. This all comes to a head because she has not revealed all this to Tom and her daughter, suddenly visiting, becomes semi-hysterical as she sees Tom and realises what her mother is doing. Roger is also uneasy about what Nicky is doing.

Nicky wants an idyllic visit to Mexico, to relive the experiences with her husband, failing to realise the impact for Tom – while the audience is wishing her to tell him the truth.

While this is a romantic story, it does not quite end as we might have liked or expected and the culmination of the film is at an exhibition of Tom's paintings, a number of which portrayed Nicky, one of them called The Face of Love.

THE FAULT IN OUR STARS

US, 2014, 126 minutes, Colour.

Shailene Woodley, Ansel Elgort, Laura Dern, Willem Dafoe

Directed by Josh Boone.

No, this is not a Shakespeare film of Romeo and Juliet, star-crossed lovers, nor the version of Julius Caesar where the fault lies not in our stars but in ourselves. This is a film version of the very popular novel by John Green, designed for Young Adult reading. The book is a bestseller and this film has done very well at the box office.

It is a story about cancer.

Hazel is a teenager who was diagnosed with serious disease at the age of 13, making it difficult for her to breathe normally, requiring her to have a canister of oxygen which she has to take with her everywhere, and the connection to her lungs through her nose. She is generally a cheerful character, strong-minded, strong-willed, acknowledging her illness and its effect, and the potential shortness of her life. She has devoted parents, feels that sometimes they mother her over much. However, she does have some touches of cynicism.

To please her parents, Hazel goes to a support group, not finding it very helpful, but listening to a young man, Isaac, who has already lost an eye and is about to lose the other, talking about his love for a girl called Monica who will support him (she doesn't). But Hazel is also interested in his friend, Gus (Ansel Elgort) who suffers from leukaemia. He states that his one desire is oblivion and she reacts strongly against him. She talks to him after the meeting and they click, going out for walks together, talking, finding each other congenial. While she is short and strong-minded, he is rather tall, gawky, and an optimist with a perennial smile.

A lot of the action centres on a book that Hazel has read and lends to Gus. He is impressed, they talk about it, and she confesses that she has written to the author asking about life after

the novel ends – but has had no reply. Gus emails the author, who lives in Amsterdam, and he replies. They decide that it would be wonderful to go to visit him in Amsterdam. After a lapse in health, and the doctors warning against it, the two go to Amsterdam with Hazel's mother (Laura Dern).

Just as we might have thought that the film was becoming a touch sentimental, the visit to the author is actually a disaster, an interesting grumpy and grouchy performance from Willem Dafoe. The film and its impact gets a little tricky when the couple decide to visit the Anne Frank House, some commentators feeling that this demeans Anne Frank and the Holocaust by making a comparison with her fate and that of the terminally ill with cancer. Anne Frank herself, probably, would be far more sympathetic. They listen to her words, her experience of confinement and impending death. The young couple take heart from her story.

Since death is inevitable for both of the characters, the audience is not surprised when one of them dies and the effect that this has on the one remaining. Gus has been an enthusiastic supporter of making a mark in the world whereas Hazel says that it is enough to love one person.

This is not the type of film that is geared to an older audience. It is clearly targeted to the Young Adult audience and their experience of life and death, limited as it is because of simply being young. Judging by the box office, the younger audiences do identify with the characters and appreciate experiencing their lives and deaths.

FRANK

Ireland, 2014, 105 minutes, Colour.

Michael Fassbender, Domhnall Gleeson, Maggie Gyllenhaal, Scoot Mc Nairy, Tess Harper, Francois Civil, Carla Azar.

Directed by Lenny Abrahamson.

A papier mache head? Actor Michael Fassbender hidden within this head? Leading a band? Composing music? Who is this character called Frank?

The writer of this film is Jon Ronson who, decades ago, was urgently requested to join in a band and play keyboard. The leader of the band, with the stage name of Frank Sidebottom, did wear a papier mache head, a kind of joke, concealing his identity but enabling him to do all kinds of things to entertain an audience. (This film is dedicated to him, Chris Sievey.).

While Frank certainly engages audience attention, the main character is Jon (reliving the screenwriters experience but with quite a number of changes in tone). The film opens with Jon talking to himself, actually trying to compose songs which he does, walking, in the bus, in his room upstairs. But he also has an office job. He is played very effectively by Domhnall Gleeson.

At a club, he encounters Frank and his head and the smiling face drawn on the papier mache. He also encounters the PR man for the band, recovering the body of the dead keyboard player from the river. Jon receives a phone call at work and, thinking he is going for just one performance, he accepts the invitation to go and play keyboard. What happens is rather different. He is invited to go with the band to a retreat where they will practice and perfect

the music that they want to record. Which takes almost a year – as evidenced by the very bearded Jon.

The band is an eclectic lot. The PR man used to play keyboard and goes along the suicide path of his predecessor. Ominous for Jon. But, by this time, Jon has become a much stronger character, standing his ground, contributing to the music, becoming friendly with Frank but criticised and alienated from the other members, a Frenchman, a female drummer and a woman who looks perpetually unhappy, ready to attack at any moment, protective of Frank, Clara, played by Maggie Gyllenhaal. Her unpredictable interactions with Jon range from severe and critical to open and sexual.

Ordinary audiences may be wondering about the music, whether it is the genuine article or whether it is a weird concoction with nowhere to go.

And we keep wondering about Frank and whether he will remove his head. At one stage Jon thinks he will and takes a peak in the shower, but Frank is protecting his head in the shower with plastic.

All throughout the film there are visuals of words on screen, messages on Twitter, a growing number of people following Jon and his descriptions of what is happening with the band. There are also references to YouTube which has been placing videos of the activities of the band sent by Jon. This leads Frank to be persuaded that they should go to the United States from Ireland and go to a festival in Texas.

They do go, and they do get on stage, with Jon having persuaded Frank to tone down his experimental style for more easily accessible music and songs. But, with division in the group, Frank disappears.

The last part of the film has John tracking down Frank, going to visit his family, hearing some of the explanations, seeing Frank himself and understanding his mental condition.

The film is, to say the least, offbeat. Michael Fassbender does a good job of using his body language to communicate his character, despite his artificial head, and also sings well. It is an interesting tour-de-force of a performance, different from the many menacing characters Fassbender has been playing. Domhnall Gleeson reminds us that he is also a rising star.

The film was directed by Lenny Abrahamson, an interesting Irish director, with offbeat comedies like *Adam and Paul*, *Garage*, and a serious exploration of young adult responsibilities in *What Richard Did*.

GABRIELLE

Canada, 2013, 104 minutes, Colour.

Gabrielle Marion- Rivard, Alexandre Landry, Melissa Desormeaux -Poulin.

Directed by Louise Archibault.

Canada's official entry for the Oscar for Best Film in a Foreign Language.

Gabrielle is a vivacious young woman. We initially see her and a choir – but there is

something different about the choir, some of the members have Down Syndrome, and others have difficulty in attentiveness. The choirmaster, a dedicated young man, has difficulties in co-ordinating their efforts.

This is a choir that belongs to a residence for mentally-impaired adults. And Gabrielle is one of these. It is intriguing to discover that the actress portraying Gabrielle, Gabrielle Marion-Rivard, herself has mental difficulties.

The film offers an opportunity for the group at the centre and in the choir to be affirmed in performance, in their characters and in interactions during the film. It is also an opportunity for Gabrielle Marion-Rivard to give a striking performance, credible, sympathetic, at times exasperating, and a chance for audiences to look and listen as well as appreciate and understand.

Gabrielle is 22, has a busy mother who is involved with a Symphony Orchestra but is cared for by her older sister, Sophie, a kind and understanding woman who nevertheless has a life of her own, especially with a partner who is working in India with a children's choir – and whom we see via their Skype communications. Gabrielle is not able to manage by herself but feels a great need for some kind of independence, a chance to have a place of her own so that she can be herself and cope.

A significant part of the film involves this quest by Gabrielle, staying with her sister, looking out the window at people getting into the bus, coming downstairs and imitating them, trying to find her way to a pet shop where Martin, with whom she has fallen in love, works part-time. But he is not there and in her attempts to get home becomes quite bewildered and lost. It is particularly dangerous for Gabrielle because she is diabetic.

The other major theme of the film is about relationships, love, and possibilities of sexuality and partnerships for those at the centre. Martin is a pleasant young man, a soloist in the choir, attracted to Gabrielle. They are caught several times together and Martin's mother is very upset and withdraws Martin from the centre. This has repercussions for the choir rehearsals because the group is training to perform publicly during a music festival in Montréal.

The film is matter-of-fact about the sexuality issues, the members on the staff of the centre being very direct in language and questions of Gabrielle and Martin. As it raises questions for Martin's mother, it also raises questions for the audience, the nature of the relationship, the possibilities for the future, issues of pregnancy and parenthood. But the film does not want to solve these problems, rather, it shows a temporary encounter and leaves the rest to the audience as the concert is in progress and both Gabrielle and Martin happily sing.

Non- Canadian audiences will not be familiar with the real-life singer, Robert Charlebois, who agrees to sing with the choir, some of his own songs (which have some eyebrow-raising lyrics), comes to their rehearsals and happily performs with them as the culmination of the film.

There is great humanity in this film, not shirking the difficulties, especially for Gabrielle having to say goodbye to her sister as she goes overseas, indicating how difficult it is for Gabrielle to live by herself, having some accidents as she attempts cooking, with the realisation that there must be some supervision, but in the most affirming and supportive way possible.

GOOD VIBRATIONS

Ireland, 2013, 104 minutes, Colour.

Richard Dormer, Jodie Whittaker, Liam Cunningham, Dylan Moran.

Directed by Lisa Barros D' Sa and Glen Leyburn.

On the whole, audiences will receive many good vibrations while watching this film. This reviewer saw it with only one other person in the cinema preview and really wished that there were more people present, sharing their vibrations. On the whole, it is a feel-good film though it is set in many difficult days in Belfast of the 1960s and 1970s and during the Troubles.

This is the story of a Belfast man, who considered himself the best DJ in Belfast in the 1960s. His name is Terri Hooley, who also acted as a consultant for the film. He is played with quite some exuberance by Richard Dormer, bringing this character with all his strengths and his many flaws to quite vivid life.

Terri worked in a Belfast club but customers were in decline. With his growing awareness of the punk music movement, he was interested in promoting local bands, holding auditions, giving the players opportunities, inviting audiences, making records, and trying to promote them, even going to the BBC where he was not particularly well received although famous music DJ, John Peel, was supportive.

There are fantasy sequences in the film, especially with Terri's childhood, imagining himself flying in his garden, the home where his communistic father, who stood for Parliament, very often and was always defeated, trying to inculcate a socialist awareness in his son. He was not particularly impressed when Terri had the brainwave of starting up a shop, a music shop, in central Belfast. The name of the shop was Good Vibrations. For many years, it was the centre of musical sales and activities and promotions.

Terri thought that music, especially the punk music of the period would attract young people and transcend the divisions of politics and hatred. To some extent, he was right.

The other important thing in his life was his meeting his wife, dancing with her, proposing, the hardships of their life together, his investing her savings in his enterprises, her supporting him despite so much exasperation. But, Terri also led a comparatively wild life, music being all rather than clear economics and accounts, running the risk of squandering his capital, always in view of his music dream.

This had some bad consequences on his marriage, his drinking, even his inability to hold his young baby with his trembling hands.

Yet, he persevered with his vision, was supportive of many musicians and groups, enjoyed promoting them, even despite threats of sectarian boycotting and disturbances in Belfast. There is a powerful supportive concert in Belfast at the end, Terri making his mark.

The film is enjoyable in its way, Richard Dormer's performance being most impressive, and, in the context of Irish troubles, an affirmation of the message: make music not war.

GRACE OF MONACO

US/France, 2014, 102 minutes, Colour.

Nicole Kidman, Tim Roth, Frank Langella, Parker Posey, Paz Vega, Derek Jacobi, Robert Lindsay, Milo Ventimiglia, Geraldine Somerville, Nicholas Farrell, Jeanne Balibar, Roger Ashton-Griffiths.

Directed by Oliver Dahan.

It is somewhat embarrassing for a reviewer to say that this film was enjoyable, embarrassing in the face of almost universal critical condemnation. But, I found it both interesting and enjoyable. Perhaps this is because of the presence of Grace Kelly in one's consciousness and in her films, memories of seeing the films at the time, remembering the occasion of her wedding. Maybe those not familiar with Grace Kelly or her films will see this as something of a fiction which they can take or leave. In fact, the film does begin with a statement that, while it is based on events, it is a fictional interpretation.

The film shows the build-up to the 1956 wedding of Grace Kelly with Prince Rainier of Monaco, with some footage of the actual ceremony itself shown later. Most of the action takes place in 1961-1962.

For Princess Grace herself, there was the dilemma of whether she should go back to Hollywood and appear in Alfred Hitchcock's *Marnie*. At the beginning of this film, Hitchcock himself comes to Monaco to discuss the role with his friend, Gracie, leaves a script with her which she studies, and rehearses a number of ways to interpret a sequence in front of her mirror. The issue becomes political, whether the people of Monaco, wary of their American princess, would approve of her going back to Hollywood, and whether European royalty would approve of the same thing. This leads the film into the political issues of the period.

At this time, President De Gaulle was waging war in Algeria and needed finances for this war effort. One of the ways for doing this, along with a number of other political reasons and financial issues, was to impose taxes on independent Monaco. The small nation itself was financially strapped and could not afford the taxes. Rainier was offering a number of French companies tax havens in his country, while so many French visited Monaco for its financial benefits in the casinos. Rainier himself, while marrying an American, was very strong on the traditions of the Grimaldi family, ruling in Monaco since the 13th century. He had somewhat stern European expectations of women and wives.

The film shows Grace with two of her children, the tensions with her husband, the issue of *Marnie* and her status in Monaco. Negotiations for the wedding, in this very Catholic principality, were entrusted to the American priest, Father Francis Tucker. He played a significant role in Monaco. He was Grace's confidante, especially urging her to acknowledge the role she had to play as wife, mother and Princess of Monaco, role-playing and acting if she must. He also urged her to study the protocols and rules and regulations as well as perfect her French and her style and poise.

The drama of the film, apart from the relationship between husband and wife, is how to deal with De Gaulle and a blockade against Monaco. In the screenplay, Grace uses her shrewdness to attract the aristocratic women of Monaco and their work for the Red Cross to hold a ball to which she invited world leaders – and De Gaulle accepted. (The ball took place in October 1962 at the time of the Cuban crisis for the United States and at the time of the opening of the Second Vatican Council.)

The political intrigue is interesting even if the solution is probably simplified and glamorised.

But, so much of the interest in the film is in Nicole Kidman's performance as Princess Grace. Some critics have complained that Nicole Kidman does not look like Princess Grace or act like her but, I was happily convinced to accept her. Tim Roth is an interesting choice for Rainier, seem mostly in preoccupation about his political situation. Frank Langella is quietly persuasive as Father Tucker. Parker Posey does severity personified as the regulator of protocols within the Palace – and caught up in an interesting subplot as to whether somebody in the Palace was undermining the family and negotiating with De Gaulle. Derek Jacobi gives a rather enthusiastically camp performance as the count who instructs the Princess in the ways of protocol.

Of course, the film looks very good, with scenes of the city itself, the Palace, the beautiful Mediterranean coastal cliffs. And, those with an eye to fashion, will be looking at all the creations for Nicole Kidman.

Audiences may have forgotten, but Cheryl Ladd appeared long since in a film entitled, Grace Kelly (1983), allegedly approved just before her death, a film that ends with the wedding. Comparisons have been also made with Diana, with Naomi Watts impersonating the Princess. I would prefer this film.

HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON 2

US, 2014, 102 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: Jay Baruchel, Gerard Butler, Cate Blanchette, America Ferrara, Djimon Hounsou, Jonah Hill, Craig Ferguson, Kristin Wiig, Christopher Mintz-Plasse.

Directed by Dean DeBlois.

How to Training your Dragon was a very entertaining animated film of 2010. It had colour, it had verve, it had interesting characters and plenty of action, Dragon flights included. It was set in the Viking island of Berk, ruled by Stoick the Vast, voiced by Gerard Butler, and focused on his young, less than bulky, less than Vast, son, Hiccup, voiced by Jay Baruchel. It is time for an entertaining sequel.

There was a lightness in humour about the first film, retained for the second, but in the context which is somewhat darker, somewhat grimmer.

Stoick is still there, wanting his son to take over as Chief, but Hiccup is reluctant, comparing himself to his father and finding himself wanting. Nevertheless, he and his faithful dragon, Toothless, so prominent in the first film, take joy flights and hang-gliding escapades, discovering a far country of rock and glacial ice. They also discover Dragon Hunters who

have to deliver to an overall ruler, Drago, voiced by Djimon Hounsou. Stoick tells Hiccup the story of Drago and his attempts at Viking dominance. Clearly, battlelines will be drawn, especially when it is discovered the Drago has a whole host of captive dragons.

But the big surprise is that Hiccup discovers his mother, Valka, voiced by Cate Blanchett. She has been missing for over 20 years, thought dead – and her return brings great joy, and happy reminiscences, for Stoick, and a whole new dimension of family for Hiccup.

Hiccup has a plan to defeat Drago but believes in peaceful negotiations rather than battles. Perhaps it is inevitable that battles ensue in a confrontation with Drago with some heroism for both Hiccup and Toothless (who has been captured, used by Drago, with Hiccup having to do some kind of psychological hypnotic therapy to return Toothless's consciousness to normal).

The film opens with the young people of Berk involved in rather Quidditch-type dragon races through the air – and finishes with them after the adventure.

Lots of interesting characters, especially Hiccup's girlfriend, Astrid, voiced by America Ferrara, and the various friends who sound like Jonah Hill, Christopher Mintz-Plasse, Kristin Wiig.

No objections to further Berk adventures and more dragon-training!

THE LAST IMPRESARIO

Australia, 2014, 85 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Gracie Otto.

It is Greta Scacchi, early in this film, who says that Michael White is the most famous person you have never heard of. This lively documentary is an attempt to make him known, now that he is almost 80, has had a stroke, and has not been involved in his impresario work of producing and financing theatre, films, the arts for many years.

And who is Michael White and is it worthwhile a film being made about his life?

His parents were refugees from central Europe, and he was born in 1935. An asthmatic, he was sent to boarding school in Switzerland, a lonely experience, although he says it gave him a broader international outlook. By the 1960s, he became interested in promoting experimental theatre in London, which continued during the 1960s, especially the swinging 60s, where he was swinging along with the most energetic of the clubbers, drinkers, drug-takers.

White took risks in promoting plays, clashing with the quite censorious Lord Chamberlain's office at the period. One of his greatest risks was the financing of Kenneth Tynan's *Oh Calcutta*, the musical review which put nudity on the stage. However, frequently during the film the camera's panning of a wall in his office shows a large panel with the posters of many, very many, plays that he put on, including some pieces by Barry Humphries (and

Barry Humphries recalls the failure of his show, *Housewife Superstar*, on Broadway in the 1970s).

In fact, this is a film with myriad talking heads, all talking very personally, all warm in their admiration of Michael White and what he achieved as well as their own relationships with him. Some of the interviewees are Naomi Watts, Kate Moss, John Cleese, Anna Wintour, Yoko Ono. This jigsaw of personal testimonies does build up quite a portrait. It includes the background of his two marriages, his relationship with Australian media personality Lyndall Hobbs, interviews with his children and their interpretations of their father. Particularly helpful are the scenes with his first wife, Jill, who obviously has a great liking for her former husband – they divorced in 1972 – and has helped him in his illness.

The Last Impresario is a very well researched, documented and edited documentary. The film draws on more documentary material, photographs, video material as well as the interviews than might have been expected. The project was initiated by actress, Gracie Otto (Barry Otto's daughter, Miranda Otto sister). She came across Michael White at the Cannes film Festival, a Festival he had attended every year since 1968. She found him at parties, meeting celebrities and decided to ask questions. She has a very blunt style in asking questions, which he comments on at one stage as being very Australian, and with her brother metallic voice, it is a wonder that he agreed to allow her to film him and make the film. but, she has persevered and put together quite an impressive portrait.

For those interested in British theatre and film, with extensions to Broadway, the film serves as a useful overview from the 1960s to the present. There is more detail than might have been anticipated. And this aspect of the historical overview is very enjoyable, entertaining.

But, having said that, one wonders about White himself. For those fond of meeting the rich and famous (though on a world level he is not so famous and, with the rather generous supporting of the arts and allowing himself to be swindled, especially in the case of the rights to *The Rocky Horror Show*, not too rich), this is a celebrity experience. But whether ordinary people would be interested in this life or even in meeting him, might be another matter.

MALEFICENT

US, 2014, 97 minutes, Colour.

Angelina Jolie, Elle Fanning, Sharlto Copley, Sam Riley, Imelda Staunton, Juno Temple, Leslie Manville, Brenton Thwaites, Janet Mc Teer.

Directed by Robert Stromberg.

This is a Disney film which gives credit to the classic 1950s animation film, *Sleeping Beauty*, as well as to the fairytale by Charles Perrault. But, this story of the wicked witch who cursed *Sleeping Beauty* does not unfold in the way that we might have anticipated.

The film could well have been made as animation, and very effective at that. The imaginative talent here has worked on quite extraordinary production design, especially the interiors of the Palace, of the huge wall of trees and thorns which separate two kingdoms, and the general backgrounds of good and happiness as well as of evil. A lot of attention has been given to costume design as well as make up. The film looks quite striking.

The name... Maleficent has overtones of evil. However, to our surprise, Maleficent is seen initially as a little girl, a fairy in the land of fairies. She is bright, vivacious, and though there are no rules in this wonderful land, she is seen as a leader by the animated creatures. One day she encounters a little boy, Stefan, who is stealing from the kingdom. However, the two become friends, talking, exploring, enjoying each other's company.

When Maleficent grows up, she is an imposing presence because she is played by Angelina Jolie at her most commanding, beautiful, with a seemingly sculpted face (and prominent cheekbones), with extraordinary large and powerful wings. Once more, she encounters Stefan, and, after a long time, the friendship is renewed.

In the meantime, there is a narrative, recounting the events in the fairy tale style. It is spoken by Janet Mc Teer. She indicates that all will not be well.

The way that it is explained is that Stefan is ambitious (or, once a thief, always a thief). The old King, so aggressive against the beautiful land of the fairies, wanting to incorporate it into his own kingdom goes to war with the fairies, but now he is dying. There are candidates for the throne – and Stefan wants to be the successor. In a way that you will have to see with a cruel and deceitful manoeuvre, he does become King at the expense of Maleficent. This means that he has made himself a mighty enemy. For the rest of the film, the enmity is dramatised, Maleficent becoming truly maleficent.

In the way familiar from the fairytale, she curses Stefan's daughter. She is to live to the age of 16 and then to go into a deep sleep, only to be awakened by a kiss of true love, Maleficent remembering that Stefan's kiss was not true love at all.

The Princess, Aurora, is entrusted to 3 small fairies who come to human life (played by Imelda Staunton, Juno Temple, Leslie Manville) and who care for her until she comes of age. As she grows up, she is played delightfully by Elle Fanning. Maleficent always keeps an eye on Aurora, getting to know her, talking with her, still seemingly so stern but her heart mellowing – and Aurora calls her her fairy godmother.

This is certainly a variation from the original story but so is the solution. Indeed, Prince Charming (Brenton Thwaites) arrives, searching for the castle and is dismayed to see the young woman whom he had encountered in the woods transformed into the deep sleep.

There is a nice surprise at the kiss of true love. But, there has to be a final confrontation between King Stefan and Maleficent, a battle of wits, suffering and pain, the defeat of evil, an act of heroism on the part of Aurora, and a happy ending that we would not quite have anticipated.

Which means that Maleficent is good to look at, imaginative, quite an entertaining film, a surprising film, a film that is tantalising to watch – with the overall presence of the imposing Angelina Jolie.

A MILLION WAYS TO DIE IN THE WEST

US, 2014, 116 minutes, Colour.

Seth Mc Farlane, Charlize Theron, Giovanni Ribisi, Sarah Silverman, Liam Neeson.
Directed by Seth Mc Farlane.

Audiences fond of westerns will remember many ways that they have seen people die in the West – but may find it difficult to reach 100 let alone 1,000,000. While there are many and varied ways here, a lot of them unexpected and funny in a brutal kind of way, in this film, we realise it is just an arresting entitled to entice people into see the film.

Older audiences and those with a sense of movie history may be thinking of Mel Brooks' ground-breaking satire, *Blazing Saddles*, from 1974. It really broke through expectations, using the familiar conventions and cliches of the Western and overturning them, especially for the black sheriff of the town and jokes on racial prejudice at the time (just over 10 years after the March on Washington and the speeches of Martin Luther King). There was a lot of crude humour which audiences might have been surprised at but laughed at, and might still do when they think of baked beans!

40 years on, the spirit of satire is still alive, but so much of it, especially in stand-up comedy on stage and on television is geared towards the crass, the crude, no limit on bodily function jokes. This is pervasive in this film where some of the jokes are funny (especially about moustaches and Stephen Foster's song) but a number of them are unpleasantly crass.

It is all the work of Seth Mc Farlane, who has had great success on television with his two series, *Family Man* and *American Dad*. He was the host of the Oscars in 2013. But, for moviegoers, he is best-known for his very satiric and funny (and crude) story of a boy and his best friend, a teddy bear, who grows up into a character who would be more than at home on *Saturday Night Live* or in comedy clubs. Mc Farlane voiced the bear, Ted.

Well, here is again, all bright and smiley, as Albert the sheep farmer, a rather laid back fellow, who would seem more at home in the 21st century than in the 19th century. There is a back story, later in the film, when our hero is picked up by Indians and does some initiation ceremonies with them, particularly with their hallucinatory drugs, he thinking that all on the plate being handed round was for him. And so, back he goes into his fantasy past, even to his birth, even to a visit from a surprisingly rough-mouthed Abraham Lincoln to the school, the influence of his father who continually criticises him gruffly...

But all this stemmed from his trying to defend a young woman in a bar brawl. She is played by Charlize Theron who warms to him and his good manners and gallantry, even at the county fair. Here she shows her ability with the gun, intimidating the villain in the town, Foy the pharmacist, (Neal Patrick Harris allowing himself to be the butt, literally, of an extended bodily function joke stolen from the film *Bridesmaids*). He has stolen Albert's wife (Amanda Seyfried) who is a vain young thing that he is well rid of.

The pharmacist is not the only villain of the film. We have already seen a vicious gunslinger and his gang in action. And Charlize Theron has been his wife since she was nine. He is played by Liam Neeson, who must also be a good sport to be the literal butt of a flower joke.

This description of the plot action gives, hopefully, an indication of the kind of humour, the kind of treatment, the more 21st century open satire. For those who have seen *Blazing Saddles*, and enjoyed its anarchic Mel Brooks' jokes, *Million Ways* will probably come in as a second-best. Not probably! (Although the Django-getting-revenge ending is something of a

classic.)

OMAR

Palestine, 2013, 96 minutes.

Adam Bakri, Leem Lubani, Samer Bisharat.

Directed by Hani Abu- Assad.

Some years ago, Nazareth-born Arab director, Hany Abu Assaad, made a very powerful film about Palestine called Paradise Now. He took the audience into a Palestinian village and introduced them to various families, especially to young men who have committed themselves to be suicide-bombers. It showed the making of videos explaining their motivation for their sacrifice, their getting through into Israel, and the decision of one not to carry on with the mission while the other did. It was a cinematic introduction to the world of suicide-bombers.

In this film, Omar, a Palestinian, is seen immediately climbing over the wall which divides Israel from Palestine. He is a young baker, who is wanting to visit a young girl, still at school, to whom he is attracted. He also wants to meet her brother, Tarek, a friend from childhood, who is involved in plans to target Israelis. A third man, Amjad, has also been a friend from childhood.

The three plan to ambush an Israeli and kill him. When they do confront their victim, decisions have to be made as to who will do the actual shooting, a personal dilemma. Soon, Omar is pursued, especially in his wall-climbing, and chased through the town. When he is caught, he is tortured, is interrogated, and experiences something of a brainwashing though he thinks he is resistant to it. His interrogator uses methods familiar as good-cop, bad-cop, threatening Omar and then engaging with him rather personally. Omar experiences prison which also has its influence on his outlook.

On his release, the interrogators have an expectation that he will supply information to them. He does not want to, but feels the pressure. This is complicated when he finds that his girlfriend suspects that he is an informer and begins a liaison with his friend Amjad.

The interrogator keeps in touch with Omar who is also approached by local Palestinian authorities who know quite a deal about him and want information from him.

This is sometimes powerful story of contemporary young man in a most difficult situation, with his traditions and loyalties, with the experience of Israeli occupation and dangerous environments, and the possibilities for his own life and future, prospects which are continually under threat.

ONCE MY MOTHER

Australia, 2013, 96 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Sophia Turkewicz.

Once My Mother is a very moving documentary, a story of a daughter discovering the truth

about her mother, a mother whom she had resented for a long part of her life.

Sophia Turkewicz made a name for herself as a film director in the 1970s and 1980s, especially with the perceptive film about Polish migrants to Australia, *Silver City*, which drew on her own experience and that of her mother. With this documentary, she makes a journey back into her past, back into the life of Helen, her mother, revealing quite an extraordinary story of a young Polish woman at the time of World War II.

The film opens with Sophia's mother unable to care for herself and residing in a home for the elderly, with touches of dementia coming on. Sophia engages in conversation with her mother and takes her back into the past. What follows reveals, especially in her early years, hardships in life: work on a farm with relatives in Poland, leaving the farm at an early age and moving to the precarious existence in the city, being taken and transferred to a gulag, released after the war, going to the United Kingdom where she had choices as to where she might go. She chose to go to what is now Zambia, living in a tent camp for refugees, finally deciding to move to Australia, to Adelaide, where she had to work hard for a living, place her daughter to board in an orphanage (one of the main causes of the daughter-mother resentment), finally marrying and settling and living a long life.

It was in Lusaka that she met an Italian man, became pregnant, gave birth to Sophia, but the man was repatriated to Italy.

In 1977, Sophia began a film story about her mother, and *Once My Mother* uses footage of that period, a younger, vigorous Helen, talking to camera, gradually revealing aspects of her story, her experiences in the camp in Africa, the hard work in Adelaide and her regrets about her daughter boarding, her settling down.

But it was literally following in her mother's footsteps that brought home to Sophia the difficult life that her mother had experienced. Sophia visits the farm in Poland, meet friends and hears about conditions at the time. An African visit. And, finally going to Italy, meeting her father who did not know about her, meeting his longtime wife and their children, her siblings, and experience of joy.

While the film is a memoir, a tribute to the difficult life of her mother, it is also a healing of memories for Sophia herself. The audience is invited in to share this life, learn something of a life that is so different from theirs, experience the regrets and resentments, experience the healing and reconciliation.

THE ROVER

Australia, 2014, 104 minutes, Colour.

Guy Pearce, Robert Pattinson, David Field, Scoot Mc Nairy, Gillian Jones.

Directed by David Michod.

In more recent years, there have been many futuristic films set to some kind of apocalyptic crisis, films like *Oblivion* and *Edge of Tomorrow*, again with Tom Cruise and aliens attacks and combat. There have been other futuristic films with bleak-looking countryside which has been devastated, like *Book of Eli* and *The Road*. Guy Pearce appeared as a character in the latter. He now wanders the Australian countryside in *The Rover*.

The catastrophe which is background to *The Rover* is not quite the apocalyptic disaster of previous films. And it is not explained except to say that it had happened 10 years earlier. We don't know what has happened in cities because all the action is in the South Australian countryside and the Flinders Ranges, houses in the small towns, stores with limited good, goods, and petrol and other stocks barricaded behind guarded small openings. There is not a great population, most people just sitting around, wary of strangers, ready with guns.

The Rover is the second film of celebrated director, David Michod, hailed for his initial film, *Animal Kingdom*. He doesn't choose easy subjects, or comforting subjects -definitely not here.

We first see Eric (Pearce), driving out to this desolate land. *The Rover* relies very strongly on Guy Pearce's screen presence, intense and rugged, furrowed face, straggling beard, often staring into the middle distance while the camera stays on him for quite a long time, giving the audience the opportunity to try to read his mind and feelings. While his character remains fairly mysterious, the amount of time we concentrate on him means that we identify with him.

While Eric is trying to buy something in the store, a group of three men whom we have seen bickering with each other in a truck, argue and crash outside the store. They quickly steal Eric's car and drive off. Eric takes their truck and goes in pursuit, to little avail.

Eric tries more peaceful confrontation but is bashed and left by the roadside where he is discovered by a strange character, Rey (Robert Pattinson far from his *Twilight* vampire existence), the brother of one of the men in the truck who have left him wounded and for dead.

The two go on a quest to find the men and the car. On the way they meet just a few people, a friendly doctor who takes care of Rey's wounds, a strange settlement where a young boy teenage boys seems to be available for passers-by, pimped by his stern grandmother, sitting knitting in a rocking chair. Some of the people they pass are trigger-happy, some not, and many of them do not survive. There is a store selling petrol, a precious commodity barricaded under the counter with a demand for American cash rather than Australian notes.

As the two travel along, there is some kind of communication, but it soon emerges that Rey (an American with an accent that is sometimes hard to decipher) is mentally handicapped, shrewd but slow, with Eric wary of him, but supporting him.

Ultimately, the pair catch up with the trio and it does not spoil the film to say that there is gunplay.

In so many ways, this is a very pessimistic film, grim about human nature, picturing a survival, not so much of the fittest, since so many are not fit at all. But, there are some emotional moments at the end of the film, with Eric and his response to Rey and the revelation of why he came out into the desert in the first place.

This is not a crowd-pleaser. Rather, it is a film for those who admire cinema, engrossing plots, interesting characters – and touches of the unexpected.

SEDUCED AND ABANDONED

US, 2013, 95 minutes, Colour.

Alec Baldwin, James Toback, Bernardo Bertolucci, Roman Polanski, Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Diane Kruger, Berenice Bejo, Ryan Gosling, James Caan, Ari Lerner, Mark Damon.

Directed by James Toback.

Seduced and Abandoned is a film that will appeal only to film buffs – and there are many. Audiences will need to know a lot of the people who appear, not just the popular actors but also something of the directors and producers. It may be possible to learn from this film, but it is filled with so much detail and presuppositions that the audience will know what the protagonists are talking about, the careers of many presented and the clips from their films.

To that extent, the film is something of an indulgence for cinema buffs.

The film is something of a documentary, something of a fiction, something of a mockumentary. The basic premise has Alec Baldwin wanting to get back into his film career after many seasons of television's *30 Rock*. He joins up with director, James Toback, to watch the screening in New York of Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris*. The pair get the brainwave of redoing this theme in a contemporary 21st-century setting, possibly the Middle East, possibly Iraq, a *Last Tango in Tikrit*.

Toback is the more optimistic as they set off the Cannes Film Festival in 2012 to seek financial backers for the project. Baldwin is far more sanguine, setting the bar fairly low.

The film was interesting and entertaining, especially when the pair go to visit producers like the prolific Mark Damon and Avi Lerner. They suggest some estimates as to how much money could be invested. Baldwin is to be the star but they have already talked with Neve Campbell and promised her a role in the film. But, she is not considered big and bankable – and sometimes neither is Baldwin himself. So, there are all kinds of speculations about the film, the plot, changing plot details, introducing a big star and putting Neve Campbell in the more supporting role, suggestions about where it should be filmed. And the producers are not really all that keen on investing a great deal of money.

Where the film is really interesting for film buffs is in the interviewing of four prominent directors, seeing clips from their films, listening to the directors explaining their career, the opportunities, what happened during their careers, their hopes and ambitions. Bernardo Bertolucci is the veteran, in a wheelchair with back trouble which prevented him from filming for 10 years, but reminiscing about his friendship with Pasolini, working as his assistant, and, especially, working with Marlon Brando in *Last Tango* (with several clips, some rather jolting seen in isolation). Roman Polanski is interesting in his talk about Poland, his training, his early films, the making of *Rosemary's baby*, of *Chinatown*. Francis Ford Coppola talks, of course, about *The Godfather* and about *Apocalypse Now*. He seems to have lost some edge and infusing is about making films.

Martin Scorsese is always interesting, his rapid-fire speech getting through a lot of material in a short time, mentioning once again his time and study of the priesthood and the religious

dimensions of his career in film.

There are also some stars who were in Cannes at the time, Berenice Bejo from *The Artist* who hosted the awards at the Festival, with Ryan Gosling more articulate than might be expected, James Caan and his reminiscing about his career and opportunities, Diane Kruger offered a role in the new film but graciously putting it on hold until she examines the script.

And all of this to the background of the city of Cannes, the beauty, the sea, the market, the razzle-dazzle, the red carpet.

For those not in the know about the movies, probably best left. For those in the know about the movies, an entertaining indulgence.

THE TRIP TO ITALY

UK, 2014, 105 minutes, Colour.

Rob Brydon, Steve Coogan.

Directed by Michael Winterbottom.

Who would not want to go on a trip to Italy? And, one might suppose, that after seeing this film quite a number of members of the audience will definitely have Italy very high on their places to visit.

This is a particular trip, similar to the one that Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon took some years ago around the northern areas of England, travelling together, stopovers at hotels, visiting historic sites, but mainly going to restaurants where they enjoyed the culinary delights of the area and Brydon was, allegedly, writing up articles for a newspaper.

Well, the newspaper has commissioned him again and he invites Steve Coogan, who is a touch reluctant, to join him on a trip around Italy. People might think that scenic England is beautiful but most of us would have to admit just how beautiful Italy and its different regions are. In this film, the duo visit Piemonte, the Ligurian coast, Tuscany, Rome and its environs, Naples and Pompeii and the Amalfi Coast. It is picture postcard material – but photographed vividly alive and beautiful.

If you are a gourmet, you may well enjoy the meals – although the film does not delay over them, perhaps the duo are too absorbed by the sites. In the first film, Steve Coogan had a loose kind of tongue and a roving eye. This time, he is more concerned about his teenage son back at home in London and, eventually, inviting him to join the trip. It is Brydon who has the roving eye now, taking up with an attractive woman on a boat, later wondering whether he should renew the acquaintance and asking the advice of a close friend, somewhat concerned as he is about his behaviour and his family.

Perhaps it needs to be pointed out that this is all fiction – probably an opportunity for Coogan to portray a more controlled man than before and for Brydon to fictitiously break out.

Audiences of the first film may remember the imitations of Michael Caine, especially from his being in *Batman*. They are back again plus many, many more, most of them very amusing, the two of them being excellent mimics and impersonators. There are also some

comparisons about their careers, Brydon getting an opportunity to go to LA for a film directed by Michael Mann, Coogan talking about his career and its extent. Some of this is fictitious, some of it true.

This is an easy kind of film to watch, entertaining while it is up there on the screen, wondering at the beauty of Italy, interest in the presentation of the meals (it is noticeable that all the chefs presented are male!), entertainment in listening to the two stars.

Nobody would mind if there were another film which opened up another country, its scenery and its culinary interests.

UNDER THE SKIN

UK, 2013, 107 minutes, Colour.

Scarlett Johansson.

Directed by Jonathan Glazer.

This is a film which is very interesting to think about and talk about after seeing it, perhaps more so than while watching it. It is an artfully made film, certainly designed for an outhouse audience rather than a popular audience who might be quickly bewildered by its style and themes.

The skin is that of Scarlett Johansson, once the child actor in films like *The Horse Whisperer*, moving to significant adult roles in *Lost in Translation*, more lately having a mixed career in *The I am Man* and *The Avengers* films.

In 2013, she was a significant presence in *Her*, a character not seen on screen but only heard, the voice for a computerised robot, designed as a companion for a man who invested in this kind of technology. This time she is, initially, a strange woman who seems to assume the identity of another woman and then is seen driving a van through the streets of Glasgow. She keeps asking people the way, ordinary men in the street, some of whom respond, getting to get into the van, with lustful intentions which are then seen to be extraordinarily frustrated, becoming surreal as they work in as they walk into a viscous pool and are destroyed. No explanations given. The audience is left to wonder about the relationships between men and women, about seduction, about willingness to be seduced, about lost and sexuality, about the destructive woman.

While this seems eerie and sometimes unreal, there are many scenes of life in Glasgow, contemporary, shops and supermarkets, and discussion about the 2014 referendum for Scottish independence.

There is an interlude at a beach, where Scarlett Johansson sees a couple in difficulties in the water, and attempted rescue and failure, and the discussion with a man from the Czech Republic – man who seems ordinary and sincere, but doomed in his encounter. Another interlude involves her asking directions from a man with a disfigured head and face, reminiscent of the elephant man. She interrogates him about his life, loneliness, sexual desires, sympathetically seducing him, but with different results.

We are still wondering who this woman is. There is also a mysterious rider on a motorbike who seems to be controlling her. the drama moves on a little when she goes on a bus into the

Scottish countryside, which are sympathetic man who takes her in, takes her shopping, has a more restrained sexual encounter with her. In the woods, she encounters a range who seem sympathetic at first but their encounter has dire consequences.

When it is revealed what is under the skin, it is an alien woman, visually renders reminiscent of mystique in the X-men series.

As the film is based on a novel which, according to readers, has the elements of the film, it takes many of them in a different direction, leaving much of the novel's social commentary about life and work in Scotland. Under the Skin focuses just on the woman, her predatory and destructive behaviour, and leaves audiences to ponder all of this, male and female stereotypes and transcending them, and what is, ultimately, alien behaviour.

X-MEN: DAYS OF FUTURE PAST

US, 2014, 131 minutes, Colour.

James Mc Avoy, Michael Fassbender, Hugh Jackman, Patrick Stewart, Ian Mc Kellen, Jennifer Lawrence, Nicholas Hoult, Peter Dinklage, Ellen Page, Omar Sy, Shawn Ashmore. Evan Peters, Halle Berry, Lucas Till, Michael Lerner, Bingning Fan, Anna Paquin, Famke Jansen, James Marsden, Brian Cox, Kelsey Grammar.

Directed by Bryan Singer.

With a time-tangle title like this, it is not a surprise to find that time travel is a central part of the plot. This also offers the opportunity to see Charles Xavier the younger (James Mc Avoy) and older (Patrick Stewart) as well is Magneto the younger (Michael Fassbender) and older (Ian Mc Kellen) – life in a futuristic 21st century and then back in 1974.

Things are not going well in our future world. Machines have been invented to combat the Mutants. And they are winning. Charles Xavier and Erik Lehnsherr/Magneto join forces and deliberate on who is the best person to send back into the past. With the popularity of so many sequels and the development of the character and adventures of Wolverine, it is not a particularly difficult choice. And off Hugh Jackman goes in the time machine to try to resolve the problems of the early 1970s.

The problem concerns Mystique (Jennifer Lawrence), who has something of the truth of the new machines to challenge the mutants and is on a mission to find the Professor (Peter Dinklage) who had the ear of American military officials but has lost favour with his theories and expenses.

The first mission is to release Magneto from prison, the highest security guarded prison, with a character called Quicksilver who does the judge job with expertise – but, Magneto unleashed, is a dangerous presence in the world, using his extraordinary powers to contract front government officials even on the lawn of the White House. Also has extraordinary shape-shifting powers, becoming ordinary people in the crowd taking on the presence of Richard Nixon or of Mystique.

Needless to say, this film offers quite a number of opportunities for extraordinary special effects. As with all the X- Men films, great attention is given to these effects.

In case audiences with long memories, back to 1970, are wondering about President Nixon, from this film it seems that President Nixon had much more to worry about than Watergate.

While Wolverine is doing his best back in the 1970s, matters are getting worse in the future, so in the latter part of the film, a great deal of attention and effects are given to the Mutants, with the introductions some new ones, to the battle with the enemies.

While the film resolves its problems, another sequel is on the way – the large box-office and the success of this particular chapter has ensured.

YVES SAINT LAURENT

France, 2013, 105 minutes, Colour.

Pierre Niney, Guillaume Gallienne, Charlotte Le Bon, Laura Smet.

Directed by Jalil Lespert.

Yves Saint Laurent was one of the best-known names in the world of fashion in the latter part of the 20th century, working in the industry from 1957, dying in 2008.

He is gaining quite some cinema interest because there was a documentary film made about him, *L'Amour Fou*, something of a tribute from his partner, Peter Berge, but highlighting the main features of his life and career. Along with the present film under review, there is another film of the same name with Gaspar Ulliel in the title role.

This biopic is interesting when it gives some background to Saint Laurent's background, his growing up in Algeria, his roots both in Algeria and in France, his work in Paris, especially becoming assistant to the then celebrated Christian Dior. Though young, he was inventive in his imagination, his visualising of shapes and designs, his inspiration in the geometry of designing dresses, his use of colour, and his talent for creativity.

At first, he seems a rather shy young man, nevertheless eager to succeed in his chosen career. The film reveals his crisis about being drafted for serving in the French military in the early 1960s in the Algerian war. At first reluctant, he was interviewed by the press and criticised. He decided to register but was soon found to have tendencies towards depression and was temporarily placed in an institution. He was fired by the boss of the company – but, with the help of an astute lawyer, and a pay out, he was able to found his own house of design. And he continued with this over the decades.

For those who are interested in and enjoy fashion, a great deal of attention is given in the film to the various shows, especially the bright shapes in the mid-1960s, the darker images of the early 1970s, the influence of Russia in the mid-1970s.

The film shows his meeting with Peter Berge, their long-term relationship, and Peter Berge's custody of the Saint Laurent's heritage, his fashion work as well as their large collection of artwork.

But, for a lot of the film, the audience becomes something of a voyeur audience, with a touch of the Peeping Tom, in being drawn into the designer's private life, his sexual activities, his seeming recklessness, his infatuations and betrayals, his moods and eccentricities. He was not always a very nice person. We are offered a lot of information, visualised, that we probably did not need to know.

Which means that for those interested in the designer's career, it is better to recommend the documentary rather than this more prurient look into his life.

REVIEWS JULY- AUGUST 2014

ALL THIS MAYHEM
AND SO IT GOES
BEATRIZ'S WAR
BELLE ET SEBASTIEN
BETHLEHEM
DAWN OF THE PLANET OF THE APES
DELIVER US FROM EVIL
ERNEST AND CELESTINE
FRENCH MINISTER, The/ QUAI D'ORSAY
GALORE
GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY
HERCULES
JERSEY BOYS
KEEPER OF LOST CAUSES, The
LUCY
LUNCHBOX, The
MOST WANTED MAN, A
MRS BROWN'S BOYS D' MOVIE
REACHING FOR THE MOON/ FLORES RARAS
RISING FROM ASHES
SELFISH GIANT, The
SEX TAPE
STILL LIFE
TIM'S VERMEER
TRANSFORMERS AGE OF EXTINCTION
VOLCANO
WORDS AND PICTURES

ALL THIS MAYHEM

Australia, 2013, 95 minutes, Colour.
Tas Pappas, Ben Pappas.
Directed by Eddie Martin.

Certainly a lot of mayhem, and by the end of the film audiences may thinking mayhem is too slight a word.

There will be two audiences for this documentary about that Pappas brothers, those who know absolutely nothing about them, their story or even skateboarding, and those who are skateboarding fans, have followed the sport for many years, know the champions and their skills. For the latter audience, it will be an opportunity for seeing the images of the past, thinking through the mayhem

in the Pappas brothers' lives, and see something of despair and hope. For the former audience, they have the advantage of discovering as the narrative unfold, the variety of complications, the sport, the mayhem and its consequences.

This is also a Melbourne-based film, with the skateboarding centres in Prahan and Northcote, the suburbs nearby as well as St Albans in the west. The two brothers were born in the 1970s, were regulars at skateboarding in the late 1980s, becoming more and more noticed with their skills, not over-outstanding at the beginning, but becoming more and more able and effective. Fortunately, for this film, there were a number of skateboard fans taking videos of the action, in Melbourne, as well as in various places in the United States where, first of all, Tas Pappas moved, soon followed by his brother, Ben.

Once the brothers are in the United States, they pal up with many of the skateboard experts of the time – a kind of communal living, a kind of reckless indulgence in everything you might think of, especially the drugs. By the mid 90s, there is strong competitiveness in the United States, with the two brothers emerging as world champions.

As the title indicates, all is not plain sailing. In fact there are some literal drownings.

The key to this documentary is a long interview with Tas Pappas in 2013, a detailed straight-to-camera, very frank, re-living of his life, the story of his parents and their breakup, going to the United States, his father following and getting into financial troubles, his brother, Ben, succeeding in the United States – and then the disasters which, for those not in the know, had better not be outlined here as following through Tas's narrative, there are many, many surprises.

For the fans, there is plenty of skateboard footage from the late 80s, through the 90s and into the succeeding decade, views of the American champions, the many competitions over those years, and the screaming and yelling fans. The inclusion of the many talking heads from the United States as well as from Melbourne add to the interest, especially with their hindsight opinions. For those not in the know, while they can admire various manoeuvres, there seems a fair amount of repetitiveness in the skateboarding.

Tas Pappas explains that his family were real "Bogans" and he gives quite an interesting description, which means of this documentary is also a look at the Australian character, the competitiveness, the attitude which one of the American says is: Australians don't give a shit! But, when all is said and done or, at least, a lot is said and done, that estimate of the Australian character is not quite accurate. Truth and honesty may come a bit late in life, but this film shows that it may not come, but that it could well come.

AND SO IT GOES

US, 2014, 94 minutes, Colour.

Michael Douglas, Diane Keaton, Rob Reiner.

Directed by Rob Reiner.

Michael Douglas turned 70 this year. Diane Keaton turned 68 this year. Director Rob writer turns 67 this year. And the song, The Shadow of Your Smile, which is the finale some of this film won the Oscar for Best Song 49 years ago.

Not that this necessarily indicates an "old" mentality in this film, but it is definitely one for

grandparents and those with grandparently feelings. It is a comfortable romantic comedy designed, especially, for those who are not as young or poor as they used to be.

Michael Douglas seems to be enjoying himself as a crotchety widower, a realtor, who is trying to sell his family mansion for over \$8 million. He hams it up more than a little, especially in trying to persuade different ethnic buyers. Back at the office, he is controlled by the co-founder of the company, played with sardonic deadpan by Frances Sternhagen. In the meantime, he lives in a smaller apartment in a block of units which he owns, which means then that there are some neighbours whom he finds a little bit difficult to deal with, especially the children.

Diane Keaton is a widow, happy memories of her dead husband, singing in various lounges and bistro's to make a living. She is one of Michael Douglas's tenants. Quite an amount of battle of the sexes in the interactions between the two, especially when he launches into a critique of her act, accusing her of doing too much crying, though praising her for her voice and general abilities. He offers to be her agent – and finally does persuade a restaurant owner, played by Frankie Valli (the Frankie Valli of the Jersey Boys!) to hire her.

This is very much an so it goes screenplay. But then...

Michael Douglas's son, a former drug addict whom he has not seen for ten years, suddenly turns up on his lawn with a little girl whom he announces as his granddaughter. He also announces that he is to go to prison for six months and he would like his father to look after the little girl, Sarah. She is definitely not what grandfather was thinking of for his retirement after selling his house (which he does to a celebrity without realising it). Diane Keaton, who had no children, immediately takes a liking to the little girl and looks after her, sometimes to grandfather's great relief. And, of course, the little girl takes to calling Diane, grandma.

There is very little unexpected in what happens, but that is the point, We look forward to grandfather warming to the little girl, warming to his next door neighbour, and the audience waiting to see how a very happy family will emerge, including the neighbours, in the final party. On the way, grandfather arrives home to find the woman next door giving birth, not something he was anticipating to experience in his old age.

Rob Reiner has made some likeable films from When Harry Met Suddenly to The Bucket List. For the (older) target audience, it will also be very likeable.

BEATRIZ WAR/ A GUERRA DA BEATRIZ

Timor- Leste, 2013, 103 minutes, Colour.

Trim Tolentino

Directed by Luigi Acquisto, Bety Reis.

The first reason for congratulations is that this is the first feature film coming from East Timor, Timor Leste. It is a local production, directed by a local, Bety Reis, in collaboration with Australian director, Luigi Acquisto.

While older Australians still remember a lot of the television footage coming from the Indonesian invasion of East Timor in 1975, the controversy over the deaths of Australian journalists, the occupation by Indonesia of the former Portuguese colony, younger audiences will not be so familiar. Beatriz's War offers an excellent opportunity for learning about the events and appreciating the

experiences of the people of Australia's very near neighbour.

The action of the film takes place over a crucial 25 years, from the invasion to the vote for independence, 1999, and its immediate aftermath.

At the opening of the film, in 1975, Beatriz is a young girl, brought by her mother, because of the invasion of the danger, to a man who used to be a rival family leader, and asks for the betrothal of her daughter with his young son, Tomas. Beatriz is a strong-minded girl. Tomas is rather a gentle boy, easily bullied. But there is an attraction between the two. The parents ratify the union – but the local priest, Father Nicolau, cannot bless the union until they come to a marriageable age. Ultimately, they do, and Beatriz becomes pregnant.

The film is shot locally, capitalising on a range of locations, in the mountains, on the flatlands, by the sea. Audiences get a feel for this neighbouring country.

The occupation is more difficult for the women, who stay at home, while the men were able to go into the hills to join resistance movements. But that is not the fate of all the men, the occupying military, in a very grim sequence, round up the men in the village, get them to sing the anthem of the resistance and then mow them down. Tomas is not amongst those killed in this massacre. He has gone into the mountains.

The years pass, Beatriz grows older, works with Thomas's sister – and grieves when their father comes to offer himself in exchange for his daughter. No news of Tomas.

In some ways, the women in the village get used to the presence of the soldiers, especially the commander who invaded initially and has stayed, a man of deep brutality, who decides to exploit the women and has force-married Thomas's sister, Beatriz urging her to do this. The women make a decision that they will populate their village with children from the occupying forces, a decision which has consequences for the children, seen as mixed race, especially when fathers, like the commander, demand that they return to Indonesia after independence.

Again the years pass and, unexpectedly, Tomas returns. Film buffs will recognise some clues from *The Return of Martin Guerre* with Gerard Depardieu and its American version with Jodie Foster and Richard Gere, *Sommersby*. The question is, is this really Tomas, or someone posing as Tomas. This gives some force to the final part of the film, Beatriz and her dealing with the return of her husband, the villagers relying on traditions to gauge the truth of the return or not, Thomas's sister presiding over the issues.

Audiences might remember that in the mid-90s, Jose Ramos Horta, along with Bishop Carlos Belo SDB, received the Nobel Peace Prize for their contribution to forming a just peace to the conflict. There is a Catholic priest in this film, Father Nicolau, sometimes in cassock, sometimes in local clothes, very supportive of the people, from his work with the young Beatriz and Tomas, to his stand against the invaders, his protest against the massacre by publicly reading out his list of the dead and his being deported to Portugal.

With the national background, the occupation, the massacres, the hardships of daily living, the resistance in the mountains, the focus of the film is Beatriz, played by Trim Tolentino, a strong woman who has had to live through, as have the people, a grim 25 year long experience, but also the extraordinary experience of voting for independence and achieving it.

(Robert Connolly's 2008 film *Balibo*, dealing with the invasion, the role of Australian journalists, the

action of Jose Ramos Horta and the people is worth seeing in connection with Beatriz's War.)

BELLE ET SEBASTIEN

France, 2013, 104 minutes, Colour.

Felix Bossuet, Tcheky Karyo, Margaux Chatelier.

Directed by Nicolas Vanier.

What a pleasant surprise.

In a film which adults and children could enjoy, the audience is taken into the French Alps, on the border with Switzerland. And, not only are we taken there, we feel we are really in the midst of some rather breathtaking scenery, mountains, villages, the different seasons, the variety of animals found in the Alps. The director, Nicolas Vanier, has made something of a career of directing and photographing nature documentaries.

Even at the opening, with Cesar (Tcheky Karyo) and his grandson, Sebastien (Felix Bossuet) walking along the craggy edges of sheer cliffs, hearing shots where animals are killed and finding a small kid on the lower ledge needing rescue, Cesar lowering Sebastien down to retrieve the animal, quite a dizzying and difficult feat, we are immersed in the way of life of the people of the Alps.

Sebastien is only six, a good boy, pleasant but not cute in the American movie style. Cesar is something of an old grouch, a drinker, but devoted to his grandson. When it appears that the sheep are being taken by a huge dog, maltreated by its previous owners and now running loose and wild, the men of the village set out to shoot it. However, Sebastien has encountered the wild dog, pacified it, talk to it and has become a friend. The mountaineers have called it The Beast. After a short time with Sebastien, The Beast becomes Belle and human and dog – quite a huge white dog in fact – become firm friends, Sebastien even standing in front of Cesar's rifle to protect Belle.

As a story about humans and dog, it will be a delight to those who have a passion for canine friends – and might also almost be a means of converting those would never see themselves as dog-lovers!

But that is not all. We are informed that it is 1943, and that means occupied France. It is gradually revealed that there is a squad of German soldiers in the village, making demands for supplies, especially bread, from the locals and, in secret, slaughtering some of the sheep for food. The other predators are wolves roaming the mountains. Cesar's niece, Angelina (Margaux Cartelier) is the baker and the leader of the German squad is rather sweet on her.

As we might have been led to believe because of the occupation and the proximity of the Swiss border, the theme of leading Jewish refugees over the mountains becomes an important subplot, involving Angelina, the local doctor who serves as a guide, and even Sebastien and Belle. As one group is snowed in on Christmas Day, Belle saves the day by leading the group on a secure path.

The film is often strikingly beautiful to look at, landscapes to wonder at and admire. The characters are friendly but rugged, mountain people. And Belle, despite her fearsome first appearance, is a beautiful big dog and she and Sebastien are great friends.

BETHLEHEM

Israel, 2013, 99 minutes, Colour.
Tsahi Halevi, Shadi Mar'i, Hitham Omari.
Directed by Yuval Adler.

There is no mention of Bethlehem as the birthplace of Jesus in this film. Rather, this is an Israeli film, dramatizing another aspect of the conflict between Israel and Gaza.

A previous film of 2014, Omar, raised the issue of Palestinians moving from one side of the wall to the other and the possibilities for Israeli security officers to choose young Palestinians as targets for information and collaboration. This is also the theme of Bethlehem.

The protagonist, Sanfur, is seen with a group of young Palestinians, he wearing a bullet proof vest and urging one of his friends to shoot him to show that he did not lack courage and had something of a belief that he was invincible. But, we learn that he has a different story, that from the age of 15, he has been cultivated by an Israeli security officer, Razi, who has now become something of a substitute father-figure. Not that Sanfur does not have a father. In fact, his father has been in prison for subversive activity against Israel and his older brother, Ibrahim, is one of the leaders of Palestinian resistance. The screenplay also raises questions about the relationship of these activists with Hamas as well as with the Palestinian Authority and its leaders.

Razi is a sympathetic character, has a wife and child, and seems particularly attached to Sanfur, meeting him, ensuring that he is out of Palestine during an attack, visiting an aunt in Hebron. The attack is particularly significant as it targets his brother.

As the film progresses, Sanfur is placed in very difficult circumstances, especially for a 17-year-old in this kind of conflict. Part of the difficulty is the influence of Badawi, a Bedouin Palestinian who is not immediately accepted by the others and is antagonistic towards the Palestinian Authority which has not paid him and his fellow-activists.

The dilemma for Sanfur is whether he should stay in Palestine, always running the risk of contact from Israel, or whether he should contact Razi, make a plea to escape into Israel and disappear. Badawi has some ulterior motives because the activists want to retaliate for the death of Ibrahim by a significant counter attack. Such a counter-attack would be for Sanfur to assassinate Razi.

The film plays out this dilemma in a reminder, reinforced by the recent war between Israel and Gaza, that moves towards peace seem impossible at times. It is human stories like this which bring aspects of the conflict to dramatic and emotional attention.

ERNEST AND CELESTINE

France, 2012, 80 minutes, Colour.
Voices of, English version: Forrest Whitaker, Mc Kenzie Foy, Lauren Bacall, Paul Giamatti. Voices of, French version: Lambert Wilson, Pauline Brunner, Anne-Marie Loop.
Directed by Stephane Aubier, Vincent Patar, Benjamin Renner.

Ernest is a bear, Celestine is a mouse. They are two central characters in a delightful French animation film, based on characters in a series of books for children. The style of animation is especially French, mild water colour, muted tones, the audience supplying the full characterisation rather than the very full and explicit characterisations in most American animation films.

The film opens in an orphanage presided over by a severe character, voiced in the American version by Lauren Bacall. We are shown two worlds, the above-ground world of the bears and the below ground world of the rodents. Celestine disturbs a family of bears when she appears in the bedroom of a little boy who has lost a tooth. The mouse scares the bears but is rescued by Ernest whom we have seen in his house, preparing his musical instruments and going to busk on the streets of the town. The plot concerns the happy life of Ernest and Celestine at home as well as the police searching for them for disturbing the peace.

The last part of the film has two court cases, one above ground where Celestine is being tried by the bears and below ground where Ernest is being tried by the mice. There is some humorous repartee in the court but then a fire breaks out disturbing both cases with both Ernest and Celestine coming to the rescue of the judges.

There are two versions of the film, one in the original French with Lambert Wilson as Ernest. The American version has a very strong cast led by Forrest Whitaker as Ernest and with such performers as Lauren Bacall and Paul Giamatti in supporting roles.

What else could happen except for happy ever after and the prospect of other Ernest and Celestine films.

DELIVER US FROM EVIL

US, 2014, 118 minutes, Colour.

Eric Bana, Edgar Ramirez, Olivia Munn, Sean Harris, Joel Mc Hale.

Directed by Scott Ericsson.

It is over forty years since the *The Exorcist* made such an impact on worldwide audiences as well as on critics. Almost immediately there were many imitations, some of them spoofs from Italy, then a number of serious sequels and variations on the theme. While there have been some lulls in release of films of diabolical possession and exorcisms, there has been an increase since 2005, and there is no sign that it is abating.

A significant question is: why do audiences worldwide continue to have a fascination in the phenomenon of diabolical possession and the rituals of exorcism?

It can be noted that one of the best of these films in recent years, based on fact in the United States as well as in the course offered in Rome for those interested in exorcism, was *The Rite* (2011), with Anthony Hopkins as a Jesuit priest.

Perhaps it is the “Francis-effect” with the impact of Pope Francis and his Jesuit background, but here is another film with a priest confidently announcing that he is a Jesuit. As the film progresses, Jesuits may wonder whether he is the kind of role model that they would like.

This statement is not advocating *Deliver Us from Evil* as a great film about exorcism or even a good one. It is rather something of a potboiler with some interesting moments about Catholic themes and the problem of evil.

As regards the plot, the screenplay draws on elements of the original *The Exorcist* and its sequels, with mysterious goings on in the Middle East, especially with Demons. The screenplay is up-to-date insofar as there are three American soldiers in Iraq in 2010, going down into a vault, with video

camera, smelling strange odours, finding a message on the wall, photographing the material. But, three years later, each of the soldiers is in violent crisis back in New York City, one brutalising his wife, another found dead while doing a painting job, the third, present in a sinister manner at the Bronx Zoo, actually possessed.

The possessed man is confronted by a New York police officer, Ralph Sarchie, who wrote a book about the experience and vouches for its truth (sounds more like PR than actuality). In the confrontation with the possessed man, he encounters a Jesuit priest, Father Mendoza, who has had a difficult drug past, experienced some conversion which included belief in God and becoming a Jesuit, with some lapses (which could cause some difficulties in the contemporary context of sexual misconduct), but has become an expert in psychiatry and working with people in violent mental difficulties and possession.

This is a New York police story, there is plenty of action, quite an amount of violence and deaths.

For Christian audience, especially Catholics, it is the Jesuit character who is of interest, although the police officer has been a lapsed Catholic from the age of 12, denying a God who did not intervene in an attack on his family. Father Mendoza makes a distinction between Primary Evil and Secondary Evil, the latter being the destructive experiences in most people's lives. His focus on Primary Evil is on the unexplained presence of pervasive evil, the dichotomy, we might say, between God and the Devil, Primary Evil being a continual menace in the world.

When the detective wants to upbraid God because of not intervening in disaster, Father Mendoza says that they could talk all day on the problem of evil but they should focus on the problem of good, why so much good in the world – and he makes the point that God relies on us humans to intervene and help with God's work for good. And the pertinent example is that of the detective and others in their police work confronting criminals and bringing them to justice. Father Mendoza uses the language of Ignatian "discernment" but it is a fairly basic and unnuanced description that he gives. However, he does persuade the detective to make a confession, sacramental, where a detective confronts his memories of dealing with a child abuser, beating him to death in his anger. The priest points out that vengeance was done on the abuser but not justice, and that vengeance normally stays with the avenger, contaminating the avenger's life.

This does provide an interesting religious core to the film.

One reviewer expressed surprise that an exorcism should take place in a police interrogation room. But, why not? Whether the scene is an authentic interpretation of the official ritual is not always clear, Father Mendoza explaining the six steps in the process of exorcism and proceeding then to pray, to demand the demon's name, to oust the demon (with just a few special effects to remind us of *The Exorcist*). The production team could have well done with a Catholic adviser because Father Mendoza uses "Holy Ghost" instead of Holy Spirit and the colour of his stole for the exorcism is blue!

Edgar Ramirez, long hair, somewhat unkempt, a jogger, a heavy smoker (which he sees as a better addiction than many others), is meant to be an image of the contemporary priest. Eric Bana is the detective and Sean Harris the former soldier who is possessed. It is interesting to note that the film was directed by Scott Derrickson, an American director with a Presbyterian background, who made the far more effective *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005) and a very effective haunted house film, *Sinister* (2011).

An example of the current trend of possession and exorcism films, a police-action thriller with some acknowledgement of theological and religious themes.

THE FRENCH MINISTER/ QUAI D'ORSAY

France, 2013, 113 minutes, Colour.

Thierry Lhermite, Raphael Personnaz, Niels Arestrup, Jane Birkin.

Directed by Bertrand Tavernier.

This is a story about French government, focusing on a particular minister, the minister for foreign affairs. There is a glimpse of a photo of George W. Bush, which seems to indicate that the setting is around 2003, discussions of an imminent invasion of a Middle East country, here given a fictitious name. Many audiences will appreciate the politics of the period.

The film is directed by veteran, Bertrand Tavernier, best known for his quite serious films for many decades. An interesting question to ponder is why he chose this particular film and comedy at this stage of his career.

Some commentators have referred to the British television series, the hilariously comic *Yes, Minister*. The key to that series was that the minister was very much of a fool, relying on his advisors, especially Sir Humphrey Appleby, Nigel Hawthorne's perfect re-creation of a civil service adviser, shrewd, adept with language and insinuation, seeing himself as the power behind the minister. That is not exactly the case here. Rather, while the minister is often a fool, he is shrewd and smart enough to perform well in public and to take the advice that he wants to hear. These advisers to the minister are not Humphrey Applebys. They are professionals, caught up in the political pressures, research, advice, speechmaking, rescuing the minister from difficult situations.

But, the film is still a comedy, an amusing comedy, with a blend of spoof, satire as well as critique.

Thierry Lhermite is the minister, a professional politician, rather sure of himself when he has no basis for this, but quick on picking up trends, need for action, and reliant on advisers whom he trusts. He is not in favour of the invasion of the Middle East. He is under pressure to move for Germany to have a place on the UN Security Council. He travels to the United States to give speeches. He travels to Africa when a civil war crisis erupts. He makes jokes about NATO and tries to avoid NATO meetings. And, on the personal level, his charm to have a dinner with a prize-winning novelist, played with forcefulness by Jane Birkin.

The audience is taken into this world by initially focusing on a young would-be civil servant, Arthur, preparing to wear the right clothes and have the right manner for his interview. He is caught up in the minister's whirlwind and has a job before he knows it, but actually doesn't have a physical desk and the table that he has to work at is part of a narrow thoroughfare with everybody passing through. But, he makes his way and is successful at his work, even when a journalist on a bus in New York steals one of the pages of the minister's speech and there is a media-political kerfuffle.

The main character supporting the minister, patiently, biding his time, even nodding off, is played by Niels Arestrup. That the minister succeeds is often due to the old man's advice – even passing a note up the table while the minister is indulging in conversation with the novelist, to tell him to keep quiet and let her get a word in.

It is interesting to see the minister whirl in and out of his rooms, papers flying as he opens and slams the door. In his visit to Africa, he defies advice and gets out of his car in the middle of an angry crowd, contacts the Prime Minister and resolves the case. He has his mantra which he repeats often, for

policy: lucidity, unity, efficiency!

The film does get a bit serious at the end, with the minister going again to the United Nations and, after all the many drafts that his speeches always go through, he delivers a speech which receives and applauding response.

The film is particularly French in its characters, rather different from an English version of this kind of story – but quite entertaining in its way.

GALORE

Australia, 2014, 100 minutes, Colour.

Ashleigh Cummings, Lilly Sullivan, Toby Wallace, Maya Stange.

Directed by Rhys Graham.

It is summer in Canberra, the summer of 2008, the summer of the bushfires which came into the city suburbs and destroyed homes and took four lives. Throughout the film, the camera notices the columns of smoke in the far distance, then the approach of the fires and finally the city and its people surprised by the extent of the devastation.

The approach of the fires and their destruction – and purging – might serve as something of a motif for the mood of this film and its portrait of teenagers in an idle summer.

There are four characters at the centre of the film, principally a young girl, Billie, played with some force, even dominance by Ashleigh Cummings. She has been friends with Laura, Lilly Sullivan, since they were very young but now the moods and crises of teenage have caught up with them. Danny (Toby Wallace) is Laura's boyfriend but right from the beginning we see him passionately kissing Billie. Billie is no slouch at flirting and going further. Laura, on the other hand, is somewhat restrained, inveterate writer in her diary, discussing with Billie just what she should do about a sexual relationship.

Into the group comes Isaac, an Islander living in a shelter where Billie's mother does charitable work. She has pity on Isaac and brings him home to live in the caravan on the property, much to Billie's displeasure. However, he is drawn into the group and their activities with the other teenagers with nothing to do and virtually nowhere to go except to dams and waterholes. A focal point of their partying is New Year Eve.

As the days draw on with sunbaking, swimming, needling each other, conversations, walks... Billie drinks too much, clashes with Danny, is caught up in her relationship with Laura and takes a car owned by some of the other boys and goes on a reckless drive which has, of course, some dire results.

This film is well made, the performances good. However, one of the difficulties is that we see what the characters do but often, very often, it is hard to appreciate what is motivating them. This applies even to Billie and her behaviour, the audience having to observe her and try to work out what is driving her. There is some motivation in Laura, especially as she becomes infatuated with Isaac, with a sensual scene between the two of them. Hardest to know what is driving Danny or whether he is simply going with the flow.

Later in the film there is a funeral sequence with the parents of one of the group speaking about

their child – but indicating that they knew very little about their child. This is mostly true even of Billie’s mother, good-natured and trusting rather than really knowing what was happening with her daughter.

Admittedly, this is not a treatise on the behaviour of adolescents. Rather, it is a portrait of four young people over a short space of time. The frequently self-absorbed Billie has to come to terms with her life, face up to some responsibility for what she has done. Her experiences are something like the fire which swoops down on the city, burns and destroys – and perhaps purges enough so that there could be a better rebuilding.

GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY

US, 2014, 119 minutes, Colour.

Chris Pratt, Zoe Saldana, voices of Vin Diesel, Bradley Cooper, Lee Pace, Michael Rooker, Dave Bautista, John C. Reilly, Djimon Hounsou, Glenn Close, Benicio del Toro.

Directed by James Gunn.

In the United States, Guardians of the Galaxy has become something of the saviour of the summer box office. It has proven extremely popular – but not so much with this reviewer.

To be fair, here is the opening paragraph of an IMDb blogger (Grey Gardens). This is a fan’s, no, FAN’S, response: ‘Guardians of the Galaxy is nothing short of an amazing movie. If there's anything I can say, it's that it is the best superhero movie I have seen. Not only does it have the impressive set pieces and enough action to last you a lifetime, it has an emotional core and you actually get to care about each and every single character. Overall this movie is filled with all the required thrills and spills and is a first class action movie. It also has a great mixture of comedic value and a deal of seriousness.’ While acknowledging this, and the amusement and joy that the film will bring to younger audiences as well as to science-fiction buffs and those who enjoy tongue-in-cheek spoof of the space adventures and the super heroes, this review will not be so enthusiastic.

Acclaim must be given to the action, stunts, special effects. There is great ambition behind this particular film, capitalising on the popularity of the serious Marvel comic characters, but also capitalising on parody. One might imagine a film made of all those odd-looking and odd-sounding characters that are found in the bar, along with Han Solo, in the Star Wars films, a film about Chewbacca and co. Those films were enjoyable but George Lucas, for some strange reason and imaginative bout, created Jar Jar Binks, who not only sounded silly but looked silly and intruded a lot of silly behaviour into The Phantom Menace.

So, this reviewer was not so much thinking of Star Wars but of Jar Jar Binks and of the silliness. In fact, the word that kept surfacing while watching Guardians was “stoopid” – and this was too hard to get over.

Poor Peter Quill is abducted from earth by aliens in 1983. Older now, he is in possession of an orb, with superhuman powers, which is sought after by an evil galactic lord, Ronan. There are some other assassins and destroyers.

But, Peter forms a group of guardians who whizz around here and planetary there. There is a raccoon called Rocket (voiced with sly enthusiasm by Bradley Copper) and a tree trunk who is able only to say ‘I am Groot’ - since so many reviewers have proclaimed that this is Vin Diesel’s most wooden performance, I won’t do it. Then there is a young woman, with a jealous sister, who escapes

her planet and joins the guardians. She is played by Zoe Saldana, coloured green, a contrast to her blue appearance in Avatar.

Of all people, Glenn Close, appears as a planet leader (though come to think of it, she was in Tim's Burton's Mars Attacks) and Benicio del Toro has a cameo.

So, this is a comic book adventure with strange and funny goodies and quite an array of most evil baddies. There is no limit to the imagination and the special effects for these galactic skirmishes, schemes and battles. And the sequel is promised in three years.

HERCULES

US, 2014, 98 minutes, Colour.

Dwayne Johnson, Ian Mc Shane, John Hurt, Rufus Sewell, Aksel Hennie, Ingrid Bolso Berdal, Tobias Santelmann, Reece Ritchie, Joseph Fiennes, Peter Mullan, Rebecca Ferguson, Isaac Andrews, Joe Anderson.

Directed by Brett Ratner.

Another Hercules film. He was a popular character in the sand and sandals costume dramas of 50 years ago. He has been impersonated by Lou Ferigno, the original Hulk. And then there was the bizarre Disney film of the mid-1990s. Is enough enough?

Actually, there are many reasons for enjoying this version of Hercules. He is embodied by Dwayne Johnson, formerly the wrestler known as The Rock, more latterly quite an interesting actor, doing serious roles, but not afraid to do tongue-in-cheek spoofs. Another reason is the solid British cast of veteran actors, notably John Hurt as the King of Thrace, Ian Mc Shane as a veteran seer, Joseph Fiennes as the King of Athens, Rufus Sewell as one of Hercules warriors, Peter Mullan as the King of Thrace's implacable deputy. They all have their big moments, most especially John Hurt in his conspiracies, taunts and comeuppance.

But the main interest in the film is not something you would expect in this kind of high-budget matinee material. It is demythologising.

Demythologising?

The film opens with Hercules' nephews telling the tales of some of his 12 labours. They have their graphic and special effects moments. But then there is an interruption questioning whether the 12 labours ever actually happened and whether Hercules really was (again despite our seeing some of the scenes of his birth) a son of Zeus and a mortal mother, detested by Zeus's wife, Hera, and banished to fight the 12 labours and return to become a god. Hercules agrees with the debunking, thinking that legends have been spun about himself, his origins and his feats, turning him into something of a superhero, which he declares he is not.

And this theme continues throughout the film, sometimes seriously, sometimes with a sense of humour.

The main action concerns Hercules being persuaded by the daughter of the King of Thrace to come with his band of followers to resist enemies and consolidate the kingdom. Most of the men are farmers, no idea of military strategy and tactics. Hercules and his band, which include his nephew and the seer as well as a mutant warrior whom he had rescued and the Amazon, Atalanta.

They do a very good job, in fact, of training the men after some initial failures, so that when the two huge battle sequences turn up, that Thracians are a very disciplined military force, able to resist all kinds of attacks.

For those who like a good stoush, they will be more than satisfied with two as well as a climactic finale when Hercules is betrayed, is about to die, but fate steps in (or at least, the warrior, who decided to quit the band and taken the gold reward from the King of Thrace's) turns up and it is open slather. And it is quite some slather, Hercules overturning huge bowls of flames which descend on the dissenting troops and destabilising the basis of the huge statue of Hera which falls down on Hercules' foes.

The film was directed by Brett Ratner, whose films include the three Rush Hour films as well as an X-Men [2](#) film, The Last Stand.

Even critics came out of the screening more satisfied that they expected to be!

JERSEY BOYS

US, 2014, 134 minutes, Colour.

John Lloyd Young, Eric Berghen, Vincent Piazza, Michael Lomenda, Christopher Walken, Mike Doyle. Directed by Clint Eastwood.

From 2006, audiences in the United States and then all around the world, have been introduced to the story of Frankie Valli and the band, The Four Seasons in the Broadway musical, Jersey Boys. They do not have the status in the popular music world as, say, Elvis Presley or, their contemporaries, the Beatles. But, they did have a lot of hits, on the top of the charts, playing in popular venues all over America, and building up a huge following. Jersey Boys appeared on Broadway and won 6 Tony awards, including one for the lead actor who played Frankie, John Lloyd Young who Eastwood invited to portray Frankie Valli on screen).

If one were to surmise who would be the director of the film version of this Broadway musical, Clint Eastwood would not necessarily be the first one to come to mind. He saw the production several times, was impressed by the book, the performances and several of the actors that he saw, particularly John Lloyd Young. Eastwood directed the film, released just after his 84th birthday. Which means that Eastwood is four years older than Frankie Valli. Eastwood was best known as Western star in Rawhide (a glimpse of which is seen in this film, what he calls his Hitchcock moment), then the spaghetti westerns and a range of films, including the musical, Paint Your Wagon. Eastwood directed his first film, Play Misty for Me, when he was 40.

After more than a 40 year career in directing, let alone acting, he has two Academy Awards for Best Director, Unforgiven and Million Dollar Baby. The breadth of his film themes since he turned 70 and the skill with which he made them, including Mystic River, Flags of our Fathers, Letters from Iwo Jima, Gran Torino, J Edgar, have made him more than a Hollywood legend. And he was in production with another film at the time of Jersey Boys release.

Eastwood has retained a lot of the structure of the play as well as the style of performance. Each of the four has the opportunity to look to camera, take the audience into their confidence, and the rate part of the story. As might be guessed, Eastwood is interested in the background of the boys, their growing up in New Jersey, especially in the 1950s, the Italian Catholic family background (Eastwood

once again showing an interest in depicting Catholic aspects of American life), the links with the mob, the gangster bosses being part of the family, helping out in times of difficulty – of which there were many with the young men and their escapades, especially in stealing, going in and out of jail.

But Eastwood has also had a career in music, often composing in making arrangements for the sound tracks of his films, as well as filming *Bird*, the story of Charlie Parker, and *Honky Tonk Man*. He has also made documentaries about jazz.

Being a contemporary Frankie Valli, he seems to have resonated with the singer, the band, the songs and their lyrics. Audiences will not be disappointed as so many of the songs find their place in the narrative, some in performance in clubs or television, some as part of the plot. Non-fans may be surprised to hear quite a number of songs they are familiar with but had not connected them with Frankie Valley: *Sherry*, *Big Girls*, *Walk like a Man*, *Oh What a Night*, *Can't Take My Eyes Off You*...

Frankie and his friends were always interested in music and sang at various clubs. Their friend Joe Pesci (that's right, later the other actor) introduce them to Bob Gaudio (Erich Bergen who took this role on stage), lyrics writer with whom Frankie clicked. With a hurry in composing the lyrics for *Sherry*, they impress their old friend from the past, Bob Crewe (Mike Doyle), now a music producer, and he arranges for a record. It is a huge success, the rhythms, the lyrics, Frankie is singing voice and his falsetto. On to *American Bedstead*, *Bandstand*, the *Ed Sullivan Show*.

Not all plain sailing, The manager of the group, Tommy DeVito (Vincent Piazza) is rather self-centred, not as bright as he could be, borrowing money from loan sharks in increasingly large amounts, not paying the group's taxes – which they do not know but it all comes to a head with the help of the local mob patriarch, Gyp (a rather engaging Christopher Walken). The band breaks up, Frankie and Bob have worked together but it seems better for Frankie to have a solo career. To him, being on the road, provides many difficulties with his marriage and, especially, dealing with his oldest daughter, Francine.

While the action ends with Frankie's success singing *Can't Take My Eyes Off You*, it does move forward to 1990 and the group, meeting together after a long time, being installed in the Rock and Role Hall of Fame (interestingly, although not mentioned in the film, 1990 was the year the Joe Pesci won an Academy award for his performance in *Goodfellas*).

And how to bring the film to an end – use the style of the curtain call with all the cast onstage all singing and dancing, an exuberant end to the film. (Of interest, Frankie Valli and Bob Gaudior were executive producers of the film.)

And the film is quite a night!

THE KEEPER OF LOST CAUSES

Denmark, 2014, 97 minutes, Colour.

Nikolaj Lie Kaas, Fares Fares, Sonja Richter.

Directed by Mikkel Norgaard.

Grimace and frown. This is the usual look of the protagonist of this police story, Carl Nicolai I Cass, looking more than a bit like Michael C. Hall as *Dexter* on television), a single-minded and relentless police officer and detective. Actually he does smile a little ironically during the film and we do see a glimmer of smile at the end. His assistant is Assad, played by Lebanon-born actor, Fares Fares, who

has a great deal more humanity about him.

In the last decade, Scandinavian police stories have become popular, worldwide. We could think of Henning Mankell and Wallander, Stig Larssen and The Girl..., or the novels and the film versions of stories by Joe Nesbø. This thriller is in this vein – based on a series of novels by Jussi Adler-Olsen, featuring Carl and Assad. The next in the film series has already been completed.

The film opens with some banter between the police, idle and nitpicking conversation during their surveillance. Carl is impatient, does not wait for backup, goes into the house with some disastrous results for his partners and some injury for himself. It is not surprising to find that after he gets out of hospital, his superior does not want him in active service, a danger for others, and not particularly liked by most people in the local force. He is given a new assignment, a small office in the basement when he has to study all the cold cases of the previous 20 years – the lost causes of the film's title being these cold cases. And Assad is assigned to him, not immediately happily for Carl. But we know, eventually, with ups and downs, they will be able to work together, each saving the other's life.

Assad arranges the cases with photos on the wall and Carl's eye is caught by one that he remembers and he begins to follow it.

For those of us who are always intrigued by current novels with police investigations, be they in the US, Australia, the UK or in other contexts, this film will be very satisfying. It shows the police work, step by step, the police using their brains, intuitions, discovering leads, following them, working on hunches, and all this, despite the objections of the powers that be, quite realistically. The screenplay opens up the mystery, tantalises the audience with what might have happened, then starts to give the audience more information than the two police have so that the audience is always waiting for the police to catch up, providing solid tension for the mystery.

The victim is a young woman, involved in politics, who had attended a conference in Sweden and then, on a ferry ride with her younger brother who had suffered brain damage in a car accident when the two were young, she disappears, presumed suicide, presumed drowned.

Carl's methods are blunt and direct. He has very little to happiness in his life, his wife has left him, his stepson can't stand his mother and so stays with Carl, sometimes embarrassing him. It is only his job and his determination to live for it that gives him any satisfaction. We don't know anything about Assad (except that we do see him kneeling and bowing on his carpet in Moslem prayer at the end of the film). But, Assad has the human touch, especially his patience in sitting with the disappeared woman's brother, something which pays off when he sees a photo.

Just when it seems that Carl and Assad have finally found their man, there are some twists which give more meaning to the film – and the audience could realise that they were given some clues early on which might have given them the motivation of the criminal.

The film is lower key than some of the other Scandinavian stories, but interesting because of the tension between the two characters, the detail of the detective work, so that it is quite a satisfying hundred minutes. Here's hoping that it will not be too long before the second film in the series will be released.

LUCY

France, 2014, 90 minutes, Colour.

Scarlet Johansson, Morgan Freeman.
Directed by Luc Besson.

Lucy seems a rather quiet name for a film by Luc Besson, more famous in recent decades for his producing and direction action features. However, he has had a continued interest in science and science-fiction, most significantly in *The Big Blue* and his well-regarded *The Fifth Element*.

While he does exercise his flair for action sequences, especially in a rapid car chase through the streets of Paris, he is interested in themes of evolution, behaviour of prehistoric animals, of apes and their gradual development, the nature of the human brain, its capacity and humans not using their brains to full capacity, rather 10%.. So, he has created an action parable about the capacity of the human brain.

Lucy is a science-fiction film. However, it might be called philosophy/metaphysics-fiction, especially with its cosmic overview of animal and human development as well as its speculations about what might happen to a human being using full capacity. At the end, when Lucy has exercised the hundred percent and she is asked where she is, she replies that she is everywhere. She is omnipresent and omniscient. A symbol of God?

During the early sequences, Besson has inserted quite a number of images of animals and their behaviour, drawing from the beautiful films about nature and the world, *Baraka* and *Samsara*. When Lucy is introduced, and her boyfriend is trying to persuade her to deliver a locked case to reception at a Taiwanese office block, the director inserts visuals of animals circling each other, wary, fearful, and the superior animals pouncing. We realise we are not just in a simple story of a young woman, an American in Taiwan, who gets caught up in action adventure.

Lucy is played by Scarlet Johansson, following her non-visual performance as a computer companion in the film, *Her* and her mysterious alien in *Under the Skin*. At first, she is apprehensive, especially when confronted by the Taiwanese chief drug dealer. Then there is the mystery of the blue bags in the case, a drug whose origin has not been specified, part of the mystery of what is going on. Obviously the Taiwanese need to know what the drug is and so insert the bags into a group of mules, including Lucy.

Up till now, routine but mysterious. Then Lucy's bag begins to leak with dire effects on her on a plane and at the Berlin airport. But, Lucy is changing, makes her way to Paris with the Taiwanese in pursuit. A French captain of police is interested in her case, driving with her in an intense chase through the streets of Paris and being something of a bodyguard.

After the drug setup, the film moves to the science aspect, introducing Morgan Freeman as an expert on science of the brain, and, with his elegant delivery, we learn quite a deal about the functioning of the brain.

Lucy wants to have a record of what has happened and the Professor supervises her link with a computer, the screen noting the ever increasing use of all of her brain.

And then, the film leaves us with some philosophical speculations about human capacities, the exercise of the brain – and how humans could transcend their mundane behaviour and existence.

Which means that Besson has provided a science and philosophical parable, outstanding in its visual impact, challenging in the questions that it asks and that it implies.

THE LUNCHBOX

India, 2013, 104 minutes, Colour.

Irrfan Khan. Nimrat Kaur, Nawazuddin Siddiqui.

Directed by Ritesh Batra.

The Lunchbox has proven a success not only in India but the world over. The growing interest in films about India is to advantage here.

With the opening of the film, the audience is immersed immediately into the life and vitality of the city of Mumbai. As with the title of the film, the audience becomes interested in the thousands of men who walk, pull carts, ride on bikes, our passengers on vehicles delivering hundreds of thousands of lunch lunchboxes all over the city. One immediate query is how do the lunchboxes get to the right place at the right time – something which is explained at the end of the film, some of the carriers becoming rather indignant even at the suggestion that a lunchbox should not arrive at its proper destination.

We are also shown to different parts of the city whether the two leads live. One is a quite comfortable, but fairly cramped, home where Ila, an ordinary housewife, lives with her husband and daughter. She gets her daughter ready for school, a touch pessimistic in her outlook, that rain will come at any time, that accidents can happen. She spends time at home preparing her husband's lunch for his lunchbox. An old lady lives upstairs, whom she calls Auntie, who calls down conversation and cooking advice. In another part of the city, an accountant, Saajan, lives by himself, a widower, who for 35 years has been going to do the same kind of accounting work and comes home to a lonely house, standing on the veranda watching the neighbours have a happy family meal, and smoking.

This not might not seem the ingredients for a popular film. And audiences with a touch of impatience will need to get their impulse for hurry under some control – this is a very leisurely paced film.

At work, Saajan is about to take early retirement and is asked to help in the training of an eager, very eager, irritatingly eager, young man, Shaikh. Shaikh is not particularly reliable but, quite soon, he wins over Saajan with his sometimes desperate respect. But that is not the main thrust of the story. That is, of course, the lunchbox.

As the advertising suggests, Saajan receives the wrong lunchbox, one especially packed by Ila for her husband. Saajan finds the meal delightful and appetising, and continues to receive the meals, thinking they are from the local shop. It is Ila's neglectful husband, who generally ignores her, who makes her realise that the lunchbox has been going to the wrong destination. She encloses a note, to the interest and delight of Saajan, his immediate reply being rather functional, about salt in the meal. Then the correspondence continues, the two never meeting, communicating through the notes day by day, learning a lot about each other, opening up a great deal about themselves and their situations.

As Shaikh note, correspondence by letters seems very much out of date in the age of email. The film is, one might say, a cinematic love letter, to letters.

That is basically what the film is and is about. There is a delightful wedding sequence, Saajan going to Shaikh's wedding, the only representative of his side of the family raise while his wife's family is

there – in abundance. And there is a sad death sequence, Ila receiving news from her mother that her father has died.

Which means that the film is about basic values, the quality of human life, possibilities for happiness, the realities of sadness and some betrayal, the basic sadness in the deep experiences of long illness, death, and the delight in the celebration of marriage and wedding.

This is a film which reaches into the hearts of an older audience – one hopes that a younger audience might stray into the film, slow their pace down, and contemplate some of the deeper values of life, even through communication in a lunchbox.

A MOST WANTED MAN

UK/US/Germany, 2014, 122 minutes, Colour.

Philip Seymour Hoffman, Grigory, Dobrygkin, Willem Dafoe, Rachel Mc Adams, Robin Wright, Homayour Arshadi, Nina Hoss, Daniel Bruel.
Directed by Anton Corbijn.

A first recommendation would be that this is a film version of a John Le Carre novel. The second recommendation is that it is a contemporary story of 21st-century espionage. Then there is the recommendation of the fine performance by Philip Seymour Hoffman and audience regret at his death earlier in 2014 at the age of 46. And the direction is by the celebrated Dutch photographer and video maker, Anton Corbijn, who also directed *Control*, the story of Ian Curtis and the band, Joy Division, and *The American*, with George Clooney. As well, this film has an excellent international cast. The screenplay was written by Australian Andrew Bovell.

John Le Carre's novels have been published over a period of more than 50 years and there have been film versions over this half-century, starting in the 1960s with *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, to the George Smiley stories, to *The Constant Gardener* and the recent *Tinker, Taylor, Soldier, Spy*.

This present film might be called an intelligent film about intelligence.

The setting is Hamburger, with visits to Berlin. In Hamburg, Gunther Beckman (Philip Seymour Hoffman) is in charge of a surveillance and espionage company, an unofficial group at the disposal of the German government. The particular problem for the group is the arrival of Issa, a seeming-terrorist from Turkey. Immediately, the group goes into action, identifying the man, photographing him, a payout to a railway attendant for information...

The real target, however, is larger, a shipping company, based in Cyprus, which seems to be involved in huge amounts of money laundering for terrorist groups, allegedly managed by an Arab philanthropist in Germany, with a fine reputation but who seems to be diverted funds to the terrorists.

Two significant characters come into the action, Annabel (Rachel McAdams), daughter of a judge who is in rebellion against her father, becoming a lawyer for leftist group. She is representing Issa, the man at the centre of the surveillance. He wants to get in contact with a respectable banker (Willem Dafoe), whose father collaborated with Issa's father and finances in the Soviet Union thirty

years earlier.

It should be said that while this is an espionage film, there is practically no violent action throughout the whole film, rather the emphasis on surveillance and intelligence. There is an abduction, there are some interrogations, there is a car and taxi crash at the end, but violence is not the aim of the film.

There is a great attention to the timing and deadlines, the role of the banker and the amount of money available for Issa, the abduction of Annabel and getting her to collaborate with the surveillance group, and the same for the banker. The German authorities want Issa. Gunther's plan to divert Issa's money to the philanthropist and catch him, if possible, signing documents diverting the money to terrorists. The German government officials are single-minded, not particularly flexible. And into the equation comes the CIA agent, Martha, played with quiet and intense ruthlessness by Robin Wright.

The complexity of the plot is fascinating for audiences who like espionage stories. Each of the characters has their own particular interest. And the build-up to the arrest of the philanthropist is skilful – and so are the final images of the film which are not quite what we might have imagined.

MRS BROWNS BOYS, D'MOVIE

Ireland, 2014, 100 minutes, Colour.

Brendan O' Carroll, Jennifer Gibney, Eilish O' Carroll and many of the O' Carroll family!

Directed by Ben Kellett.

If you are not already a fan of the very popular television series, Mrs Brown's Boys, you may have a bit of difficulty in following this cinema version, just who's who in the Brown family? We are placed in the middle of things, and because of this, there might be not too many converts either.

On the other hand, this reviewer attended the Thursday, 1.00 pm session and there were only two other people in the cinema, an elderly couple, older than the reviewer, who, in fact, chuckled all the way through. converts! (And before the film started, Mrs Brown's face suddenly appeared on screen – which seemed like a trailer for the film we were actually in there to see – but it was actually herself telling us how much she enjoyed performing the stage version in Australia and that she and the family are coming back: Book Now!)

Mrs Brown is the creation of Brendan O' Carroll, first writing a screenplay about this Irish widow in the late 1990s, made into a film directed by and starring Angelica Huston, simply called Agnes Browne. O' Carroll himself had a number of cameo roles. But then came the television series, Brendan O'Carroll himself taking the role of Mrs Brown (a bit disconcerting to see photos of the real O' Carroll with his bald head and seeing him as a martial arts trainer with a fright wig in this film), looking like a latter-day Mrs Doubtfire, dealing with his Granddaddy, the pushy neighbour and the array of children.

It is fair enough to say that the humour is "fairly broad" and that the vocabulary is exceedingly profane (with many expletives including the other four letter F alternative). Much of the humour is slapstick with a lot of pratfalls, especially in the Moore Street market. And there is a lot of spoof of Irish ways and manners, the Browns in their suburb of Dublin but also, for instance, farcical court cases and images of the Catholic Church, (not particularly irreverent). Father Damian is the parish priest, first seen nailing Jesus to a cross outside the church because a holt had come out and the statue of Jesus was hanging by one hand; then in the confessional where Mrs Brown wants to get

something of relief from the pressures of life by confessing but her neighbour insists that she has many more sins than Mrs Brown and squashes into the confessional to prove her point, Father Damian fleeing to get some air. There is another priest who performs a funeral and then there is Mrs Brown's son, appearing rather impassively, wearing a Roman, not really actively involved in anything.

The slim plot is, as often, about greedy developers trying to get rid of poor people, this time ruthless Russians, relying on a corrupt lawyer, to take over the stalls at the market, destroy them and put up some high-rise buildings. Needless to say, they don't win. Part of the complication is that, because of difficulties generations ago, Mrs Brown has been landed with a tax bill for some millions of dollars. However, an old lady reveals that she has a document proving that the bill was paid. Again, needless to say, the Russians are after the document, Mrs Brown is after the document (leaving a rather well-mannered lawyer, who was afflicted with Tourette's syndrome, to do a filibuster in the court room until she gets back with the document).

So, it depends on whether you want to see and believe that Brendan O' Carroll is Mrs Brown (who is not averse to suggesting to the audience, whom she regularly addresses to camera, that she is really a man). The film often makes play of the fact that it is a film, tearing down a backdrop to reveal a real building, Mrs Brown gazing to the sky as the camera zooms up there, telling us how much she likes movies because after falling into the river, she immediately appears dry! Yes, there are some outtakes during the final credits, but a whole lot of them are actually left in the action, actors falling laughing at having to repeat their lines.

The film is very Irish, playing on the old traditions, but it is also a reminder that Ireland has become very multicultural, especially with the character of the Indian stallholder whom they all refer to as being Jamaican - and that that is the richness of Ireland. At the end, Kate Brown, who will inherit the store from her mother, makes a strong, patriotic and sentimental speech in favour of Dublin.

And if this review sounds promising, by all means join the many fans of Mrs Brown and her Boys.

REACHING FOR THE MOON/FLORAS RARAS

Brazil, 2013, 118 minutes, Colour.

Miranda Otto, Gloria Pires, Tracy Middendorf.

Directed by Bruno Barretto.

Reaching for the Moon is a generic kind of title, which could be applied to any story. There is a meaning for its use for this film, explained at the end of where a central park in Rio under construction is to have lighting fixtures which are like bringing the moon and its light to the park.

It is 1961 and the first half of the 1960s.

This is a story of two strong women, the American poet, Elizabeth Bishop, and the Brazilian architect, Lota de Macedo Soares. Both were middle-aged, their lives intersecting, an unlikely duo, an unlikely friendship, which developed into a relationship of love.

While the central focus of the film is Elizabeth Bishop, a fine performance from Miranda Otto, there is a fiercely dynamic performance by Gloria Pires as Lota. Elizabeth Bishop was rather shy and somewhat retiring, while Lota was full of energy which ultimately led to her emotional and mental collapse.

We are introduced to Elizabeth Bishop sitting in Central Park, New York, with the poet Robert Lowell. He comments on her poetry, her particular style which could be interpreted as prose with pauses. His particular comment is quite telling. He suggests to Elizabeth that she has "observations broken into lines". Somewhat diffident, she decides to go on a holiday and sails for Brazil. Connections have been made and Lota, along with her American partner, Mary (Tracy Middendorf) are there to meet her, Mary being a school friend of Elizabeth's.

Audiences made to share Elizabeth's edginess and appreciate her desire to return to the United States. However, the audiences also is made to feel the strong force of Lota's personality, her interest in Elizabeth, the personal attraction, the sexual attraction which leads them both into a partnership.

The other attraction for Elizabeth is the beauty of Brazil and its mountains, forests and gardens, and the attraction of the city of Rio. This beautiful scenery is also a great attraction for the audience.

Elizabeth also realises that Lota has a political background, especially with her radical father with whom she does not communicate. a politician, The genial politician, Carlos, is a close friend, as well as an admirer of Elizabeth's poetry. When he decides to nominate for Governor of Rio, Lota decides to actively participate in the campaign and, to collaborate, when there is a coup and a change of government. This is very difficult for the American, Elizabeth, to appreciate, especially the role of dictatorship as a form of government which Lota supports.

On the one hand, Elizabeth is left to herself, living in the beautiful house that Lota has designed and her own personal study. It is here that she has a creative period with the consequent book being awarded the Pulitzer Prize. On the other hand, she is lonely, still conscious of usurping Mary's place in Lota's affections and a somewhat unwilling party to Lota's plan to placate Mary who wanted children, to adopt a local girl with Lota seen as grandmother and Elizabeth seen as an aunt.

The other factor is alcohol, Elizabeth very cautious about drinking on her arrival, but her drinking more and more, reinforces her loneliness and her emotional dependence on Lota.

The end of the film explains that Elizabeth Bishop is considered one of America's greatest poets while Lota bequeathed a heritage, especially in her creative park in Rio. But, just before the end, the audience is involved in the emotional turmoil of the two women and its tragedy.

Bruno Barretto is one of real Brazil's best-nine directors for such films as: Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands, A Show of Force, Carried Away. This is a very empathetic film, for the two women and, always, for Brazil.

RIO 2

US, 2014, 99 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: Jesse Eisenberg, Anne Hathaway, Andy Garcia, Jermaine Clement, Jamie Foxx, Will I. am, Rita Marino, Kristin Chenoweth, Rodrigo Santoro, Tracy Morgan, George Lopez.

Directed by Carlos Saldhana.

Rio was a very happy film, happy characters (allowing for the villain, Nigel). Rio 2 is also a very happy film, happy characters – and Nigel turning up again.

The film comes from the studios which produced the Ice Age films, so with these and the Rio films, a very good record for producing entertaining animation, popular with audiences. The animation style is very vivid, very bright colours, cheerful in themselves, well delineated characters, mostly birds, with some other eccentric animals and a range of humans, the sympathetic conservationists Linda and Tulio and the big boss and his squad of loggers with their heavy machines, sawing and dragging down the trees in the Amazon.

In fact, very little of the action takes place in Rio. Rather, we are mostly in the Amazon, not only with Blu, Jewel and their offspring but with a huge flock of blue birds – and some rival bright red birds on the opposite side of the gorge, all territorial, because of the scarcity of Brazil nuts. While the birds generally get on well together, their rivalry is tested in a battle, a kind of aerial soccer match, a kind of Brazil-nut Quidditch action game. This confrontation, along with an amassed attack by blue birds on loggers and drivers, with the red birds joining in the action, are the main adventurous parts of the plot.

The film pokes fun at the urbanisation of Blu and his family, the children knowing how to open a Brazil nut by opening the can, relying on their television and their iPads. It is obviously time that they went back to their roots and found other blue birds, which they did not know existed, and discover their true selves. It is not difficult for Jewel who discovers her father, Eduardo, the patriarch of the blue birds. The children settle into the outdoor life. But, it is rather hellish for Blu, still relying on his GPS, and who is dismissed disdainfully as “a human pet”. Unwittingly, he contravenes the boundaries - which sets up the need for the competitive aerial battle – and, even then, as he goes to the rescue, he makes a mistake putting him even further on the outer.

Nigel is in pursuit of Blu, but with a new assistant enamoured of him, Gabi, a rather sassy frog. They stumble upon auditions for a concert and the film pauses for some minutes while Nigel is invited to sing and he does a show-stopping version of I Will Survive. Nigel and Gabi eventually get tangled in the bird-attack on the loggers.

Characters from the first film are back again, all with entertaining supporting roles.

It is the voice cast which is very good. Jesse Eisenberg was Blu in the first film and he is very much at the centre of this one. Eisenberg has one of the most distinctive ways of delivering lines in films at the moment, a kind of stammering, hesitant, gawky, which has served him well for many roles, even for Mark Zuckerberg and the establishing of Facebook. He is perfect as Blue. Anne Hathaway is more generic as Jewel but Andy Garcia obviously relishes the opportunity to be the stern patriarch, Eduardo. Leslie Mann and Rodrigo Santoro are Linda and Tulio. Jamie Fox and Will I.am are the two friends, and Miguel Ferrer is the voice of the Big Boss.

Rio 2 is as entertaining as its original. (Except for a warning that logging warriors in, say, Tasmania, might feel under siege from these birds.)

RISING FROM ASHES

US/Rwanda, 2013, 82 minutes, Colour.

Narrated by Forest Whitaker.

Directed by T.C.Johnstone.

Rising from Ashes is an impressive documentary as well moving one. Its focus is on Rwanda and the establishment in 2006 of the cycling team, Team Rwanda.

However, the film gives an outline of the events of 1994, the Hutu genocide of the Tutsi. This outline, spoken by narrator, Forest Whitaker, goes back to the 19th century, German colonial presence, the transition after World War I to Belgian authorities who considered the Tutsi to be more intellectually and culturally advanced than the Hutus and placed them in positions of authority and power. This led to decades of Hutu resentment which boiled over in 1994, April, with propaganda on radio and the media to rouse up Hutus to eliminate the Tutsis. Almost 1,000,000 people were killed in the few months in the middle of 1994, often bludgeoned to death, killed with machetes, with buildings, including churches, burnt. The film indicates some of the consequences – but does not go into the many arrests and trials in succeeding years, of killers, of politicians, of clergy.

The young men of this film were children during the genocide, many being scarred, a number losing parents and extended family.

In the succeeding decade, as these young men became adolescents, a number of them found their skill and their passion in life in bike riding. American cyclist, Tom Ritchie, visiting Rwanda, had the idea to set up a foundation which would encourage the sport, train the athletes, build them up to enter international competitions, and become a focal point for national pride. Ritchie appears in a number of interviews in the film. His main aim was to persuade a friend, former cycling champion, Jock Boyer, to come out of retirement, come to Rwanda (of which he knew nothing, even the genocide, and had to look on the map for its location) and be the coach for the team.

Boyer comes across as a very strong character. But he also mentions that after his cycling success, he behaved inappropriately with a minor and was jailed, finding the jail experience very hard and trying to settle back into life. He is persuaded to go to Rwanda and meets the young men. He is most impressed and takes on the job.

The film features several of the young men, most notably Adrian, who was eventually to go to the 2012 London Olympic Games. Of the initial 15, Boyer wanted to choose a team of five and specialise in training them. We hear them speak of their history, their ambitions, some rather sombre and not speaking English, some rather exuberant, speaking English. It is interesting to note later in the film that Jock Boyer was able to speak in French to the team.

The film takes events year by year from 2007 to the 2012 London Olympics. We see the young men in training, their strengths, their skills with mountain bikes, competitions, challenges, and the strong regime to keep them fit, exercise, meals – as well as the good humour and their working together.

The film keeps up its momentum year by year, showing the team eventually going first to South Africa and then to the United States, active in competitions, learning by experience.

At one stage, competition is held in Rwanda itself, giving the locals an opportunity to see their champions, to focus on them, and to start building national pride in the team.

In the latter part of the film, we see competitors in trials for getting a place in the Olympics, some generosity of team spirit as Adrian's chain snaps and his partner instantly gives him his bike.

Boyer becomes an engaging personality, as we learn so much about him, see him in action with the group, firm, supportive. And we see the young men over a period of six years growing, changing, achieving.

This is a fine film about the sport which gives a great detail about the cycling itself but also takes us beyond to the human dimension as well as the social dimension in Rwanda, a contribution to building up spirit and national pride after the terrible events of 1994.

THE SELFISH GIANT

UK, 2013, 91 minutes, Colour.

Conor Chapman, Sean Thomas, Sean Gilder, Siobhan Finneran.

Directed by Clio Barnard.

While this contemporary film, a bleak look at life in Yorkshire, especially the children, is inspired by Oscar Wilde's story of *The Selfish Giant*, there is none of Oscar Wilde's comedy, rather a reflection on his own sad experiences, his imprisonment, his being thrown back on awareness of human betrayal, love thwarted, separation from home and family, confinement leading to his death.

The director whose films come to mind while we are watching *The Selfish Giant* is Ken Loach, his films of social realism over many decades, especially his 1968 film about a young boy and a bird, *Kes*. But there was far more immediate uplift in Loach's film.

This story focuses on two young boys, Arbor and Swifty. The performances by Conor Chapman and Sean Thomas are very fine indeed, completely credible, especially for Conor Chapman portraying a very disturbed young boy. We see this right from the beginning, his disturbed sleep, waking, hyper with his brother and mother, needing to take pills to steady him. His trouble at school, defying the teachers, defying other boys, but always relying on his friend, Swifty.

At the centre of the plot is the stealing of copper wire from the railways and selling it off to a dubious dealer, Kitten (Sean Gilder). Kitten is an abrupt man, living on the edge of the law, selling and reselling various goods, including the copper wire, and pocketing the money. To that extent, he is a bad influence on the two boys.

There are some lighter moments and touches, especially in a horse race with Swifty very concerned about the treatment of the horses. There is a sympathetic receptionist at the school where, after they are both suspended for misbehaviour, Swifty sits every day, influenced by his sad and earnest mother who urges him on to get an education. Swifty's father is a brute of a man, yelling at his children, no patience or concern.

When tragedy strikes, Arbor hides himself, unable to deal with the events until some of the adults do some good for him – including, surprisingly, Kitten.

This is a first feature film from writer-director, Clio Barnard, who demonstrates and explores the sensibility and sensitivity to the young boys and their characters, their crises, seeming hopelessness. A number of reviewers have referred to the film's treatment of its themes as "poetic" – a poetry of the goodness of life and the bleakness of human nature.

SEX TAPE

US, 2014, 94 minutes, Colour.

Cameron Diaz, Jason Segal, Rob Corrdrey.

Directed by Jake Kasdan.

Well, at least, the title is not trying to hide the theme of the film. On the other hand, this is a Hollywood comedy so it is not going to be too outrageous. And for those buying a ticket in anticipation of what the title might lead to, they will really have to wait till the end of the film to see the contents of the sex tape, and not too provocatively, really.

Before the credits, for about five minutes, the film starts to live up to its title: Annie (Cameron Diaz) is writing a blog, describing her meeting with Jay, their sexual experiences, then to love, then to marriage – and children - before the end of the credits! Jump a few years and they find they have practically no desire to make any sex tape, as busy as they are with their jobs and managing their children. In fact, they find they have practically no time for sexual activity.

Jay works for a radio company and works with music. We see Annie going to a meeting with a large company who promote toys and family products, charmed by her blog and what it could do for their image. The CEO of the company is played by Rob Lowe (whom diehard movie fans may remember had some sex tape problems of his own in the 1980s). He is a good sport and plays a variation on a leering Lothario.

One evening, they are unexpectedly free and send the children off to their grandmother. A lot of farcical attempts in the sex department, all proving failures. Then comes the brainwave to make a sex tape, three hours of their activity, culminating in Jay's promise to delete. Plot-wise, of course he does not.

The rest of the film is not seeing the sex tape but rather the frantic efforts of Annie and Jay, along with their friends, Robby and Tess who help them to recover it. It has gone out on a lot of iPads that Jay has given away as gifts. So, here we are in our modern cyberworld with unwelcome files spread far and wide, some knowing the technology to preserve them, others not knowing the technology to delete.

One of the search sequences involves Rob Lowe again with the two couples trying to spin stories of collecting for charity, Robbie and Tess having the brainwave to say that they are collecting used iPads for charity!

A consequence of this kind of tape is, of course, the possibility of blackmail, and that is what occurs as well, but there is a somewhat easy way out, as there is a crisis at the school social media performance when Jay realises the tape is on the hard drive of his son's computer, just about to be displayed to the general public.

This may make the film sound very enjoyable and it has its moments. It is one of those entertainments that couples, indulging in a little prurience, might enjoy on a night out. Nothing more.

STILL LIFE

UK, 2013, 92 minutes, Colour.
Eddie Marsan, Joanne Froggatt.
Directed by Umberto Pasolini.

This is a film which one could recommend to audiences who want something that re-affirms the value of humanity. It is a small film, a comparatively little-known cast, but it is beautifully written

and directed by Umberto Pasolini.

Have you ever wondered about what happens to people who have died alone, with few contacts or relatives, and what goes on before they are buried? Here are some answers.

The versatile actor, Eddie Marsan, who has had a strong career portraying supporting characters, coming through work with such directors as Mike Leigh, especially his star turn as a driving instructor in Leigh's *Happy Go Lucky*. Here he plays John May, a 44-year-old man, living alone and without any friends, who conscientiously turns up at his council desk every day, visiting the homes or institutions where people have died, searching for some clues for contacts or relatives, filing them away, looking for the addresses of any possible contact or source of information, visiting conscientiously and patiently, explaining the situation to often-unwilling relatives, and he himself going to the funerals, often alone except for the officiating minister, gathering the ashes from some cremations and scattering them. At home, he puts their photos in an album which he obviously cherishes and looks at with great affection. And then, on the official documents, he writes "case closed".

This might seem sad and pathetic, and in many ways it is. John May is a good man but seems never to have been able to relate intimately to anyone. There is no sign of any family. He is a meticulous man, a most tidy desk, a very neat kitchen, setting the table simply but well for his own meal.

One day he is summoned by his boss and told that there is reorganisation in several councils for carrying out his particular tasks. He is being let go. However, his final case concerns a lonely man with only a document or two, but nothing really to identify him. John makes it a personal quest, and is able to track down a fish and chips shop in the country where he discovers a former wife and a daughter, makes contact with the blind soldier who gives a most praiseworthy account of the dead man and his helping the blind man, and he buys a bottle of whiskey for two old friends, out on the street, who give their version of the dead man. John finally finds a daughter, goes to visit her and invites her to the funeral. He is able to build up a picture of the dead man, his qualities, his flaws, his responsibilities, his time in prison – enough to build up a small congregation to come to the man's funeral.

The film builds up to a climax which we hadn't anticipated, more pathos, but a very moving tribute to John May and all that is best in sympathetic human nature.

TIM'S VERMEER

US, 2013, 80 minutes, Colour.

Tim Jennison, Pension Jilette, Teller, David Hockney.

Directed by Teller.

From Pinball Machines to painting Vermeer.

Tim, that is Tim Jennison, has had a most colourful life. He describes himself as an inventor – and the first part of the film is most interesting in showing all the things he got up to with his inventing and repairing, from the above-mention pinball machines to all kinds of engines and flight and, in the last 10 years, examining the painting and techniques of the Dutch painter of the 17th century, Johannes Vermeer.

This documentary has been written and produced by his longtime friend, Pen Jilette, very well-known along with his partner in magic shows and entertainment, Teller, who directs the film (and is

momentarily seen in some of the sequences). Jillette narrates the film.

What interested Tim Jennison about Vermeer's paintings is not only their beauty, but the strength of their light. Examining many of the paintings and thinking about them, he wondered whether there was some kind of optical device that enabled Vermeer to capture the colours and, especially the full light (more like a shot on video and painting by other masters), and the extraordinary detail of the beautiful compositions as well as the characters, the Girl with the Pearl Earring being possibly the best known. For his project, he chose The Music Lesson – housed, in fact, in Buckingham Palace where, we see, the Queen was reluctant for him to see the painting but relented, giving him 30 minutes to study the painting but with no cameras or devices.

The film takes us step by step in Tim's venture, Tim emphasising that he was in no way a painter. We see him talking to a number of artists, especially David Hockney, who had been studying the variety of devices that the 17th century painters, especially in Holland, could have been using, a century of telescopes, magnifying glasses and other instruments. Tim sets up a Camera Oscura, explaining how it works in capturing an image and then projecting it, upside down, on a wall. He experiments with the Camera, with a variety of lenses which enabled the image projected to become much larger. He then experiments with lenses without the Camera and finds that the images can be projected, quite large, on walls.

Tim also has conversations with an expert on the eye, who give some information about the connection between the retina and the brain, the capacities of the eye for focusing, on seeing light, more than the artist could have seen for his painting.

The latter part of the film shows Tim enlarging the original image, painting the whole work of art over a period of more than four months, painstaking detail, day by day. It is a huge undertaking, especially for an inventor rather than a painter. Ultimately he completes the work and invites the experts to have a look at it, David Hockney being particularly complimentary at his skill in being able to recreate the light as well as the intricate detail.

Tim says that there is no written record of any help that Vermeer might have had, even of apprenticeship with a contemporary artist. The artists remind Tim that while there might not be any written documents, the paintings themselves are documents which can be studied and speculated on. It would seem that Vermeer used some kind of ocular device – and preserved its anonymity much like the inventor does not like others to see what has been created, protecting the creation by secrecy, or, in these days, by patents.

Many would regret that they had no opportunities to study fine arts when they are at school – and found themselves usually behind in appreciation of paintings. This is a fine opportunity for their horizons to be opened, for the skill of the artist and the wonder of the achievement.

TRANSFORMERS: AGE OF EXTINCTION

US, 2014, 165 minutes, Colour.

Mark Wahlburg, Nicola Peltz, Stanley Tucci, Kelsey Grammar, John Reynor, Sophia Miles,
Voices of: Peter Cullen, John Goodman,
Directed by Michael Bay.

It's not quite true to say, seen one Transformers movie, seen them all. Yes, there is a great deal of similarity in plots and characters in the first three films, but this one begins with a more human

touch than usual.

Admittedly, there has already been a battle with the destruction of the city of Chicago, the Decepticons wreaking havoc on humans and buildings. And the retiring CIA chief, played with a villainous relish by Kelsey Grammar, is involved in secret plots to rid the world completely of Transformers. He sees himself as the complete Patriot, with hawkish no tolerance of Transformers.

In fact, the Autobots have been vanquished, have disappeared, in hiding, especially their leader Optimus Prime (voiced by Peter Cullen). Fortunately for the plot of the film, he is hiding in Texas, disguised as a truck in a huge vintage cinema which is in a state of decay. Cade Yeager, an imaginative but impoverished technical inventor (played by Mark Wahlburg in his usual down-to-earth style) buys equipment as well as the old truck that he has discovered. Into the story comes his daughter, Tessa (Nicola Peltz) and his longtime friend, Lucas (T.J. Miller). There is a reward for finding Transformers and Lucas is interested in it, even phoning the authorities – but, unfortunately, linking up with the CIA secret surveillance for Transformers. And in they come, in mass force, being watched by the CIA Director on massive screens, drawing on negotiation skills which have no effect and then resorting to weaponry, mass weaponry.

This begins a series of chasers, raids, assembling of Autobots, one sounding like John Goodman and looking like him as a bearded cigar-chomping warrior, help from Optimus, the gathering together of the Transformers and the discovery of the lengths of plotting by the CIA Director.

Enter an entrepreneur, Joshua (Stanley Tucci) who has the largest laboratories we have ever seen, working on reconstructing Transformers, in possession of transformium, discovered in the Arctic – the audience has seen in a prologue how the Transformers defeated the dinosaurs millions of millennia back – and the CIA hopes to defeat all Transformers with the aid of these controlled reconstructions.

There has to be a confrontation, of course, and that happens in Chicago, an extended, very extended, sequence of smashing and mayhem, The Autobots doing their best, Cade and his daughter and her boyfriend, a 20-year-old racing car driver from Ireland, getting caught up in all the action.

And this is where it should have ended – but director Michael Bay, ever the loud expert in booming action, thought that the fans needed more. And so the whole action moves to China for another almost-hour, laboratories and reconstructions, pursuit by Optimus Prime, Cade and family going along, complexities, some changes of heart, and a whole new extended, very extended, battle confrontation which will give Hong Kong the opportunity for extensive rebuilding after this Transformer showdown.

If you want to see Transformers: Age of Extinction, then the recommendation would be on the IMAX screen and in 3-D, some of the 3-D being the most effective for some time.

But, a review is rather superfluous. Fans will want to see the film, critical approval or not. Non-fans will not want to see it, critical approval or not. Transformers, from the Hasbro toys, to the animation films of the 1980s, to this particular franchise, is a movie phenomenon and that's that.

VENUS IN FUR/VENUS A LA FOURRURE

France/Poland, 2013, 91 minutes, Colour.
Emmanuelle Seigner, Matthieu Amalric.

Directed by Roman Polanski.

Venus in Fur is an adaptation of the 19th-century novel by Leopold von Sacher- Masoch, from whose name the word masochism is derived.

But this film is not exactly a version of the novel. Rather, the writer, David Ives, has written a play, performed on Broadway, with the two central characters of the novel but in impersonations by the adapter of the novel for the play and an actress who turns up for an audition. This means that the film is a two-hander, the camera initially tracking up a darkening Paris street in cold weather and entering into a theatre where auditions are being held for the play (and, at the end, the camera tracks back out into the street).

The film relies on a great deal of dialogue coming from the play and capitalises on its action remaining inside the theatre for the whole of the performance, using many parts of the theatre, the audience seating area as well as the stage and adaptations of the lighting for effect.

This is a film by Roman Polanski, who has been making films for 50 years and turned 80 at the time of this film's release. His previous film, *Carnage*, was also adapted from a play but was a four-hander, two couples in New York City confronting each other about bullying in the school – which turns into some bullying of each other. Polanski allows himself more restriction in this film but it is not exactly just a filmed play. Rather, each take is particularly set up and the film relies on a great deal of editing for the interaction.

Thomas, who has adapted the novel for the stage, is played by Matthieu Amalric. And the actress, Vanda, is played by Polanski's wife, Emmanuelle Seigner, with whom he has collaborated on three other films. This is one of her best performances, a dominating performance.

Vanda has quite a repertoire of wiles. She can be ingenuous as happens when she first turns up late for the auditions, skimpy dress, chewing gum, seeming rather ignorant. She can be shrewd as she engages Thomas in conversations, often confounding him. She can be pushy, quickly winding Thomas around her finger so that he gives her an audition.

But, once the audition starts, Vanda (both the actress's name and that of the character in *Venus in Fur*), is different, her manner changes, her diction becomes more refined, she proves to Thomas that she really can act. She virtually takes control of the audition, even persuading Thomas to reverse the roles so that she becomes the master of the house, Severin, and he puts on a dress and shawl to become Vanda.

Not only are the roles reversed but also the power play between the characters. In the 19th-century, it was expected that the man would dominate the woman – although women could become dominatrices, wielding sadistic power and weapons for the man's masochist experience. But here, it is the woman impersonating the man dominating the man impersonating the woman, a fascinating psychological reversal of the challenges for the audience as it responds to Vanda's control of the situation. Finally, naked but with a fur, and with striking chord music, she performs a dominating dance illustrating the success of her power, leaving the man-impersonating-woman with a collar around his throat, tied, being led like a dog and finally completely bound.

Anyone thinking that this is something of a pop-erotic film will find it tedious for their sensibility and wonder why they came in. For audiences interested in the psycho-erotic, with top performances and direction from a master, it is a challenging psychosexual exploration.

VOLCANO/ EYJAFJALLAJOKULL

France, 2013, 92 minutes, Colour.

Valerie Bonneton, Dany Boon, Dennis Menochet, Albert Delpy.

Directed by Alexandre Coffre.

Volcano is a slight French comedy, capitalising on the style of Valerie Bonneton and her timing and Dany Boon and his comic style.

This is a French version Planes, Trains and Automobiles, except that the couple are involved in the battle of the sexes, separated and bitter against each other, he having married again. The reason they are travelling is that they want to get to Greece for their daughter's wedding.

It is the day that the volcano in Iceland in 2010 erupted stopping all air travel for several days. This means that the couple finish up travelling together, in a car and bickering which means that a young couple and their uncle cannot stand riding with them. They are careless with the hire car and it rolls backwards, eventually being run over by a truck. They stay in motels and actually have a sexual encounter. In Albania, they are welcomed at a Festival but he causes a disaster. They get a lift from a very religious man who ultimately ousts them. And finally, they travel by boat to Corfu but are arrested.

They arrive just in time to witness the wedding from the top of a mountain and then join in the celebrations – but all is not entirely well at the end of the film.

WORDS AND PICTURES

US, 2014, 111 minutes, Colour.

Clive Owen, Juliette Binoche, Amy Brenneman, Bruce Davison.

Directed by Fred Schepisi.

It does depend on one's sensibility, some have a love for words, a relish for the words and their meanings, and wordplay; others have a passion for pictures, colours and design, the immediate impact of a picture which is worth a thousand words.

This is one of the premises for this romantic comedy – with some edge.

At first we see Clive Owen as Jack Marcus, a talented literature teacher, urging his students to be creative in their imaginations and write up images that have not been heard before. He has an eager honours class because this is a distinguished Preparatory School. We see Dina Delsanto, an art teacher from a school which is closing down and who is hired to teach the same eager honours class. The initial encounter has a sardonic edge to it, Jack trying to make an impression and inviting her to participate in his game of going through the alphabet successively and naming words with five syllables. Dina is not particularly impressed.

So, it is clear, that Jack is a man of words and Dina is a woman of pictures. In their arguments, we see a touch of the battle of the sexes, then the competitiveness leads to a war between words and pictures, the aim of the war is to have a confrontation in the presence of all the staff and students, Jack to provide 1000 words and Dina to provide a picture.

In the meantime, we see that Jack is an alcoholic, his job is under threat, he is to undergo a review, with interviews by many of the staff. And, in the meantime, the audience has seen that Dina walks with a crutch because of her rheumatoid arthritis. Jack's drinking takes the better of him as he makes a show himself in a local elite restaurant. Dina holds him in something of contempt.

As regards drama, there is the focus on Jack, his editing of the school magazine, the promise of a poem, where he uses a deception to promote himself, his sense of embarrassment in the presence of his son and, because of Dina, leading him to AA meetings. Dina is cared for by her sister and has an operation for knee reconstruction. And, audiences anticipating some kind of rapport between the two will not be disappointed -although this leads to further antagonisms.

Quite a deal of attention is given to paintings and discussion about paintings, especially the need for a painting not just to appeal to the brain but also to the heart and emotions. Quite a deal of attention is given to the value of words, the syllables game, the derivations and meanings of words.

The film was directed by Fred Schepisi who made his mark in Australian filmmaking in the 1970s with *The Devil's Playground* and, his masterpiece, *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*. Schepisi has directed quite a number of international film including *The Russia House* and *Roxanne*. His previous film to this was *The Eye of the Storm* from the novel by Patrick White.

The film is interesting because of the two characters and the place of this film in their careers. They clash – but not forever. So, this film is in the tradition of romantic comedies but with welcome emphasis on the value of words and on the power of pictures.

REVIEWS SEPTEMBER 2014

HUNDRED-FOOT JOURNEY, The
HUNDRED-YEAR-OLD MAN WHO CLIMBED OUT THE WINDOW AND DISAPPEARED, The
BEGIN AGAIN
BOYHOOD
CHARLIE'S COUNTRY
DEVIL'S KNOT
EXPENDABLES 3, The
FELONY
FREEDOM
GET ON UP
GOD'S NOT DEAD
GOD'S POCKET
INBETWEENERS 2, The
MAGIC IN THE MOONLIGHT
NIGHT MOVES
PREDESTINATION
SNOWPIERCER
THESE FINAL HOURS
WHAT WE DO IN THE SHADOWS

THE HUNDRED-FOOT JOURNEY

US, 2014, minutes, Colour.
Helen Mirren, Om Puri, Manish Dayal.
Directed by Lasse Hellstrom.

The Hundred- Foot Journey is situated in France – where they don't measure in feet and yards but have to translate anything metric for the commercially necessary non-metric audiences of the United States and Britain. No matter whether we use feet or metres, this is an entertaining film.

Statistics have indicated that television audiences are prone to watch programmes about food and cooking. This is a good reason to give up some hours of television watching because Hundred-Feet? Journey is a film about Indian cooking and about French cooking, with some most impressive visuals in the kitchen and on the tables of the restaurants a hundred feet apart.

The family of Mumbai are expert in providing the joys of Indian food in their native city but when riots occur with destruction, they decide that they need to migrate to Europe. They spend some time in London but find it too cold, especially as they try to live under the flight path into Heathrow, the plains zooming down very closely overhead. Off they go to the continent, driving through Switzerland and into France where they have a van breakdown – and the father of the family, played by Indian veteran actor, Om Puri, has an epiphany.

A derelict building, a failed restaurant, is on sale. He buys it and starts to fulfil his dream of an Indian restaurant in Europe. He discovers that there is a certain amount of racism and bigotry in France which threatens his restaurant. But the main threat comes from across the street, those hundred feet, from a one Michelin star restaurant owned and managed by the haughty French Madame Mallory (Helen, Mirren, in very regal mode with broken English accent).

The battle of the kitchens has its amusing moments, the screenplay poking fun at French snobbery and exclusivity of menu, and enthusiastically demonstrating the virtues (and odours and tastes) of Indian cuisine, so to speak.

The son of the family (is an expert cook – in the opening, he explains to passport control that he is a chef. His father is exceedingly proud of him. And he begins work at the Mumbai Palace.

At first, the rivalry is intense, Madame trying to do her best (and worst) to close the opposition down. But when antagonism from the locals turns ugly, she disapproves of the racism and begins, herself, to get rid of offending graffiti. And, as the end of Casablanca reminds us, "this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship").

The chef son has a great desire to learn French cooking and he is accepted by Madame, more than proving his worth after her initial doubts. He is also attracted by Madame's sous-chef, so there is nice romance, although it is tested when the young man achieves another Michelin star and is invited to chef in Parisian restaurants.

In the meantime, his girlfriend pines for him and begins to give up hope. Madame and the boy's father share a very warm friendship. So, in the end, it is happiness for all, including the audience going out of the cinema feeling very good.

THE 100-YEAR-OLD MAN WHO CLIMBED OUT THE WINDOW AND DISAPPEARED

Sweden, 2013, 114 minutes, Colour.

Robert Gustafsson Iwar Wiklander, David Wiberg, Mia Skaringer, Alan Ford.

Directed by Felix Herngren.

This is a title that a customer might have to memorise exactly while going to the box office, especially when this cinema is also screening *The Hundred-Foot Journey* – even this reviewer, with clarity of diction, was given a ticket for the journey instead of the old man!

The novel has a strong reputation in Scandinavia. And local audiences there have enjoyed the adaptation. For audiences who haven't read the novel, it probably won't have the same impact. And the other difficulty would be the particularities of the Scandinavian humour (which another member of the audience stressed that she understood and enjoyed – and it may have been she who chuckled loudly throughout the film).

It is quite a wry story. Which means that it does have its amusing and funny moments, but it was not a hilarious experience.

While there is the contemporary story, the old man, Allan, played by Robert Gustafsson, turning one hundred after he has gone to a residence for the elderly, there are visits to his past. As they prepare his birthday cake, and re-count the candles, he does climb out the window and off he goes. The staff continue to search for him in the residence, the police also pursue him, one being interviewed by the media but, all in all, the film pokes fun at the ineptitude of the officers.

With a limited amount of money in his pocket, he buys a ticket to a small town – but an angry young man demands Allan look after his suitcase while goes into the toilet. But the bus arrives and so off Allan goes with the suitcase – which is the major development of the plot as criminals pursue him in Sweden, with orders by phone from their boss who lives in Bali. The case was full of money.

In the meantime, Allan has made friends with Julius and is introduced to a couple who are involved in a circus and caring for an elephant. There are some elephant jokes, a morbid one when one of the criminals looking for the money is crushed by the elephant. Another criminal is transported to Djibouti where he is killed by suicide bomber. It is that kind of film. Meanwhile, Alan is quite carefree and enjoying his liberty.

All this might have been amusing but there are various flashbacks to Alan's life and his fascination with explosives. He is also preoccupied with screams, telling of his mother screaming when he was born, that he probably screamed back, that he screamed at his violent father, that he was put into an institution. That might have been enough but, in fact, he goes to Spain, encounters General Franco (very critical of his way of dancing, too feminine), is given the gift of a gun, then finds himself working on a skyscraper in Manhattan where he hears about the Manhattan Project and explosions and goes off to New Mexico where he meets Robert Oppenheimer and gives various theories for the successful exploding of the atomic bomb and is congratulated.

He is then recruited for the Soviet Union by a scientist, encountering Stalin but offending him and relegated to a gulag along with Herbert Einstein, who is the exact opposite, mentally, of his famous brother. After an explosion destroys the Pacific Fleet – which is the death of Stalin - he is in Paris in 1968, is in Washington DC in 1981, talking with President Reagan whose directions about a wall in his garden are taped and listened to by Gorbachev where they interpreted as a hostility towards communism. Unfortunately, this line of flashbacks just peters out. It would have been interesting to bring this train of storytelling to some conclusion, but no.

Back to the present, a gift of a flight to Bali, some more accidents and happy ever after (for however

long) for Allan after his birthday.

BEGIN AGAIN

US, 2014, 105 minutes, Colour.

Mark Ruffalo, Keira Knightley, Adam Levine, Catherine Keener, Hailee Stansfield, James Corden.

Directed by John Carney.

Begin Again is written and directed by John Carney who had a great success with the Irish musical film, *Once*, which was then transformed into an award-winning Broadway musical.

Carney obviously likes songs, and is interested in those who write them, produce them, distribute them. So, this is a story about singers, musicians, producers and the recording of an album – which means that there are songs inserted every so often during the film, making it a musical but not musical comedy in the traditional sense.

The two stars, Mark Ruffalo and Keira Knightley, work very well together.

We encounter both of them in a bar, he, Dan, drinking, she, Greta, sitting quietly, while her friend Steve (an enthusiastic James Corden) urges her on stage to sing her latest song. Nobody seems to be listening except for Dan who makes her an offer about her lyrics and the possibility of promotion.

Then we go into flashback, Mark's story, his 18 year marriage to Miriam (Catherine Keener), is trying to be a father to his teenage daughter Violet (Hailee Stansfield), the story of his founding a record company but his seven dry years without inspiration, listening to a string of demo tapes and flinging them out his car window in dismay, offering his opinion to the board meeting only to find that they are dissatisfied with him and oust him. Greta, meanwhile, has been five years in a relationship with a popular singer, Dave (Adam Levine, frontman of the group Maroon 5) who has an affair with his temporary manager, which dismay Greta who is about to return home to London when she is dragged on stage by her friend Steve, to sing her song.

That all sounds rather dismal. But the film is not dismal, audiences finding it rather cheerful, especially when Greta agrees to a recording of her songs for an album, Mark producing, and avoiding all the complications of studios by recording in a range of settings around New York City, in central Park, on a roof below the Empire State, under a tunnel, in a subway... Dan also recruits a range of musicians who have little employment but find it exhilarating to be part of this project. Steve enters wholeheartedly into the project.

There are still some personal complications, Dave not understanding how he could have entered into the affair, but his winning an award, and inviting Greta to come back – she sings a song with hostile lyrics on his phone, which challenges him. Greta also helps Violet, especially with her clothes and shopping, but invites her to play the guitar in one of the recording sessions. And then invites Miriam to be there for the recording.

The film has a nice ending, nothing absolutely conclusive on the personal side but an achievement with the record – and, something which those who download music will appreciate, the distribution of the record online at a lower cost!

Perhaps this film will work if you are in the right mood, but also have a love for popular music.

BOYHOOD

US, 2014, 164 minutes, Colour.

Ellar Coltrane, Lorelei Linklater, Patricia Arquette, Ethan Hawke.

Directed by Richard Linklater.

Boyhood has become famous because of its making, a process of 12 years, persevering with cast and the changes in their lives.

Writer-director, Richard Linklater, greatly admired for his series of *Before*, *Sunrise*, *Sunset*, *Midnight*, and a career which has mixed documentaries with feature films, decided in 2002 that he would like to make a film about a young boy and trace his growth over 12 years from 6 to 18. He and his cast and his crew spent a week every year adding to the film, developing the story, exploring the characters, changing the development of the plot according to some aspects of the boy's life. A reviewer reported that she had taken a friend to see *Boyhood* and that the friend was very impressed and asked how many actors had played the part of the boy. In fact, it is the same boy, Ellar Coltrane, developing his fictional life story over the 12 years.

As with so many of the other of Richard Linklater's films, this is a Texas story. It captures the atmosphere of Texas, making the film a piece of contemporary Americana.

At the opening of the film, the boy, Mason Jr, is a friendly and likeable young lad. He lives with his mother, Grace, played by Patricia Arquette, a mother who makes bad choices in husbands and partners as is seen over the years. She has been married to Mason, again played over the years by Ethan Hawke, a frequent collaborator with Linklater, but they are separated, he wanting to travel and move around, still with some adolescent tendencies which make it difficult to relate to his son, even though he loves him.

As the years go on, Mason turns up at various times to see his son, take him out, trying to build a relationship with him. Mason Jr is not unwilling. And his mother, liking Mason, allows him to be with their son even though she is frequently exasperated with him. Mason Jr has a sister. She is played by Linklater's own daughter, Lorelei, who also changes substantially over the years, finally asserting herself in her adolescent years.

The family experiences a number of difficulties, especially when the mother marries a man who seems genial, lectures at college where she attends his courses, marries him and brings her two children to blend with his children from a previous marriage. All seems well until, as happens in so many of these marriages, he starts to be demanding, bullying, and is a drinker. While Mason and Lorelei have got on well with the other children, they have to get away suddenly and lose these bonds. Grace tries another marriage with a war veteran but the war has influenced his mental condition and his ability to relate to people.

However, the fascination of the film is to watch Ellar Coltrane, over the 12 years, as a little boy, growing up in school, his friends, clashes, the way that he has to fit into new families, the visits from his father, clashes with his mother despite his love for her, and into his adolescence in school. The film is rather reticent about his growth in his sexuality though he has girlfriends. Like so many of the young men of his time, he experiments with drugs, clashes with his family, wants to move out, has to plan his education – while discovering that he has a talent for photography. All in all, the processing progress of the story depends on a great deal of detail in the characters' lives.

While some people have claimed *Boyhood* is something of a masterpiece, Linklater winning the prize for Best Director at the Berlin Film Festival of 2014, others have wondered because they think that nothing really happens, little action and slow-moving. But this seems to underestimate the power of ordinary life, developments and challenges of a young boy and his moving into adolescence, the importance of family, finding one's place in family, relating to parents, dependence and the move to independence and forming an individual character.

The film offers a fine opportunity for audiences, in a film running over 2 ½ hours, to watch human nature action and reflect.

CHARLIE'S COUNTRY

Australia, 2014, 105 minutes, Colour

David Gulpilil, Peter Djigirr, Luke Ford, Dan Wyllie, Gary Sweet, John Brumpton, Bojana Novacovic, Ritchie Singer, Gary Waddell.

Directed by Rolf de Heer.

This is the third collaboration between director, Rolf de Heer, and celebrated aboriginal actor and dancer, David Gulpilil. The first film was in 2002, *The Tracker*. The second was the 2006 *Ten Canoes*, the dialogue in local languages. Now the focus is on the present, and spoken in aboriginal languages as well as in English.

The important thing is to focus on David Gulpilil himself. This film is particularly autobiographical. Since appearing in *Walkabout* when he was a teenager, David Gulpilil has had a marked career in films, *Storm Boy*, *Made Dog Morgan*, *Crocodile Dundee*, *Rabbit-proof Fence*, Australia. But he has also had a very difficult life, marked by alcoholism, domestic violence and, more recently, time in prison. The screenplay of *Charlie's Country*, the collaboration between Gulpilil and de Heer, draws on all these experiences.

At the time of making the film, David Gulpilil was 60. He looks quite wizened, especially when, towards the end of the film, his hair, previously long, and beard are shaved. He looks like a very old man, wearing many deeper lines of age and experience. Which means that this performance is very courageous, allowing the limelight to be on himself and allowing audiences to know a great deal about his life-experiences.

Charlie lives in a settlement, a lean-to existence, with friends in the town, going into the supermarket to buy things, at the ATM with his credit card, family and friends asking him for money (which he gives) a blend of the traditional, the disruption to the traditional as well as to the realities of 21st-century life. Charlie goes hunting with a friend but the police confiscate their weapons. And then Charlie goes bush, going back in his mind and heart to the traditions, but he collapses and is taken to hospital.

The second part of the film is centred on Darwin, the hospital, shops and the buying of alcohol by those with cards (as Charlie has) but sharing it with the others in a settlement place in the Darwin parks. Ultimately, Charlie breaks out in anger and is arrested and imprisoned – with scenes of the monotony of prison as Charlie does laundry work, lines up (with overhead shots of the food) for meat pies, the pasta...

As with David Gulpilil in real life, Charlie has the opportunity to do something for others and chooses to train young boys in the ways of aboriginal dance and singing, a hopeful ending for this film.

DEVIL'S KNOT

US/Canada, 2014, 115 minutes, Colour.
Colin Firth, Reese Witherspoon, Alessandro Nivola,
Directed by Atom Egoyan.

Based on the true story.

In 1993, three very young boys were assaulted and murdered in woods at the edge of the city of Memphis, Arkansas. There was a lot of talk about devil-worship, about Satanism and rituals, one of the accused of having an interest in these themes and a library with background books. The police were eager to close the case, focusing on three young men who were accused, neglecting other evidence. There were strong feelings in the city.

Veteran Canadian director, Atom Egoyan, makes his first American film, with a strong interest in the case, most especially in those involved in the defence. The screenplay has been written by Scott Derrickson and Philip Boardman, Derrickson the director of *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, *Sinister*, and the New York police thriller, with possession and exorcism, *Deliver Us from Evil*.

This film has not been well reviewed, nor widely-released. The main reason seems to be that there were three very strong documentaries, entitled *Paradise*, which dealt at much greater length and with greater detail on the case, on the accused, on the judicial processes, on the aspects of Satanism. With such a thorough treatment, many who saw this present film thought it superfluous and were very critical of its seeming bias. However, for those who have not seen the documentaries, and are not familiar with the case, it makes very interesting viewing for those who like reconstructions and investigations of true crime.

We are introduced to the events through one of the boys, Stevie, going on a bike ride with his friends and going into the woods, with the promise that he would be back by 4.30 in the afternoon so that his mother (Reese Witherspoon) could go to work. Her husband (Alessandro Neville) tells her that the boy has not come home. It soon emerges that three of the boys have disappeared, although a voice-over of a little boy begins to tell us that he was there and what happened, tapes of a boy who claimed to have been there but was inventing the story as he was interviewed by the police.

The police investigate, people search through the night, but in the morning the naked bodies of the boys are found. Several of the teenagers in the town come under suspicion, one mentally disabled boy who confesses, then later retracts. Another boy is drawn in just by association. And the main accused, who suffers from mental illness and has been in an institution, becomes the main target because of his interest in devil-worship. There is another boy who might have been involved but who has immediately gone to California, is brought back, and fails a lie detector test during his questioning.

While the film focuses on the family, especially the parents' grief, it introduces a central character, a private investigator with his own company who, pro bono, devotes his and his staff's attention to examining the behaviour of the accused. He contributes this material to the defence counsel who find it very hard to do their work because of the presumptions and dogmatic decisions of the presiding judge (Bruce Greenwood).

The investigator is played by Colin Firth, a determined man in process of a divorce from his wife

(Amy Ryan). He observes, he questions, he analyses evidence, lack of evidence. One of the reasons for taking on his work is that he is against capital punishment, the taking of three more lives in the city, and the harsh judgements made about them. He does make contact with Stevie's mother and, as the film ends, gets from her some leads which might help the boys.

In a postscript to the film, it is explained that through a particular legal circumstance in Arkansas, the three convicted men were released in 2011. The film also offers suspicious indications about two of the fathers of the murdered boys, perhaps indicating devil-worship activity in the town at the time.

While it would be important for those interested in the case to see the three documentaries, they are not readily available, and this particular rendition would rouse interest in the case, the administration of justice, and the effect of the later release of the accused.

THE EXPENDABLES 3

US, 2014, 120 minutes, Colour.

Sylvester Stallone, Mel Gibson, Jason Statham, Wesley Snipes, Harrison Ford, Kelsey Grammar, Jet Li, Terry Crews, Kellan Lutz,
Directed by Patrick Hughes.

Apparently they are not expendable at all. With the original and now two sequels, they are obviously inexpendable. Although, arch-villain, Mel Gibson, says they should all be 'deletable'. There is no obvious reason for the expendables not to go on and on – except for most of the casts advancing age!

Within minutes, Sylvester Stallone is leading his squad in an extraordinarily daring raid on a moving train, guns and helicopters blazing against him, to rescue Wesley Snipes (who, in a tongue-in-cheek nonchalant remark when asked about why he was in prison for so long, replies "tax evasion"). And that's before the credits.

There are several missions throughout the film, all gung-ho, all weapons blazing, though with the contemporary nod to computer skills and hacking for defusing bombs with minimal deadlines, and an extraordinarily high body-count, especially in the final mission which culminates with tank and rocket fire, and an imploding building, from which, of course, the goodies escape, Stallone hanging on to an extension from a flying helicopter. But, of course, it is that kind of film and that is what the fans want (reports of millions of illegal downloads 10 days before the American release of the film).

Words came to mind during the preview: macho, belligerently bellicose, hawkish, invincible American action... But what also came to mind were the May-June 2014 exploits of ISIS in Iraq, a group going into the city of Mosul, their taking all the money out of the banks, rounding up citizens, bombardments and the execution of Shia military. Real life imitating the movies!

This is a film for a very masculine, macho sensibility – though one of the younger protagonists, the new expendables, is a big strong young woman who works as a bouncer at a fairly difficult club but who joins in the spirit of the expendables, though muttering several times in disgust, "men!".

Arnold Schwarzenegger turns up as a military contact, along with offside, Jet Li. Harrison Ford appears as a government suit but finally gets into the action himself, piloting a helicopter and letting fly with weapons.

With apologies to Cormac Murphy, this is definitely a country for old men.

It says something about Hollywood promotion that we know most of these performers just by their personal name: Sly, Arnie, Mel, Harrison, Jet, Kelsey, Wesley... For action fans, Jason Statham is instantly recognisable.

We expect this kind of thing from Sylvester Stallone, Jason Statham, and Wesley Snipes. When Stallone retires his expendables, he accompanies Kelsey Grammar on a search around the United States and Canada and Mexico for replacements. They are good, but do find themselves captured by the villain, Mel Gibson (as villain in last year's *Machete Kills* and now as a despicable villain, Hollywood is giving work to Gibson but putting him in roles that elicit no sympathy from audiences). This means a final mission to a fictitious former Soviet republic to rescue the young expendables.

Interestingly, the film was directed by an Australian, Patrick Hughes, who made a big impression with his contemporary variation on a Western story, *Red, Hill*. With this showing, and directorial flair, he shouldn't be out of work for some time.

FELONY

Australia, 2014, 97 minutes, Colour.

Joel Egerton, Tom Wilkinson, Jai Courtney, Melissa George.

Directed by Matthew Saville.

By definition, a felony is a serious crime. Because of the title of this film, audiences may be expecting a high-powered crime drama. They may well be disappointed because this is a very-low key but realistic treatment of a crime, an unintended careless knocking of a paperboy to the street with a car and the driver not immediately facing up to the reality, the responsibilities and the consequences.

But audiences might welcome the fact that this is a drama confined to suburban Sydney streets, characters being fairly ordinary, people one might pass in the street every day. This means that they can identify much more readily with the characters and situations, situations anyone could find themselves in unexpectedly.

Actually, the film does open with some police action, a raid in a warehouse, shots fired, the chase, arrests – and then the squad celebrating down at the local pub, pleased with an proud of their success. It is in the aftermath of the celebration that the accident occurs. While there are some moments of attention to other cases being investigated, including tracking down a man who has assaulted a young girl and has been supported in hiding by his girlfriend, finishing up in court. And there are further arrests consequent to the raid on the warehouse.

Most of the action, however, takes place with five central characters. Joel Egerton portrays the hero of the raid, escaping being wounded because a shot has hit his protective vest. It is he that has had the accident, bumping the paperboy in the dark at 5 AM, delaying momentarily to help and then not telling the full truth. Tom Wilkinson plays the chief detective, who has had some personal grief, is on the wagon, but has given his life to the police and continues intensely with the cover-up. Jai Courtney is the earnest young policeman, something of a righteous crusader, who is suspicious of the accident report, re-listens to the recording of the call for ambulance help; also becoming very sympathetic to the mother of the victim, going out of his way to help her, something which bewilders her. Melissa George plays Joel Egerton's wife, made participant in the cover-up and facing the dilemma of whether her husband should admit the truth or should be more caring of her and his

family.

This is a drama about conscience played in the context of ordinary day life, which means that the audience is challenged, perhaps more than usual, to test themselves and see where sympathies lie and what they would do in such a situation themselves. While conscience demands honesty, circumstances can untangle the motives for admitting responsibility or not. We also see that it depends on ultimate integrity as well as an emotional response to being guilty of such an accident, silence, and making peace with those who have been affected by grief.

FREEDOM

US, 2014, 98 minutes, Colour.

Cuba Gooding Jr, William Sadler, Sharon Leal, David Rasche, Terrance Mann, Jubilant Sykes, Tony Sheldon.

Directed by Peter Cousins.

Freedom is a bold name and title for a film. The freedom, and the desire for freedom, portrayed here is that of the African- American slaves of the 19th century, the hardships of the transportation from Africa, the sales, the plantations and their owners, often violent and vicious, and the possibilities of escape through the Underground Railroad.

This is a very worthy film, a strong message about freedom, linked with the religious conversion of John Newton, author of Amazing Grace. While many audiences appreciate this kind of film, critics tend to be very cautious, not wanting to be identified with a religious-themed film, expressing over-sensitive remarks about the social and religious messages.

Be that as it may, many audiences would be very interested in the two stories in Freedom, that of the slaves in the 19th century and the story of John Newton in the 18th century. The two plotlines are intercut throughout the film, but brought together at the end where the main slave taking his family to freedom is the great grandson of a boy slave that John Newton gave his Bible to.

Cuba Gooding Jr has a substantial role, (different from the many straight-to-DVD action films in which he has appeared for so many years). He is also one of the executive producers of this film. He plays Samuel, who organises plans for his family's escape, for his elderly mother, his wife (who is actually the daughter of the vicious plantation owner, mixed-race) and his son. And the film shows in some detail the various steps for escape via the Underground Railroad, the places travel to, the time taken, the wide range of dangers and difficulties even to the Canadian border and freedom, and the reality of legislation against anyone helping the slaves escape, the setting being the 1850s, not too long before Lincoln's abolition of slavery.

The slaves on the plantation are helped by a Quaker, Mr Garrett, who helped slaves over many decades, to a refuge beyond the plantation, travel by cart and horse, risking road barriers with plantation-hands and guns, to a Quaker house and hiding, to escape on horseback, to hiding on a train in cotton bales, assisted by slaves, to the Mason- Dixon line where they are taken in by a theatrical troupe and helped across the line to meet the famous abolitionist, Frederick Douglass.

Life on the plantation is presented vividly, especially in the anger of the owner and his whipping of one of the slaves who risked his life to let the others go and was caught. Audiences will be moved by watching the experience as well as being informed on the realities of the Railroad.

And, intercut with this story is that from 100 years earlier, the story of John Newton. Newton had been in the Navy, had been flogged, had found himself put in charge of a slave ship – accepting the reality of the slave trade as part of Britain’s life. He is engaged to be married and his fiancée gives him a Bible with an inscription about freedom. We see Newton in Gambia, at the slave market, the branding of the slaves, their being put on the ships in cramped conditions, which leads to a number of deaths and illness. There is an educated slave, Isaiah, who has an influence on Newton and who consoles the young boy whose family had died – the great-grandfather of Samuel, escaping 100 years later.

Moved by the slaves, tormented by dreams and buffeted by a vast storm, Newton has something of a conversion experience and, on his return, after the wedding ceremony, he sings Amazing Grace – as do the descendants of the slaves in the 19th century.

The story of Newton and his influence on William Wilberforce was seen in the film *Amazing Grace*, a film to be recommended. Another film on Britain and slavery, social and political attitudes, which is worth seeing is *Belle*.

GET ON UP

US, 2014, 139 minutes, Colour.

Chadwick Boseman, Nelsan Ellis, Dan Ackroyd, Viola Davis, Lenny James, Craig Robinson, Octavia Spencer, Tika Sumpter, Aunjanue Ellis.

Directed by Tate Taylor.

Get on Up is a movie portrait of the celebrated soul-singer, James Brown. He is played with great energy by Chadwick Boseman (who had the opportunity to portray another African- American icon on screen, baseball player of the 1940s, Jackie Robinson, in the film, 42).

This is a film for those interested in the popular music scene of the 20th century, especially in the United States and its influence beyond. James Brown was born in 1932 and died in 2006, his career spanning the second half of the 20th century.

Get on Up opens with a number of sequences over the time of Brown’s life, a bizarre episode at a consultant’s meeting in 1988 (later taken up and developed, a significant moment in Brown’s life), an awkward interview with a less-than-savvy white interviewer, as well as his going to Vietnam to perform for the troops in 1968. Then it is back to the 1930s and scenes from Brown’s childhood.

Some audiences have found this difficult, the moving frequently from one time period to another, with captions providing information about dates but with references to Brown’s song’s and their success. But the juxtaposition of episodes is a way of providing explanation of behaviour over the decades. There is also a difficulty for some audiences in trying to pick up all the dialogue of the film, especially that of Brown himself, with his Georgia accent and his rather harsh and screeching voice tone.

However, audiences will be able to put together, even though it is given piecemeal, the narrative of Brown’s life and career. He had a particularly harsh childhood, living with his mother (Viola Davis in another interesting and different performance), his father away for work but, on his return, a violent man who drives away his wife and will not let his son go with her. James learns something of music from his father, but eventually he is sent into town to live with his Aunt Honey (Octavia Spencer). One of the influences in this part of his life is going to church, hearing the music, experiencing the

rhythms, movement and dancing, and being encouraged to develop his music. There is another powerful sequence where eight young boys are blindfolded, one hand behind their back, commanded to fight to the end – while the affluent whites watch from their balconies and a formally-dressed band plays.

By the 1950s, James is part of a band, taking every opportunity (even from Little Richard having a break during performance) to perform for the public. Brown is not a blushing violet, taking every opportunity to promote his band and himself, and had a talent for the business side. This leads to an audition, the making of an acetate record, being introduced to the King Recording company, being taken on by one of their agents, Pop (Dan Aykroyd), who persuades the boss who doesn't understand Brown's music, expecting verses and chorus for the definition of a song. The main crisis, as with any outstanding individual performer, is a company wanting him to perform without his backup and band. His closest friend, Bobby Byrd (Nelsan Ellis) does stay with him until it finally becomes impossible.

Brown's personal life is rather in the background, marriage and children, a roving eye, divorce, a second marriage, more children.

The important thing, of course, is the music, the range of songs and lyrics, the particular style, not only singing but agility in dance rhythms, characteristic of him himself and his backup singers. The screenplay traces the years, the decades, highlighting a number of songs and their contribution to Brown and his success, his concerts, his growing audiences, his influence on younger musicians and singers. There is a scene where he performs in Paris in 1981 – which is also the time when Bobby Byrd has had enough and leaves him, commenting that he has always been alone.

The concert in Boston, and whether it should go on or not, after the death of Martin Luther King, shows Brown's intelligence and shrewdness, quite an affecting sequence.

Audiences may remember that Brown spent some time in prison – and that is the situation for the 1988 encounter with the people at a meeting, Brown firing a rifle shot, driving off and being chased by police, and eventually finishing up in jail.

The film ends more peacefully with a reconciliation with Bobby Byrd and his wife and information that Brown kept performing until his death, into his 70s.

There have been a number of dramatic films about African- American musicians, including Clint Eastwood's 1988 *Bird*, about Charlie Parker, and Taylor Hackford's 2004 *Ray*, about Ray Charles.

GOD'S NOT DEAD

US, 2014, 113 minutes, Colour.

Shane Harper, Kevin Sorbo, David A.R. White.

Directed by Harold Cronk.

This is more a film for believers rather than being an effective means for change of mind or for conversion. It is a faith-based film from faith-based production companies – and, at the end, there is a very long list of court cases, federally and in various states of the US, where universities and colleges have been challenged because of their bans on the activities and meetings of Christian groups.

The plot is quite straightforward illustrating its title. A young man, Josh (Shane Harper), enrolls at university for pre-law courses. He is interested in a philosophy course but is warned about the hard line of the lecturer. The lecturer is Professor Grandison (played by Kevin Sorbo who has spent a lot of his careers portraying invoicing Hercules in television films and series and in animated films – and who has weathered the years much more successfully than Arnold Schwarzenegger). The professor is anti-God, exceedingly hostile, not afraid to voice his opinions with some arrogance and who requires everyone in the class to write on a piece of paper, God is dead, and initially it and hand it in.

The point is that Josh hesitates, decides not to sign to the chagrin of the professor. Josh is to be allowed three 20 minute sessions after the lectures in order to make a case that God is not dead. At the front of the lecture room is a list of prominent thinkers of past and present who were or are atheists, including Richard Dawkins.

There is pressure on Josh to drop his case, his rather demanding fiancée walking out on him (perhaps lucky escape) and his parents disapprove. Nevertheless, he gets books from the library, reads to prepare, goes to church and encounters a sympathetic pastor, and, with some growing success, he makes his three presentations. It is here that the screenplay incorporates a lot of philosophical, scientific and religious argument.

There are several sub-plots: a Chinese student who attends the course, meets Josh, listens attentively and is persuaded that God is not dead, shocking his Chinese father back home who is definitely not a theist; a young woman who visits her mother in a residence, the mother having dementia, turns out to be the girlfriend of the professor who is very controlling of her, which she resists, and professes her faith, and discusses things religious with the pastor; a young Muslim girl is taken to work by her devout father, she removes her veil when out of his sight, works in the canteen, hears Josh talking about his case – and then she is revealed as having been a Christian for a year and is ousted by her father; it is also the story of the pastor who wants to go on a break with his visiting African missionary friend, but his car and rental cars won't ignite and he remains at home, encountering those in need – and hearing his African friend always saying, in every circumstance, God is good. The professor's girlfriend has a very worldly brother, very successful in business, fulfilling all his desires, but who is grossly arrogant towards his girlfriend, a journalist who has been diagnosed with cancer. This brother does not want to visit his mother because of her dementia but, ultimately, does so and suddenly she makes a lot of very telling statements that have an effect on him.

This is one sequence which works particularly well dramatically, the mother saying all the challenging things, which might seem impossible – and then she turns to her son and asks who he is.

At times, the script is somewhat sermonising, which tends to alienate non-religious and unsympathetic audiences. To that extent, the film is preaching to the converted, a rather fundamentalist converted, who are wary about challenges to the Bible by science. This is where comments about challenges to such writers as Richard Dawkins and Stephen Hawking are incorporated into the screenplay.

There is something of a shock ending for one of the central characters, a deathbed conversion so to speak, which does not work particularly well as drama but as a high-intentioned illustration that God is good, no matter what. Everyone ends up at a rally with a religious music group, The Newsies, singing and giving good counsel to the journalist with her cancer interviewing them.

[A glance at the Internet Internet Movie Database indicates that there are over 400 bloggers](#)

[commenting – a huge percentage of them expressing themselves in very hostile entries.](#)

GOD'S POCKET

US, 2014, 88 minutes, Colour.

Philip Seymour Hoffman, John Turturro, Richard Jenkins, Christina Hendricks, Caleb Landry Jones, Eddie Marsan.

Directed by John Slattery.

The actual place, God's Pocket, is not nearly as cosy as the title might suggest. It is a tough-looking location in the city of Philadelphia. The action takes place in the 1980s.

This is a particularly grim film, enabling the audience to peer into the life of a number of families in the area, their personal relationships, their work – with the touch of the criminal – and the violence and cover-ups which are part of the code of God's Pocket.

It is with regret that we note that it is one of the last films of Philip Seymour Hoffman, a strong performance as always, father and husband, worker, small-time criminal, partly at home in God's Pocket but reminded, when the chips are down, that he is not a native of the place despite years living there. He is still an outsider.

Christina Hendricks plays his wife. Caleb Landry Jones portrays her son, seemingly sympathetic as he goes off to work on a building site, but a loud-mouth with little respect for anyone, making racist jibes against a black worker. The old man gets a bar and hits the young man, killing him. His mother has a feel that the official report, that the young man was hit by a falling object, is a cover-up and urges her husband to find out. He makes enquiries, eventually does some confronting of the people concerned, but uncovers nothing.

He lists the help of a friend, Arthur (John Turturro) who has a number of connections, but the investigation takes a dour turn when local enmities erupt in violence.

There is some very black humour concerning the hijacking of trucks filled with meat and attempts to sell them to local bars and butchers, and the very mercenary funeral director (Eddie Marsan) refuses to conduct the funeral unless he is paid and puts the body waiting for burial out in the street. Then it is stowed in the truck which is involved in an accident, the corpse going hurtling down a hill...

The film as well acted, and audiences interested in the cast will want to watch it, but most people in real life as well as in the cinema may want to avoid spending time in the grim and glum God's Pocket.

THE INBETWEENERS 2.

UK, 2014, 96 minutes, Colour.

Simon Bird, James Buckley, Blake Harrison, Joe Thomas, Emily Berrington, Belinda Stewart-Wilson, David Field.

Directed by Damon Beasley, Iain Morris.

The synopsis for The Inbetweeners Movie described the four central characters as "socially troubled". Publicity for films doesn't usually go for understatement, but this is a case in point. They are definitely "socially troubled" and more, much more.

At one stage in this sequel, Jay is asked whether he is a moron. It is surprising that they needed to ask the question! Any impartial observer, or even a partial observer, would readily declare that Neil is definitely a moron – or worse. Simon has tendencies either way, often moronic, sometimes indicating that, deep down, he may have some common sense. While Will is not a moron – he continually wears his spectacles, even while swimming, and no matter what – he is definitely one of those “silly-ass” Englishman, educated accent, strong vocabulary, but prone to get caught up, because of his low self-image, in too many of the multi-moronic activities.

Audiences who have enjoyed the television series and wondered whether, because of television restrictions, it could have gone further in its gross-out episodes and language, will find a ready and frequent answer to their questions. The language is crass, not just in the swearing, but in the almost-perpetual obsession with sex and sexual activity (and a lot of false boasting there). and, if audiences are wondering about bodily functions, excrement, urine, vomit, then there is quite a bit, and often quite grossly explicit.

The main interest for Australian audiences is that the four find their way to Australia, Jay has come in search of his lost love (since Australia is an island he was under the misapprehension that if you went down to the shops he would run into her), pretending that he has an important job in a hotel (whereas he is really supervising the toilets). With boastful messages and phone-images to the other three about his beyond-Lothario sexual activities (visualised explicitly for the audience in case they did not understand what he was talking about). The other three are having problems of their own, impulsively deciding that they should come to Australia.

When they arrive and discover the truth, they find that Jay is camped out in a tent on his uncle's lawn. Australian actor David Field is the main Australian contribution to the film, apart from the locations, and is no mean contributor to crass language and suggestions.

The tone of Neil's moronic capacities is quickly observed when he mistakes the Opera House for an alien craft. Then, where else should this kind of British tourist go but to Byron Bay and a water theme park. Plenty of opportunities for malfunction here, especially Neil feeding a dolphin with fast food and its quick demise. Will is beguiled by a school friend who is a tour guide and he think she is in love with him. After some disillusionment, he flies from Byron Bay/Ballina airport directly to Birdsville and chases his friends who have driven there to find the long-lost love. The final comedy is their being stranded in the desert, no idea of the size of Australia, no idea of traffic on the Birdsville track, no water, no petrol, thinking that they were dead and ready to give up the ghost when they are rescued and are told that they have been out there for two hours!

So, there are some amusing moments of course, but a lot of the characterisation, dialogue and episodes are quite crass and tawdry.

MAGIC IN THE MOONLIGHT

US, 2014, 97 minutes, Colour.

Colin Firth, Emma Stone, Eileen Atkins, Simon Mc Burney, Hamish Linklater, Marcia Gay Harden, Jacki Weaver, Catherine Mc Cormack.

Directed by Woody Allen.

Since 1979, one of the annual events for a film reviewer has been the preview of Woody Allen's new film, sometimes with two in one year. He has been one of the most prolific American directors as

well as having a career in acting. So well-known as a comic, valued for his one-liners, he has also explored the meaning of life, the presence and absence of God, the nature of belief and unbelief, often putting this kind of questioning into the character that he plays.

The 2014 annual event is a quiet pleasure, not a full on comic drama like his previous film, *Blue Jasmine*, but a pleasant-key, sometimes tongue-in-cheek romantic comedy.

One of the difficulties of Woody Allen being so prolific is that critics and his fans tend to spend a lot of their time making comparisons between his films rather than focusing on the film on view.

This film is very stylish, opening at a theatre with a magic performance in Berlin, 1928, and a brief scene in one of those cabarets with a song by Ute Lemper. But then, it is off to the south of France, lovely countryside, the Mediterranean coast, the mansions of the rich.

The central character, Stanley, played by Colin Firth, world-renowned magician using a Chinese name and Chinese clothes and decor, is tempted by his friend, Howard (Simon Mc Burney), to expose a young woman, Sophie (Emma Stone), who passes herself off as a medium, having vibrations to discern the facts about the past and intimations of the future as well as conducting seances. It is a great challenge. He is an arrogant man with a fair amount of disdain for others, and fancies of his reputation for exposing fakes.

At the house in France is an interesting array of characters. Jacki Weaver (who must be continually offering prayers of thanksgiving for the many international roles she has gained since the award-winning performance in *Animal Kingdom*) is a widow who owns a mansion, living there with her son Brice (Hamish Linklater) who is in love with the medium. He is a genial enough young man, a touch of the foolish, wooing Sophie, the medium, by playing Jerome Kern songs on his ukelele.

It is Emma Stone's Sophie who demands audience attention as well as that of Stanley. He is unimpressed by her seance, but puzzles about mysterious aspects and her knowledge of things she could not possibly know. She is accompanied by her mother (Marcia Gay Harden) who is in the background, planning funding for a foundation for research, but, unfortunately, having very little to do in the action. Much more dominating with her presence is Eileen Atkins as Stanley's aunt, an amusingly strong performance, especially towards the end when she surreptitiously guides his thinking with what seem to be suggestions but which are designed towards his making a final choice about his life and romance. (Had I been second director, I would have liked Sophie to be sitting in the armchair at the end of the film – you will see what I mean.)

There is something rather strange about having the Woody Allen lines spoken by Colin Firth with his clipped British accent, but many of the lines are those we have heard from Woody Allen himself. Stanley is a rationalist, of the British uptight manner, touches of Noel Coward, but nevertheless he has many Allen lines about the meaning of the world, the meaning of life, the possibilities or not of prayer, the role of God. Some critics and audiences, charmed by the pleasant surface of the film, have decided that there is little depth in it – perhaps they have missed the depth because of the manner of delivery and the Firth tone and voice. (One aspect of the dialogue that should be commented on favourably is that, while Allen has been using a great deal of seemingly unnecessary coarse language over the last 15 or more years, *Magic in the Moonlight* is refreshingly free of this, no swearing within earshot).

This time the film doesn't have the wide scope of the excellent *Midnight in Paris* or the dramatic tension of *Blue Jasmine*. Nevertheless, it takes its place comfortably in the Woody Allen cannon and provides pleasing enjoyment for fans and audiences.

NIGHT MOVES

US, 2013, 112 minutes, Colour.

Jesse Eisenberg, Dakota Fanning, Peter Sarsgaard.

Directed by Kelly Reichardt.

Night Moves is a drama that could divide audiences. A smaller audience will be impressed by the themes and the very measured treatment of issues and characters. A larger audience will find the film far too slow, no adrenaline-pumping, and will be bored.

The reason for the different perspectives audiences is the director herself, Kelly Reichardt. She has made comparatively few films, but there have been critically well-received, *Old Joy*, *Wendy and Lucy*, and a film which drew much more favour from audiences as well as critics, the story of a pioneering group moving west in America in the 19th-century, *Meeks Cut-off*. Kelly Reichardt is a contemplative director, in no hurry, shooting tracking sequences which are very long, other shots dwelling on characters and nature, and a very low-key musical score, quietly instrumental, especially with piano. She is also her own editor, determining the lengths of the shots and the pace of editing. It is easy to understand why she has only a cult following.

This is an echo-protest story. The audience is immersed directly into the plot rather than given any explanations about the central characters, their motivations for protest, their going into dramatic action. We see them contemplating a dam and the water spill. We see them going to the screening of a film about the environment and the destructive threats, with something of an apocalyptic touch, while the director urges her audience to perform small and significant protest-action.

The two central characters, Josh, Jesse Eisenberg doing his expected quiet and jittery performance, and Dena, Dakota Fanning now an adult actress after her years of child-star success. The third member of the group is a former marine, who spent some time in prison, Harmon, played by Peter Sarsgaard. Time is spent watching Josh and Dena bargaining to buy a boat which they will use, packed with explosives. Harmon is the coordinator of the action, which requires Dena to go into a store buy 500 pounds of ammonia fertiliser, resisted at first, but finally persuading the salesman with the help of some friendly locals.

The action scene is, in fact, minimal. the trio simply sail to the dam wall, leave the boat, packed with explosives, paddle canoe to shore – but with some tense moments as a car pulls up in the distance. We look at the car and the man from the same distance as the trio. They decide to go back to disarm the bomb, but the man finally drives away and, mission accomplished.

After the action, the film slows again to its meditative pace, even though Josh is nervy. Dena becomes more frightened and reclusive, some minimal contact by phone with Harmon. With news of a fatality, the impact is stronger for both Josh and Dena.

There is a shock sequence which will leave audiences wondering about Josh and his character – and then the film just stops, dramatically, leaving the audience with issues about empathising with the characters, with their action, or not. The film leaves the audience with numerous challenges and numerous questions about the environment, about protest, about “theatrics” rather than solid demonstration.

PREDESTINATION

Australia, 2014, 97 minutes, Colour.
Ethan Hawke, Sarah Snook, Noah Taylor.
Directed by Michael and Peter Spierig.

Predestination used to be a theological term (well, it still is in religious circles). It was associated with John Calvin and his theology, of God's grace to some predestined people, and the sign of their grace and predestination shown by their prosperity in this world. This concept developed in the United States and is part of the belief in manifest destiny that America rules unless it falls from grace and has lost its predestination – symbolised in the experience of Richard Nixon, his claiming his authority and presidency until he was exposed and lost his predestination.

This is a film with an American setting, an American consciousness, much of the action taking place in Boston. But it should be added that this is an Australian film, made in Melbourne, re-creating the American atmosphere, totally convincingly.

Some audiences may have the religious meanings of predestination in mind when they watch this film but they soon have to readjust their understanding of the word. It is used here in a secular context, a focus on human fate and destiny, and the mysteries of human nature. Because the plot entails complex time travel, this makes the challenge to understand the meaning of the film and the presentation of the characters much more interesting, even though continually puzzling.

The film is based on a short story, *All You Zombies*, by Robert A. Heinlein, author of such stories as *Starship Troopers*, *The Puppet Masters*. It has been adapted for the screen by twin brothers, the directors Michael and Peter Spierig. Their previous film was an arresting vampire film, *Daybreakers*.

They have brought the star of *Daybreakers*, Ethan Hawke, to be one of the two central characters in *Predestination*. He first appears as a bartender in the 1970s but it is revealed that he is a time traveller, an agent used by a bureaucracy for police work and the prevention of crime. His main task is to prevent a massacre in 1975 by a murderer nicknamed The Fizzle Killer. We see The Bartender moving from one time to another – and it is finally revealed that he does much more travel than we had initially expected.

The other central character whom we also meet in the bar, talking to The Bartender, is a character called in the cast list, The Unmarried Mother. This is a name which does not do justice to the complexities of the character, especially as we first see her as a man, revealing that she has had sex change surgery. And she is somehow or other involved in the quest for The Fizzle Killer.

Her time travel is portrayed in flashbacks. As a little girl, she was taken by a mysterious stranger and left at the door of an orphanage. She grows up there, as a girl, but a feisty one, especially in conflict with fellow orphans and authorities. She goes to college, falls in love, has a child (The Unmarried Mother). But then, her inner identity as male comes to the fore and she undergoes the surgery.

It must be said that The Unmarried Mother is played by Sarah Snook (*Sisters of War*, *Not Suitable for Children*, *These Final Hours*). It is an excellent performance (both as female and as male), totally convincing, award-worthy.

A review is not meant to be a synopsis of the film and enough indications have been given here to suggest the tone of the film rather than detail the plot. *Predestination* definitely needs to be seen, to be able to comprehend the meaning of the time shifts, the growing identification of The Bartender

with *The Unmarried Mother*, the quest for *The Fizzle Killer* and the revelation of who the killer is.

Audiences will enjoy the relativity of times and spaces. They will be intrigued by the central characters and their interactions. And there are a lot of philosophical implications in the presentation of human nature, fate, destiny – and whatever predestination means.

SNOWPIERCER

Korea, 2014, 126 minutes, Colour.

Chris Evans, Tilda Swinton, Jamie Bell, John Hurt, Ed Harris, Kang-ho Song, Octavia Spencer, Ewan Bremner, Ah-sung Ko, Allison Pill.

Directed by Joon-ho Bong.

Snowpiercer is quite striking film, receiving strong critical acclaim.

The actual *Snowpiercer* of the film is a train with a vast number of carriages, continually travelling around the world, through landscapes, over bridges – but the world has frozen and it is now 2031 and survival is only for those only in the train.

This is really an international film on many fronts, perhaps enabling it to be appreciated in a wide range of countries throughout the world. It is based on a French graphic novel and has been adapted by its Korean director, Joon-ho Bong, whose past films (like *Mother*, *The Host*) have, to say the least, many bizarre characteristics, plotlines and characters. And the cast is also international, Americans Chris Evans, as leader of the revolutionaries from the back of the train, and Octavia Spencer as the mother of a little boy who is taken for cruel purposes in the running of the train. Britain is represented by Jamie Bell as the leader's second in charge, by John Hurt as the guru amongst the revolutionaries and by Tilda Swinton, almost unrecognisable in look and voice as she was in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, as the link between the poverty at the back of the train and the wealth and comfort at the head of the train. Ed Harris also appears towards the end of the film. Korea is represented by Kang-ho Song as an expert on opening the doors to successive carriages.

In one sense, the plot is fairly straightforward. Since the beginning of the train's run fifteen years earlier, there has been a group of poor survivors at the back of the train, crammed into their carriages, clothes deteriorating, and a strange block of food to be cut up, providing minimal protein. There have been some revolutionary uprisings in the past – but, now, it seems is the right time for a new revolutionary movement. Chris Evans as Curtis, who has some dark shadows in his past, is reluctant to be the leader, despite his being encouraged by Gilliam, the guru who has sacrificed one of his arms in the struggle for freedom. Curtis is supported by the wilful and often headstrong Edgar, Jamie Bell.

While the revolution is being prepared, there are visits from the front of the train, a big blonde woman who measures up children and takes away those she has chosen – with a later revelation of the ugly consequences of her action. There is a visit from Mason, the bizarre intermediary between the proletariat in the back and the wealthy in the front.

A lot of the film is taken up with the progress of the revolutionaries, not without some gun battles and a high body count of the soldiers and of the revolutionaries, as they move forward from carriage to carriage, discovering different aspects of the carriages, including a water carriage, an Arboretum carriage, a school for the wealthy, arrogant children, a club car for socialites.

Eventually, there is a climax as they come to the door of the carriage where the owner is ensconced – as we have heard from the beginning of the film. It is in his carriage that there are many revelations about what is happening, about what has happened, and what the future might entail.

The film is intriguing in its plot to say the least and impressive in its unfolding of its story, development of its characters, indication of themes of post-apocalyptic oppression.

Having said that, with the Korean director's interest in bizarre aspects of plot development, it is important to note that with the many violent sequences, *Snowpiercer* is not for the faint hearted audience.

THESE FINAL HOURS

Australia, 2013, 87 minutes, Colour.

Nathan Phillips, Angourie Rice, David Field, Lynette Curran, Sarah Snook, Jessica de Gouw, Daniel Henshall.

Directed by Zak Hilditch.

These Final Hours are, in the film, literally humanity's final time before the absolute destruction of Earth.

The film works well in the apocalyptic genre, offering a plausible end of the world, a meteor crashing into earth setting off an ever-increasing fireball that destroys the northern hemisphere, Africa and is headed, finally, to Australia. Audiences interested in this kind of film will have in mind the basic core plot of Neville Shute's *On the Beach*. There are many differences, this film is more focused on the final hours alone – though it does finish on the beach. Another recent film with this theme is *Searching for a Friend at the End of the World* with Steve Carrell and Keira Knightley.

The challenge of the film to its audience is to ask what we would do if we had only a few hours to live. The central character, James, played well by Nathan Phillips, is a self-centred man. At the opening, we see him sexually involved with his girlfriend, discovering that she is pregnant, but nevertheless leaving her and going to see another girlfriend at an end-of-life party. He is an Everyman character, but seemingly a less than worthy one. He takes his car, driving to the party, a device which enables the audience to see what is going on in the streets and how people are responding.

One thing that makes an effective impact is that the setting is Perth, ordinary suburban streets, the car passing by very comfortable homes which now are empty, still looking realistic despite what is going on. Most audiences can identify with this setting. The streets are not crowded, though there are bodies lying on the street, one hanging from a light pole, a group of with their Bibles praying in the street, some predators attacking a little girl...

It is this episode that challenges James's conscience. Reluctantly, yet willingly, he goes to the rescue of the little girl, confronting the brutal predators and killing them. He takes the girl, Rose, who wants to go to find her father. James is still somewhat unwilling but goes to the local ice rink where her father is not to be found, and she asking him then to take her to her aunt's place where her family were to gather. But, James still wants to go to his party.

The party is a conventional scene of loud music, young people dancing, sexual activity, some of it orgiastic. James leaves Rose with the partyers, and teams up with his other girlfriend, Vicky, who has

been looking forward to spend a sexual end of the world with him. He meets up with his friend, Frank, the host of the party who ultimately does not understand James's altruistic decisions. After disillusioning Vicky that the bunker she and Frank have prepared will not save them from death, she lets him go. In the meantime, there is a woman, mentally deluded by grief and drugs, who thinks that Rose is her daughter and gives her a pill which has a terrible effect on the little girl. This reinforces James and his decision to save Rose.

The final part of the film is, indeed, very sad. Rose finds her family but in tragic circumstances, deciding to stay, that this is the right place for her at the end of the world. James visits his mother, a low-key visit, with a fine cameo performance by Lynette Curran. She is going to stay in her home, quietly doing her puzzles until the end comes.

Which leads James back to where he started, to the girlfriend, seeing the enormous furnace in the sky which is devouring earth, the culmination of these final hours.

Not a film for everyone, rather disturbing in its way. But it is an interesting contribution to the ever-popular apocalyptic imagining of the end of the world.

WHAT WE DO IN THE SHADOWS

New Zealand, 2014, 86 minutes, Colour.

Jemaine Clement, Taika Waititi, Jonathan Brugh, Cori González- Macuer, Stuart Rutherford, Ben Fransham, Jackie van Beek, Rhys Darby.

Directed by Jemaine Clement and Taika Waititi.

The important part of the title is not the "shadows" but the "we". "We" are, in fact, dwellers in Wellington, New Zealand, but vampires! Migrants from Europe, they found New Zealand a peaceful place to which to migrate and settle. Further, in fact, there are many witches, groups of werewolves as well as vampires peacefully living as citizens of the New Zealand capital. At least, that is what this film claims.

And who would think up such a scenario? The answer is Taika Waititi and Jemaine Clement. The two of them are very talented Kiwi writers, directors and actors. Waititi directed *The Flight of the Conchords* and directed the moving New Zealand film about a Maori boy, *Boy*. Clement has acted in *The Flight of the Conchords* as well as a number of American films including *Men in Black 4* and gives his distinctive voice to the villain, Nigel, in the *Rio* films.

It is hoped that nobody is taking this too seriously. This is a comedy, and quite a funny comedy it is, plenty of rollicking jokes, deadpan verbal humour, and a smile on the audience's face throughout the whole film. It is a very good example of the mockumentary genre, even with old-fashioned title-images from the New Zealand documentary unit of the past. It is Un- Reality TV!

Viago (Waititi) is the host for the documentary, welcoming the camera crew into his house, a flat which is shared with three other vampires. They are of varying age, the age of Viago himself almost 400, but they also have a resident in the basement, Petyr, several thousand years old and the image of the famous Nosferatu. We are soon at the kitchen table because Viago has called a meeting to discuss the roster for the chores, to criticise The Deacon, for avoiding his responsibilities and not wanting to wash up – but he is soon at the kitchen sink washing up bloodstained crockery. It is that kind of film.

Viago is a very pleasant host, working very well with the camera crew who seem to be in on every scene (no matter how impossible). A lot of amusing episodes within the flat. However, the vampires want to go out on the town and, not having any appearance in mirrors, they are not sure how properly they addressed – they are not, very old-fashioned. And often they are not allowed into clubs. Sometimes on the way they encounter a group of young men who turned out to be the local werewolves.

It does become a bit complicated when a young man, Nick, is invited into the flat and at the end of the evening is bitten and transformed. He thinks this is something of a hoot, giving him definitely a better lifestyle, and he has no hesitation in telling everybody what has happened to him. This does arouse the interest of a vampire hunter who comes to the house and wreaks a bit of devastation.

The other principal character is Stu, a rather silent, all laconic, passive young man, an expert in IT, who is able to introduce the vampires to the Internet and working on their laptops. This is especially the case for Vladislav (Clement) who has been disappointed in love, referring to his former partner as The Beast.

There is another entertaining character, Jackie, who desperately wants to be transformed but who is a vampire slave, doing all the cleaning and tidying up in the flat. She has no hesitation in talking to camera and explaining everything.

We have been told at the beginning that there is a big social event coming up, where all vampires, werewolves and local witches turn up for dancing. There are some climactic moments, especially with The Beast and some of the guests at the social taking a dim view of Stu gate-crashing, being an ordinary human.

And, in the appropriate words of Shakespeare, all is well that ends well! Quite a different entertainment.

REVIEWS OCTOBER 2014

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TUSK
WETLANDS
WISH I WAS HERE

20,000 DAYS ON EARTH

UK, 2013, 97 minutes, Colour.

Nick Cave, Suzie Bick.

Directed by Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard.

The credits of this documentary on Nick Cave and his career start with a counter at zero. It then begins to move rapidly, very rapidly, through the numbers until it reaches 19,999. And all the time, there is an even more rapidly changing, large of photos from Nick Cave's life.

This is an imaginary, but realistic, day in the life of Nick Cave – his 20,000 day. For many years he has lived in England, on the coast in Brighton, where he feels comfortably at home. He has a wife and children. From this domestic base, and we see him getting up in the morning, we see his relationship with his family and his admiration for Suzie and her support and advice. At the end, we see him relaxing with the children.

His day is very busy including a number of visits, especially to his collaborator Warren Ellis, an eccentric but attractive character. Inserted is a sequence with Ellis and some French children doing background singing. He also visits his archive, some rooms with an archivist at work, going over various documents, pictures, so that there is a record of Cave's career to live on after him.

There are any number of flashbacks, and many scenes showing Cave at work, by himself, writing in his notebook, lyrics for his songs, scribbled and crossed out. We see him at his piano and his composing. There are many scenes of performance with his group, the Bad Seeds, and, towards the end, a full blast concert at the Sydney Opera House. Throughout the film there is work in composition, performance of Push the Sky.

Cave has an inner intensity which manifests itself in his response to the interviewers, revealing quite a deal about himself, his early life in the Victorian countryside around Wangaratta, the affirmation of his father, his moving into music, the 1980s which he says he largely forgets, a decade of drug-taking in Australia and in Berlin, where he did much of his work in composition.

For those who appreciate Cave and for those interested in how he came to achieve the status he has, there is a great deal of personal detail as well as response from various people, some of whom suddenly appear in the car which he is driving and join in conversation, Ray Winstone (although the

connection is not very clear why Winstone is there), former Bad Seeds musician, Blixa Bargeld, and an invigorating conversation with Kylie Minogue.

A disappointment for those interested in cinema is that he does not give any information about his writing for the screen, for his friend John Hillcoat, and the films *The Proposition* and *Lawless*. Given his busy music schedule, one wonders how he fitted in the writing of screenplays.

For those interested in music, for those who wonder about composers and how they work with their creative processes, and definitely for those interested in Nick Cave and his career, this is both an interesting and entertaining documentary.

ADVANCED STYLE

US, 2013, 72 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Lina Plioplyte.

The niche audience for this documentary is probably women in their 90s or, perhaps more generously, women in their 80s or late 70s. Not that other audiences might not enjoy it, but it is a film for a feminine sensibility of whatever gender.

Ari Cohen, something of a flamboyant, at least flamboyantly dressed, photographer says he has been influenced by his grandmothers and wanted to keep in touch with their sensibilities by photographing women over 50, especially those who, in the New York streets, also dressed flamboyantly, drawing attention to the styles of their costumes and hats, as well as their poses and styles as they walked along the streets.

Cohen was impressed, and we see him interviewing a number of these elderly women in the streets, flattering one by suggesting that she was 50 when she admits to 60. And he started a blog which had many, many, many hits to see his gallery of photos.

Collaborating with photographer-director, Lina Plioplyte, he selects a number of the women, those who have very strong personalities and were able to present instantly to camera. These women are certainly articulate, very New York or very New England, unabashed in relating their life stories, and taking absolute delight in explaining their ensembles or, in their words, their outfits.

Aficionados of fashion will find the film very interesting, visually striking, and humanly both serious and humorous. Cohen takes the women to a fashion show which they revel in. He also takes them to a television studio where they strut their stuff and give interviews on the *Ricky Lake Show*.

A macho audience, or a semi-macho audience, or a semi-semi macho audience, might find the film a bit trying, not to their taste or interest.

One can admire Cohen's enthusiasm. One can be impressed by the women and their vitality, and realise that if one is able to take interest in one's life and surroundings, then the 80s and then 90s will be especially lively.

ANNABELLE

US, 2014, 98 minutes, Colour.

Annabelle Wallis, Ward Horton, Tony Amendola, Alfred Woodard.
Directed by John Leonetti.

Annabelle is the name of a deadly doll. Not that that was her real name. Rather, when a sinister young woman, daughter of the next door neighbours to Mia and John, kills her parents with a cult associate, and is wounded, her blood drips down onto the nameless dial doll who then becomes the deadly Annabelle.

Over the decades that have been many films about deadly dolls. Lionel Barrymore starred in a 1930s horror film, Devil Doll. Then there were the sinister dolls, Dead of Night, with Michael Redgrave, and then Anthony Hopkins in Magic. In the 1980s and 90s, there was a series of horror films, Child's Play, with the doll, Chucky (and the director of Annabelle, John Leonetti, a longtime cinematographer, actually directed Child's Play 3).

There is another horror connection, this time with the Insidious series and The Conjuring. In the latter, the story is told of real-life Catholic exorcists, a couple, Ed and Lorraine Warren. They were associated with the Amityville hauntings and played a part in riding the house of the devil. Needless to say, some commentators were quite wary of the claims of the Warrens, who were confident and appeared in many television programs and series. Later in Annabelle, the parish priest, Father Peres, suggests that the couple who own the deadly doll, Mia and John, should contact the Warrens. They don't, but there is a reference at the end as to the final location for the deadly doll, in their museum (with the comment that the doll – which is a Raggedy Ann doll, not porcelain as in the film (perhaps too much information!) - is still blessed twice a month).

The film is not one of those gory horror films that is ugly to look at. Rather, this is something of a slow-burner, gradually building up a sense of terror, especially for the pregnant Mia and after the birth of her daughter, Lia. Every now and then, sometimes more often, there is one of those editing jump cuts which has the audience jumping in their chairs. But in this one, atmosphere is important.

There is quite an explicit Catholic tone in the film, with a couple going to a fairly crowded mass with many young adults (the setting is 1970) with some effective sermons by the parish priest, Father Peres (Tony Amendola). He preaches on sacrifice and laying down one's life for others just as Jesus did. In fact, after all the events of the film, Mia and John go to Mass once again and Father Peres repeats this sermon about sacrifice. He also preaches against fear of fear. And, he is presented as approachable, the couple coming to him with their difficulties and his offering to help out – which has some temporary dire effects on him, a touch of Satanic possession and a stint in hospital.

The screenplay introduces themes of demons and demonic presence and how the devil into enters into such things as dolls to torment humans and try to take their souls.

The other central character is a book shopkeeper called Evelyn (Alfre Woodard) who is sympathetic towards Mia, offers her books, comes to the apartment to discussion discuss the demons and is finally confronted by the devil doll.

Some of the editing cuts are startling, but the film, by and large, is not so startling, relying on audiences to identify with the young couple and their troubles, the impact of the deadly Annabelle, the religious dimensions of the couple's experience, building up to a confrontation, not nearly as explicit or melodramatic as in films like The Exorcist, but indicating that it is not improbable for Annabelle to get out of her museum glass case for a sequel.

THE BOXTROLLS

US, 2014, 97 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: Ben Kingsley, Jared Harris, Nick Frost, Richard Ayoade, Tracy Morgan, Steve Blum, Isaac Hempstead Wright, Elle Fanning, Toni Collette, Simon Pegg.

Directed by Graham Annable, Anthony Stacchi.

Usually animation films, especially from Hollywood, and in the Disney tradition, are usually bright and colourful, even if they have sinister aspects, especially evil witches. But there is another tradition, dark and sinister stories with monstrous characters, thinking of Frankweenie. There was also Coraline and Paranorman. These were definitely dark and relied on more sinister traditions, especially from monsters and horror films. And these two were made by an Oregon-based animation company, Laika.

Boxtrolls is a Laika film. With the word Trolls in the title, and memories of Nordic monsters, we might expect a very dark animation story – and that is what we get.

The film is based on a children's novel, Here be Monsters. With the film's title, we know who the monsters are – or are they?

Who are these trolls? They are small, human-enough-looking characters who are clad in cardboard boxes. Hence the name. They come out at night, scour the garbage tins and scavenge for anything that they can find and bring it back to their home, in a basement, underground. There are in process of making a giant machine – but we're not sure of the purpose.

And where do they operate? In a lavishly drawn town which may be English but certainly looks as if it comes from the continent. In fact, everyone has a British accent so that gives it a particular tone and flavour, rather than American. The trolls are not particularly in favour in the town and there is a squad set up to find them and destroy them, led by rather gross looking character appropriately called Snatcher. He has a couple of assistants, also caricature-looking but two of them will make good towards the end, the other not and, definitely, Snatcher not. Snatcher and co are the monsters.

The townspeople are very afraid of the trolls, not understanding them at all, and made even more fearful because of the story of the abduction of a little boy, the Trubshaw boy. This story is circulated and even re-enacted in the marketplace by a bizarre singer.

A little boy was taken. We see him as a baby with the trolls. Then he grows up, is curious about the world outside, removes a manhole in the street and emerges but is pushed and shoved by all the citizens. He sees the re-enactment of the taking of the Trubshaw boy and realises that it is he.

The rather wilful daughter of the Lord and Lady of the town volunteers to act in the story, sees the boy, whose name is Eggs, because of the box which he uses for his clothes, something the other trolls do. Eggs goes back to the trolls but realises that Snatcher is getting closer. Snatcher is being driven by jealous motivation, that he will be able to wear the tall White Hat that the Lord wears can be a power in the town. He almost gets there, but the ceremony is interrupted by the trolls who had been hidden in a dungeon (where we discover Mr Trubshaw hanging from his heels and rather demented). Snatcher thinks he has crushed all the boxes and got rid of the trolls – but they are still a step ahead of him.

One of the important products of the town is cheese and the Lord is very upset with the stealing of

his cheese. There is a finale, Snatcher doing a cheese-tasting with explosive results!

The animation is very distinctive for the elaborate layouts of the town, the underground basement, the machines as well as a lot of effort going into the very detailed design of the trolls and the humans. The voice cast is considerable with Isaac Hempstead Wright as Eggs, a sinister Ben Kingsley as Snatcher, and quite a number of British comedians, Nick Frost, Richard Ayoade, Simon Pegg, as well as Toni Collette bringing good quality to the voice performances.

Having said all this, I wonder who the film is really for. Enterprising and energetic youngsters who have a taste for monsters? Surely? Impressionable children, probably not. For adults? Yes and “intriguing”. So one of those animation stories which parents need to check out because of the themes and the scares.

DRACULA UNTOLD

US, 2014, 92 minutes, colour Colour.

Luke Evans, Sarah Gaydon, Dominic Cooper, Charles Dance, Paul Kaye.

Directed by Gary Shore.

Who would have thought there was more to tell about Dracula? There have been so many versions of Bram Stoker’s novel. There have been so many inventive stories (and still many more lacking inventiveness, relying rather on exploitation) about what Dracula might have done in his vampire incarnations. In the prologue to Bram Stoker’s Dracula, directed by Francis Ford Coppola, there was a historical prologue about Vlad the Impaler, his battles against the Turks, his vicious style of massacring his foes, the suicide of his wife and his being angry at the refusal of Christian burial for her, deciding that he would be anti-God.

Something of this latter history is incorporated into Dracula Untold.

Vlad is shown battling the Turks, after having been taken by them from his father at a young age and brought up by them. However, he has returned to his kingdom, based at Castle Dracula. He has restored peace, is happily married, has a son. The Turks are sending out spies and they have mysteriously disappeared. They have been killed in a cave, inhabited by bats. Needless to say, the commanding Turk, Mehmed, Dominic Cooper, is not happy and threatens the kingdom.

What follows is very interesting for Dracula fans and so a recommendation to them to see how Dracula confronts an ageing vampire, Charles Dance, and his explanations of how he became a vampire as well as his confrontation with Vlad. A bargain is pledged with Vlad trying to save his people, save his wife, save his son who has in turn been abducted by the Turks.

This means that there are a number of battle scenes, Vlad struggling to keep the bargain with the vampire and his promise to save everyone will still be struggling with his craving for blood. The film takes up all kinds of memories of vampire lore, how to protect oneself, how to destroy vampires.

Just before the end, the plot moves to indicate that there will be no sequel, which might be disappointing for those who like British actor Luke Evans as Vlad. But, we have been definitely told, not untold, that vampires live forever so there is a reassuring ending, along with the big box office that this film has had in the United States, that there will be more to tell about Dracula.

THE EQUALIZER

US, 2014, 132 minutes, Colour.

Denzel Washington, Marton Czakas, Chloe Grace Moretz, Johnny Skourtis, David Harbour, David Meunier, Bill Pullman, Melissa Leo.

Directed by Antoine Fuqua.

The story of a vigilantes saint? The initial emphasis of the film is on the saint, the latter part is on the vigilante, in brutal in his killings but attempting to be rational and moral in his decisions for killing.

Denzel Washington has been appearing in action shows for several years, as he approaches the age of 60. He brings that impression of integrity that he has offered in many of his films. Director Antoine Fuqua directed Washington to an Academy Award in 2001 in Training Day, where, in fact, he was a policeman but the film villain.

This film is loosely based on a television series starring Edward Woodward.

The first impression that Denzel Washington makes is of a benign, serious, loner, sympathetic friend called Robert Mc Call. He lives quietly in an apartment, absolutely neat and orderly at all times. Off he goes to work in a warehouse, sympathetic to many who work there, especially Ralphie, an overweight young man who has ambitions to be a security guard. At night, he can't sleep and goes over to a nearby diner to read a book, currently *The Old Man and the Sea*. He chats with and befriends a young girl who is obviously a prostitute (Chloe Grace Moretz). It is in sympathy for her and the treatment she has been given by a group of Russian thugs, especially her pimp, that Robert gets involved in helping her. Involved is rather meek word for what he actually does. Quietly going to their restaurant, going into the office, checking out the four men who are there, especially the leader who has been brutal to the girl. They laugh at him, he looks at his watch, and within less than a minute they are all dead.

The Russians send their Equalizer or, perhaps better, their Leveller, who uses the local thugs on behalf of the Moscow-based boss, to find out who did the killings, suspecting Irish and Italian groups in the city. A bit of roughing up makes them realise they are not responsible.

Nikolai, the Leveller (Marton Czakas is very persuasive as a sociopathic villain the with a smooth-talking and urbane manner, but otherwise ruthless) actually tracks down, using CCTV footage, this African- American who does not seem at all like someone who executes and with such accuracy and method.

As we probably suspected, Robert was an FBI agent, skilled in killing, but opting out because of his wife and her illness. He goes to visit former agents, good cameos from Melissa Leo and Bill Pullman, gets information about the Leveller. So all we have to do is wait for the final confrontation.

While Robert is still something of a saint in his moral attitudes for wreaking vengeance, the killings themselves become much more brutal, seemingly pandering to a strong appetite for visual violence in the audience. Some of it stretches credibility, but by this stage the film is something of a 21st century *Death Wish*.

THE GIVER

US, 2014, 97 minutes, Colour.

Jeff Bridges, Meryl Streep, Brenton Thwaites, Alexander Skarsgaard, Katie Holmes, Odeya Rush, Cameron Monaghan, Taylor Swift.
Directed by Phillip Noyce.

The Giver is based on the Young Adult novel by Lois Lowry. Filmgoers, especially young filmgoers, will recognise the links with such films as The Hunger Games as well as Divergent although The Giver was published in 1993. In fact, The Giver begins in a very similar way to Divergent but moves to calmer and more peaceful solutions to the crises in the society and community rather than the violence of Hunger Games or Divergent's martial training.

One of the immediate characteristics of the film is that much of it is in black and white rather than colour. Audiences are informed that this is a future society where equality and sameness are valued, that there are rules to foster the sameness, so black and white is an obvious visual leveller. No standout colour differences (which is also seen in the layout of the suburban area of the community where all houses are exactly the same). This isolated would-be Utopia is situated on a high rocky outcrop, making the moving out of the community difficult even if it were desired. There is a distant boundary which keeps people in. Not that the community wants to go out. This is very peaceful community, living in harmony, everyone following the rules, peace, happiness and friendship.

We are introduced to three friends who are about to graduate and move into adult tasks: Jonas, Asher and Fiona. At their graduation ceremony, The Chief Elder allots a place in the community to each of the teenagers, child nurturing, upholding the law, drone pilots... But, Jonas is not called in his turn and waits to the end where he is allotted a special role, working with The Giver, who retains all the memories of the past which have been obliterated from the members of the community. The Giver's role is to advise the council of Elders.

The audience has noticed that Jonas has already had a glimpse of colour. When he works with The Giver, the older man holding on to the young man's arms, transmitting memories – of people and events outside the community, all in colour. Jonas begins to appear in colour himself, and his perceptions of the community become coloured while all the rest are still conformed in their black and white.

As one will anticipate, there will come a time (perhaps this was The Giver's intention), that Jonas would leave the community and break through the boundary.

The film has a strong cast. Australian Brenton Thwaites (the prince in Maleficent) is effective as Jonas. The Giver himself is played by a somewhat grizzled Jeff Bridges. And, perhaps surprisingly, the community is ruled over by The Chief Elder, who is Meryl Streep, presented in the most unglamorous way, the touch of the hag. Jonas parents (adoptive) are played by Alexander Skarsgaard whose work is in the nurturing of the planned babies and the mother, severe and an ally of The Chief Elder, is played by Katie Holmes. The director is Australian Phillip Noyce, director of Newsfront, Rabbit Proof Fence as well as such American action dramas as Patriot Games, Salt.

Unlike so many other films of this kind, the running time is very short, around 100 minutes. So, in some senses it seems like a short story rather than an epic like The Hunger Games. Obviously, it is a values-oriented film, a story that is against forced conformism in society or family, where the value is freedom of choice, self-determination, and contradicting the opinion of The Chief Elder who is against freedom of choice because humans are prone to make the wrong choices.

GONE GIRL

US, 2014, 145 minutes, Colour.

Ben Affleck, Rosamund Pike, Neal Patrick Harris, Tyler Perry, Kim Dickens, Patrick Fugit, David Clennon.

Directed by David Fincher.

Gone Girl seems too slight and juvenile for a title of a novel and film about adults in deep crisis. There is often a problem when a book is a bestseller and audiences find that the cinema interpretation does not live up to their expectations and imagining of characters and plot. This review is based on the film rather than the novel, which was given as a gift, and has been left to read after the cinema experience.

This is a very difficult film to review because of the plot complexities and some twists, not that many audiences, whether readers of the book will not, could not anticipate where the plot would go. The interest is in seeing how the twists are introduced and developed. The screenplay is written by the author of the novel, Gillian Flynn – so we presume she knows what she is doing.

The first sentences of the film indicate that Nick Dunn would like to kill his wife, asking her what is going on in her head and in her feelings. It is their fifth anniversary and Nick goes to The Bar, which he owns, and is managed by his twin sister, Margot. Ben Affleck is Nick and Carrie Coon is Margot. Both give very effective performances.

But we also see Nick's wife, Amy, in a series of flashbacks, writing her diary of the past, talking about experiences with meeting her husband, the initial exhilaration, the difficult times, and his statement that she fears her husband could kill her. While the leads give solid performances, it is Rosamund Pike as Amy who gives a tour-de-force performance, obviously committed to reflecting the intricacies of her complex character.

When Nick arrives home and finds a room in disarray, with traces of blood stains in the kitchen, he is puzzled and goes to the police to report his wife missing. The main officer in charge of the investigation is played by Kim Dickens, again a very strong performance, especially in comparison with that of Patrick Fugit, her partner, who obviously needs a bit more training in police and detective work.

The screenplay shows each day passing, more and more evidence arising against Nick, including envelopes with clues provided by Amy for the celebration of their anniversary. Margot offers complete support and understanding. And then the media get onto it, especially an interviewer played by Missy Pyle, practically a caricature of this kind of interviewer, until we realise that some interviewers actually are like this, especially American interviewers. She not only goes with the flow, she creates the flow, targeting Nick and eliciting all kinds of sympathies for Amy from her seemingly insatiable audience. Then Amy is discovered, to have been pregnant, information eagerly given in a the evidence from her neighbour, her best friend.

It gets very hard for Nick. He goes to visit one of Amy's school friends who was infatuated with her, a good acting performance by Neal Patrick Harris as a lover, rather than as a compere of American award shows. He also goes to the best lawyer in Missouri, played by Tyler Perry.

This review will now try to make a comment on the second part of the film without giving any of the plot directions away. All that might be said is that it is quite fascinating as we watch the explanations given of what happened and how it happened.

The two central characters are in no way a heroic, rather, each controlling the other, Amy more so than Nick.

Probably what can be said is that *Gone Girl*, directed by David Fincher, director of *Seven*, *The Game*, *Panic Room*, and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, is a very interesting exploration of two people, their psychological states and what those states compel them to do.

THE GRAND SEDUCTION

Canada, 2013, 113 minutes, Colour.

Brendan Gleeson, Taylor Kitsch, Liane Balaban, Gordon Pinsent.

Directed by Don Mc Kellar.

What's in a name? *Seducing* has all kinds of sexual overtone and leads us to expect some medical sex story. It isn't.

This film is located on a tight little bay off the Canadian coast. The central character, Murray (Brendan Gleeson at his best), remembers his childhood days when fishing was the livelihood and everybody was content. Now, the population of 125 is in the doldrums, the waters are fished out, cashing their dole cheques with little hope of renewal - except, maybe, if they can land a contract for a factory. The catches: they have to pay a hefty bribe to the company, they need to have over 200 inhabitants, they need to have a resident doctor.

And that is where Doctor Lewis comes in - and the seduction. Can they convince the city doctor who has been sent to Tickle Bay because of cocaine in his luggage for a month to look over the place. Can the inhabitants, under Murray's leadership, persuade him to stay? They also have to raise the money with the help of the rather unimaginative bank manager who fears being replaced by a machine. They also have to convince the company boss that they have the correct population (which eventually leads to logistics problems as they have to race along back streets to get to the next venue to create a crowded impression!).

It is all very genial (except the issue of the bribe which seems to be taken for granted as business management). The doctor is a nice man but is very upset when his engagement breaks down. Everybody is so friendly, pretending to play cricket which Dr Lewis loves, helping him fish. He is attracted to the post mistress - she is not - and she reveals that everyone is deceiving him. Well, we know what happens. The important thing is watching how it happens.

Needless to say, there are a lot of characters on the island and there are lots of amusing situations (the listening in to all the doctor's phone calls and wanting to intervene when he is critical, a snorkeller putting a frozen fish on the eager angler's hook...).

The screenplay of the original, *La Grande Seduction*/ *Seducing Dr Lewis*, was written by Ken Scott and adapted for the English language version. He did the same with *Starbuck* which became *Delivery Man*.

While the setting is Canadian, the film travels well and has a universal humour and appeal.

IF I STAY

US, 2014, 107 minutes, Colour.

Chloe Grace Moretz, Mireille Enos, Jamie Blackley, Joshua Leonard, Liana Liberato, Stacy Keech, Gabrielle Rose, Lauren Lee Smith.

Directed by R.J.Cutler.

What is it about physical and mental illness that has attracted a number of up-and-coming actresses for their starring roles, Dakota Fanning dying in *Now is Good*, Shailene Woodley having to carry around her oxygen cylinder in *The Fault in our Stars*, Jennifer Lawrence mentally disturbed in her Oscar-winning role in *Silver Linings Playbook*, and now Chloe Grace Moretz in a car accident in *If I Stay*. Come to think of it, they have all been attracted by the heroics of comic-book worlds, Chloe Grace Moretz in the two *Kick Ass* films, Dakota Fanning as a vampire in the *Breaking Dawn* series, Shailene in Woodley so physically fit in *Divergent*, let alone Jennifer Lawrence in the *Hunger Games* series. Perhaps that means they are comfortable in vigorous life as well as in sadness, illness and death.

This film is based on a popular Young Adult novel. Chloe Grace Moretz is Mia, a teenager with loving parents and with a younger brother. She is a cello player, devoting hours to her practice, playing with a professional group and ambitions for the future at Juilliard. It is a snow day and so no school. Her parents suggest an outing for the whole family, but suddenly there is a deadly accident on the road...

It is not giving anything away, one only has to look at the title, to appreciate that while it seems that Mia is fatally injured, but up she gets from lying on the highway, wanders around taking stock of the situation, grief at her parents' deaths, concerned about her brother's injuries, and watching herself being put on the stretcher, into the ambulance and taken to hospital. So, this is a very extended near-death experience for her. She can see and hear everything. No one can see or hear her.

Into this scenario of Mia watching at the hospital, are inserted quite a number of flashbacks, rather randomly in fact, which fill out her story, final review of life, as a little girl, as a teenager, her seeming shyness and being pushed by a cousin, Kim, (Liana Liberato), encountering a musician, leader of the band, Adam (Jamie Blackley), who takes notice of her, and the two become an item, even a couple. But there has been a clash before the accident, Adam going on tour with his band and their great success and possibility for records, Mia and her application for the scholarship in music at Juilliard in New York.

Her grandparents, extended family and friends visit the hospital urging her to live. At first, Adam is not permitted into her room, but later does come and sings to her. The moment of truth will come and whether she opts to leave die or to come back to life is the dramatic dynamic of the plot.

Chloe Grace Moretz has shown great versatility in performances, not only in *Kick Ass*, but in the remake of *Carrie* and in the remake of the Swedish vampire film, *Let Me In*. She clearly has a strong future before her.

This is a film for the young adult audience, especially for young females, but with the romantic subplot and the pleasing performance, young males may not be unhappy to see it as well. Parents might take something of a benign attitude towards the story, and Mia's very close relationship with Adam, but, on the whole, it is not their kind of film.

THE IMMIGRANT

US, 2013, 120 minutes, Colour.

Marion Cotillard, Joaquin Phoenix, Jeremy Renner, Dagmara Dominczyk.

Directed by James Gray.

The Immigrant is a grim film.

It is 1921, boats full of migrants sail into New York Harbour, passing the Statue of Liberty, full of hope, then landing at the migrant centre on Ellis Island, a vast and milling place where apprehensive migrants, many not speaking English or unsure of it, face the officials who grill them on their backgrounds, sometimes threatening, on the lookout for any who have contagious illnesses, eventually passing the greater number of them who then go out into the vastness of the city of New York and its streets, sometimes welcoming, sometimes welcoming.

The two immigrants at the beginning of this story are Polish sisters, Ewa and Magda, who have left their home country in some desperation and are relying on the welcome of an uncle and aunt. The plan does not go well. Magda is suffering from tuberculosis and is quarantined. There have been some accusation against Ewa and her behaviour on the ship and she is held under some suspicion.

This part of the plot is forcefully communicated with Marion Cotillard playing Ewa.

Enter Bruno, played by Joaquin Phoenix. He seems a concerned American, appearing on Ellis Island to help those in need. He chooses Ewa. We are taken in by him initially but it soon appears that he is a rogue, manipulating the authorities, sometimes buying them off, choosing women allegedly to help but actually taking them to his dive of a vaudeville theatre, where they are to perform, where they are to become prostitutes. At first, Ewa is grateful, relying on his attentions, then gradually realising the truth.

The option for Ewa is to be confined on Ellis Island and deported or to go along with Bruno's plans and get enough money for him to buy off a guard who will release Magda. Ewa makes the option for her sister.

Bruno becomes infatuated with Ewa and falls in love with her. She can accept his help but not his affection. Complication arises when she sees a magician, Emil (Jeremy Renner) performing at Ellis Island and is attracted to him, and he to her. It emerges that he is a cousin to Bruno and that they have clashed for many years. They fight disastrously.

Ewa goes to see her aunt but is rejected by her uncle, later going again to get some financial help. As she collects her money, Bruno becomes somewhat compassionate, not entirely unredeemable.

The film has been directed by James Gray, who has made only a few films but stories of the grimmer side of American life, Little Odessa, The Yards, We Own the Night, Two Lovers. Joaquin Phoenix has appeared in most of his films. Phoenix is a versatile actor and offers an interesting performance here, a complex man of good and evil. The emotional power of the film relies on Marion Cotillard who is a mixture of tenderness, strength and determination, someone who may realise her American dream.

THE INFINITE MAN

Australia, 2014, 85 minutes, Colour.

Josh Mc Conville, Hannah Marshall, Alex Demetriades.

Directed by Hugh Sullivan.

Which is which is the key question that audiences will have throughout most of this film. They might well be wondering, as well, when is when. and, especially, who is who at the very ending of the film.

The Infinite Man is a small and slight film, with a cast of only three and only two locations, an interesting example of small-budget filmmaking and have the filmmakers are able to work successfully within their budget. It is something of a romance, something of a romantic triangle, but mostly a variation on time-travel, raising issues of identity.

The location is the South Australian desert near Woomera. There is also use of a beach location. The cast of three consists of Josh McConville as Dean, a romantic in love with Lana (Hannah Marshall). The third in the triangle is the caddish Terry (Alex Demetriades).

At the opening, Dean and Lana arrive to celebrate an anniversary, only to discover that the hotel out in the desert has been abandoned. Dean is a planner and had everything worked out for this anniversary – but not the arrival of Terry who disrupts the whole proceedings.

One year later, the episode is about to be re-created. But this time, Dean has been working throughout the year on a machine which will return him to the previous year and his encounter with Lana.

Well, what follows is a basic incident that Dean did not anticipate. The present Dean encounters last year's Lana. This year's Lana encounters last years in Dean. And Terry turns up.

And hence, the title, the various times that Dean can go back with time travel – but always with that complication that the previous incarnations of Dean will also be present. And Lana. Which is why the key question is which is which Dean, which is which Lana.

Because the film is done with the light touch, audiences may find these comings and goings rather slight and only mildly amusing. But, if they are drawn into the atmosphere of the time travel and its consequences, they may find it a pleasing entertainment.

There is happy ending with Dean and Lana, flowers and chocolates – but, we are still not sure, which is which!

INTO THE STORM

US, 2014, 89 minutes, Colour.

Richard Armitage, Sarah Wayne Callies, Matt Walsh.

Directed by Stephen Quale.

Whew!!

Actually, that sounds rather weak as a verbal effort to describe the impact of the tornadoes in this semi-documentary disaster film.

How to describe the extraordinary special effects, making the tornadoes (storm in the title is definitely an understatement) seem so real, visually, aurally? So that by the end of the film, though comfortably ensconced in our cinema seats, we do feel the aftermath of being battered and bruised

by being immersed in these twisters. ("Awesome", had it not been hijacked by modern usage, over-usage, could have been a word to describe the impact of the effects – a friend kindly came to the rescue and suggested "astounding" which will do!)

The plot is fairly standard, the attention of the film-makers going to the action sequences rather than to their particularly ordinary dialogue. And the characters, also, are rather ordinary. There are three groups who eventually come together.

The main group is the storm-chasers, professionals, who roam around in high-technical vehicles, one really like a tank, another with sophisticated storm-chasing computers with links to television stations to bring immediate tornado footage. They are led by a very demanding professional named Pete, harsh towards everyone, challenged that he is thinking only of money and reputation rather than the concerns of injured people, but, of course, showing himself heroic at the end. There are drivers as well as camera operators, and Alison, the university educated expert on storms.

The second group focuses on a family, widower father, rather severe on his two teenage sons, who go to a graduation at the local school only to find that the graduate son is absent, making a video with his girlfriend.

The third group, negligible (and the film could've done without them), are some Youtube Yobs, not a brain between them, drinking then drunk, carrying on with attitudes and behaviour and stunts like the Jackass team.

But, the screenplay posits more tornadoes on the one day than Oklahoma ever saw. And then they start to split. As has been said, the visual impact of the tornadoes, the pace of the editing for maximum shock and involvement, more than justifies the making of the film. If you want to see instant destruction, from the continually moving tornadoes, the film certainly provides it. (In the old days, Dorothy's house rolling through the air and landing in olives's'sOz, seemed spectacular. This time, roofs and vehicles are easy targets – by the end, there are several 747s whirling through the air.)

By the end, there is a group in peril, the father and his son, the rescued son (in the nick of time) and his girlfriend, Pete and his team, hiding in a stormwater channel, experiencing the twisters, the calm of the eye of the storm, and the final battering.

In one sense, the film is a very average B-budget story. But, it is an above average experience of cinema tornadoes.

I, ORIGINS

US, 2013, 112 minutes, Colour.

Michael Pitt, Brit Marling, Astrid Burges- Frisby.

Directed by Mike Cahill.

The look of this title is better than what the film might have been called, perhaps should have been called, 'Eye, Origins'. From the very start, the camera focuses in close-up on an eye, inviting the audience to contemplate the eye and its complexities, the wonder of its creation – or, from the point of view of the central character, Ian, the wonder of its evolution.

It should be said from the outset that this film offers a great deal for audiences to think about and

reflect on, especially if they are interested in questions of religion and science. Ultimately, the science group, especially if they are of the atheistic or agnostic persuasion (and we glimpse Ian clutching a book by Richard Dawkins at one stage), may not be convinced by the religious suggestions. Those interested in more transcendent questions should be satisfied, even if the questions are not fully, or to a lesser extent, answered.

We are introduced to Ian in 2006, conducting experiments that might lead to mice and other animals gaining colour sight. Ian is on a scientific quest to try to find some creature that started its life without sight but which evolved an eye. He is given an assistant, Karen (Brit Marling), who is no mean scientist in herself. She promises to examine the development of many creatures who have not had the power of sight and find one so that experiments can be done, giving sight to the blind. In fact, she does find a worm which is a suitable subject for the experiments.

In the meantime, taking some time off from the laboratory, Ian goes to a party where he is attracted to a woman who is wearing something like a Burkha and is attracted by her eyes, asking if he could photograph them. After a brisk and brusque sexual encounter, she disappears. But Ian finds her face on a billboard advertisement, googles and tracks her down. She is from Latin America, has had a chequered life story, but is attracted to Ian and he to her. They plan a sudden marriage but the bureau requires them to have more documentation. And, in the meantime, Karen rings with the news of what she has discovered. To not give away a surprising development of the plot, it can be simply said that something very drastic happens.

And then a shift to 2012-2013, with the Ian, a celebrity, appearing on television, commended for his scientific breakthroughs.

We also see that he has married Karen and she is pregnant. When the child is born, an expert suggests that the boy might be autistic and does several tests, including eye tests where the attention of the child goes to alternative photos, opting for one. The parents have been told, computerwise, that their child has the identical eyes of an elderly man from Idaho.

This presents Ian and Karen with different challenges. Karen, is far more open (as was Sofia) to explanations beyond the accurately scientific. For Ian, this is anathema. They try to find out if there are other examples of identical eyes – only to discover in the eye computer register that a girl in India whose eyes are exactly the same as Sofia's.

Karen urges Ian to go to India, to find the girl, to investigate and to see whether such a thing is possible, the same patterning, suggestions of reincarnation. Ian puts up a huge billboard in Delhi and receives many unlikely callers, only to find the little girl and to do some tests with her, the results of which Karen accurately tabulates and Ian, left bemused and puzzled by the exact likeness of eyes, which, scientifically, should not happen.

And that is where the film ends, sharing the experiences, pondering the scientific, pondering the possibilities of God or something transcendent. As Sophia has said the worm that cannot see is still surrounded by light which it cannot see but might come to see. Humans may be surrounded by God or a transcendent presence which they cannot see, but could - or might - some day.

JODOROWSKY'S DUNE

US/France, 2013, 90 minutes, Colour.

Alejandro Jodorowsky, Brontis Jodorowsky, Michel Seydoux, H.R. Giger, Chris Foss, Christian Vander,

Devin Faraci, Diane O' Bannon, Drew Mc Weeny, Gary Kurtz, Jean- Paul Gibon, Jean- Pierre Vignau, Nicolas Winding Refn, Richard Stanley.
Directed by Frank Pavich.

For the film buffs who experienced films in the 1960s and 1970s, and for those who appreciate the history of cinema, this is an essential film, a portrait of Chilean director Alejandro Jodorowsky and an illustrated lecture on the director himself and his career. At 84, he is a vigorous and intelligent participant in the film, responding eagerly with passion to questions about his career. He is a commanding presence.

The focus on of the film is on his attempt to make a movie of Frank Herbert's Dune in the 1970s. Everything seemed to be in place after a long and painstaking pre-production effort. He and his producer, Michel Seydoux, who had brought the director's films to France with great acclaim, went to, shop the screenplay at all the Hollywood studios. They were commended for the completion of such a planned project, but were wary of the director himself and his reputation and all turned down Dune. (Ironically, the de Laurentiis company greenlit a project in the early 1980s with David Lynch, whom Jodorowsky admired, directing – and we see Jodorowsky amusingly explaining how we went to see the film and had great contentment to find that he thought the film was awful!).

This documentary stands as a very interesting portrait of Jodorowsky, originally from Chile, maker of provocative films in provocative style, especially *El Topo* and *Holy Mountain*, both of which were screened in Australia shortly after their release. These are considered as the first of the Midnight Movies, finding a home in the United States for these late night screenings. Jodorowsky himself says here that he did not urge audiences to take LSD but wanted to provide films which offered the visual equivalent of an LSD experience with hallucinations. And he succeeded. The next step was to make Dune, which he saw as a prophetic novel – even though he changed some of the plotlines and situations according to his own prophetic interpretation. Jodorowsky is not above seeing himself as rather Godlike.

The film makers here have scored many a coup, gathering together most of the chief collaborators for Dune, and interviewing them. One, writer-director, Dan O' Bannon, who had sold up everything in the United States and moved to Paris to work on the project, had died but there were visuals of him and an interview with his widow. Together, they explain how they saw their task in bringing Dune to visual life, with illustrations of many of their designs.

After the disappointment of Dune's demise, many of these collaborators worked together, for example, Dan O' Bannon and H.R. Geiger created *Alien*. There is a very interesting section here with sequences from many of the signs-fiction films from the 1970s which were directly influenced by the planned Dune – since the quite large book compiled by the director was available at all the studios. Jodorowsky himself worked with the artist, Möbius, especially with a number of what are now called graphic novels.

This is exemplary filmmaking, keeping audience interest, moving at a great pace, introducing a variety of characters, insightful explanations of the creative process, interviews with Jodorowsky's son, Brontis, who was to be Paul Atreides in Dune, as well as the commentary from the director himself right throughout the film.

It is some consolation that he directed a film. *The Dance of Reality* with his son which was screened at the Cannes film Festival 2013.

JOHN DOE VIGILANTE

Australia, 2014, 90 minutes, Colour.

Jamie Bamber, Lachy Hulme.

Directed by Kelly Dolen.

To say a film is interesting is not meant to be put-down. If the film is considered interesting, it is stimulating, emotionally involving, giving the audience a challenge and something to reflect on.

It can be said, definitely, that John Doe Vigilantes is interesting, even confronting.

But that is not to say that all audiences will want to have this experience. This is a story, set in Melbourne and using Melbourne and locations effectively, about a serial killer who is called John Doe. When it comes to screen vigilantes, many might remember Charles Bronson in the Death Wish series in the 1970s and 1980s, a man whose family has been violently assaulted and who feels that justice cannot be done by the legal system and so takes the law into his own hands, wreaking vengeance. A more recent example is Denzel Washington in The Equaliser, a seemingly virtuous man, edifying even, who goes to the defence of a young girl and turns into an exterminator of hyper-exploitative gangsters.

The thing is that the audience found these men of vengeance initially sympathetic, and found that what they were doing was righting wrong. John Doe is definitely not sympathetic. His serial killing (some of it shown in harsh or suggested detail, especially the intense confrontation with a brutal childkiller) has as its target criminals who have moved beyond the justice system or those who have served time, been paroled and offend again.

At the opening of the film, the verdict is about to be given in his trial. The screenplay introduces a journalist, played by Lachy Hulme, whom John Doe has allowed to interview him. This gives the audience the opportunity to look at and listen to John Doe, rather phlegmatic as he talks to and listens to the journalist, remembering the various episodes. Within the interview, there are many flashbacks, the first focusing on a paedophile priest, his treatment of a little girl, and he is killing being taped. John Doe tapes many of his killings and forms an alliance with a television interviewer, sending him the tapes for newscasts.

This introduces a theme which is most significant in the film, the role of the media. We have the journalist interviewing John Doe, who goes about his investigative work by interviewing an array of people, the police, psychiatrists, the television journalist, the producer of the program, and some ordinary people in the street. This raises the issue of exploitation by the media and individuals and communities allowing themselves to be manipulated.

By this device, the film-makers are able to introduce all aspects of serial killing and vigilantes killings, for and against, nuances of Justice, difficulties of law enforcement and prison sentences, the role of parole, the different perspectives of the media, exploitative or restricted, and the attitudes of people who want to watch the videos of the killings and those who do not. This means that the audience may be shifting positions all the way through the film, approving, disapproving, being challenged, thining that some episodes might be exploitative or necessary for the message of the film, wondering about their own stances.

The film focuses on several of John Doe's more than thirty victims, and abusive husband, brutal bouncers at nightclubs, horrible abusers and killers of children... The point that John Doe makes is that they have escaped the law but deserve to be punished rather than to be kept alive at the

taxpayers' expense.

Another effect is the influence of the vigilante vengeance on the public, demonstrations in favour of the vigilantes, and individuals who set up posses, inflamed by their hate and wreaking Justice, or what they think to be justice, and indulging their vicious passions. The journalist raises the question for John Doe and whether he enjoyed his killing or not.

Lachy Hulme is very good and insistent as the investigative journalist, wondering why he has been chosen – and finding out with something of a shock. Jamie Bamber (British but working extensively on US TV) is intense as John Doe, though given some humane moments in video material with his wife and daughter.

The ending, dramatically speaking, is quite clever, though it will give audiences reason to reflect because it comes so suddenly.

This is a well written and directed film, which is definitely not an entertaining night out, but a contribution to issues about the law, justice, vigilantes.

THE JUDGE

US, 2014, 142 minutes, Colour.

Robert Downey Jr, Robert Duval, Vera Farmiga, Emma Tremblay, Vincent D' Onofrio, Billy Bog Thornton, Ken Howard, David Krumholz, Jeremy Strong, Leighton Meister, , Balthasar Getty, Directed by David Dobkin.

It was a bit of a shock to find a reviewer referring to this rather serious film as something of a soap opera. However, in the early part of the film, with the establishing of characters, the setting up of relationships in a dysfunctional family, the sadness of a mother's death, some melodramatics in a small Indiana town, the idea of some soap opera aspects did come to mind.

But, soap opera is not exactly the tone of the latter part of the film. It is much more serious, probing character, probing relationships, probing integrity, probing justice and the law.

As might be expected from the title, this is a film about law, prosecution and defence, the realities of justice and lack of justice. The judge of the title is Joseph Palmer, played with his usual power by Robert Duval. At one stage he refers to his character's age as 72 – but the actor made this film at the age of 82, a strong performance by anyone let alone a veteran at this age. The other star of the film is Robert Downey Jr, playing his son, a hotshot lawyer in Chicago, no holds barred. But he has long left his home town and has not returned to see his family, not even his mother to whom he had been devoted.

The tone of the film is set by the opening sequences with Downey, literally peeing on his prosecuting opponent, very glib with his words, extraordinarily shrewd, but then receiving the news of his mother's death and asking for a continuance of the trial he is involved in.

There were a number of films in the early 1990s where very successful men experience some kind of emotional crisis which led them to reassess their life and their work and move on to a new path. Some examples were The Doctor, Regarding Henry, The Fisher King, starring prominent actors, William Hurt, Harrison Ford, Jeff Bridges. Here is Robert Downey Jr with the possibilities of some kind of change in his life, facing the realities of divorce, his devotion to his little daughter, and, most

of all, meeting his father again after many decades.

The emotional crisis is for the whole family, including Henry's older brother, Glen (Vincent D'Onofrio) who has lived in the town all his life and the autistic younger brother, Nate (Jeremy Strong). Henry also meets his love in High School, Sam, Vera Framiga, who challenges his memories about the past and his abandoning her as well as the family. As the screenplay unfolds, there are flashbacks to Henry's relationship with his father, very tough in his stances, although he explains that he could see his son going wrong and felt that this was the best way to deal with him. Audiences, interest in father-son relationships, will find much to be interested in and moved by.

Audiences interested in the law will also find much to be interested in. While Hank is a clever and shrewd, articulate lawyer in Chicago, when he has to return to his home town in Indiana at the death of his mother, we realise the distance between himself and his father, but his admiration for him as a judge when he goes into court to listen to him. The events on the day of his mother's burial are critical, when the judge went to the supermarket to buy some things for the family and there is news of the death of a man who committed murder in the town, had spent 20 years in jail, and was not liked by the judge. When the judge has to go to court, Hank defends him, finds out about his medical and health background, preps his father for the cross examination. Billy Bob Thornton appears as the prosecutor, a sharp performance as he rivals Hank in his abilities to probe and to impress the jury. There are many telling moments in the interplay of the questioning.

Ultimately, this is a story of the judge's integrity, what he did or did not do at the time of the death, his state of mind and memory, and prepared to accept the jury's verdict.

An interesting blend of the humane and the legal.

LAND OF THE BEARS

France, 2013, 86 minutes, Colour.

Narrated by David Gasman.

Directed by Guillaume Vincent.

It is a 99.9% safe bet to say that most people have never and will never visit the Land of the Bears. And where is this land? Almost immediately, this interesting documentary tells us that it is in the eastern part of Siberia, the Kamchatka peninsula. Since most of us are not going to Siberia let alone this peninsula, watching The Land of the Bears is the next best thing.

This is a French documentary, unobtrusively filmed, the bears not looking at the camera at all (though there are some tracking shots where the crew must be in a boat gliding along photographing the bears) but a style of photography that captures the realities without drawing attention to itself.

We are introduced into a wintry landscape, snow melting on rocks, and the viewfinder opening up to a mountainous region, snow and ice-clad, a territory that looks isolated and undisturbed, that no human beings have ventured there. But there is life. We are told that there are 20,000 Bears, and as spring progresses, there is quite a deal of birdlife. At some moments, in the sea at the shore, there is some sea lions looking for fish to eat. And the fish available are salmon, swimming upstream so that they will spawn millions of more salmon, ready for the bears to capture them and devour them so that they will have full bellies and be able to go into their dens and sleep for eight months, hunger satisfied. This is a cycle of life, quite a vast and particular eco-system.

So, in we go to a den, and are introduced to a mother and her cubs, and learn that bears live solitary lives in general, and that after some seasons, the mother lets go of the cubs as they become adult bears and fend for themselves. At this stage, however, the mother cares for her cubs, finding them salmon, protecting them in times of danger. There are some moments of danger, the male bears being huge and dominant, territorial concerning the salmon that they are hunting.

Which means that the film covers the four spring and almost-summer seasons, where the bears come out and roam, spending most of their life in the water, waiting for the salmon to come, catching the salmon as they arrive, eating the salmon, (with some close-ups of how they eat, tearing skin, cutting into the flesh, and between those teeth and into the mouth).

In some ways, the film and its story is rather repetitive but there is a fascination at this opportunity of looking at the bears (longer snouts and faces than the bBears we are used to from the Americas – although the final credits indicate that a lot of the base equipment for this film was set up in Alaska, comparatively close by).

In the French version, Oscar-winner Marion Cottillard is the narrator. For the English language version, the narrator is David Gasman, who has a quietly low key and easy-to-listen-to voice, certainly not intrusive in any way, leading us more gently into the narrative and the life of the Bears. While there are some moments of feeling, especially about the young bears, some of them excluded by other cubs, possessive of their fish, and with the young male cub alerted to the female cub and gradually becoming aware of the mating instinct. But there is no sentimentality at all, with the functions of eating, swimming and surviving. There is a kind of anthropomorphic perspective, but it is not indulged in any way to make the cubs and their behaviour seem cute.

Land of the Bears was filmed in 3D and best to experience it that way. While it would look good in 2D, especially on the big screen, it would also look good in 2D on a television screen.

Devotees of nature films and films showing details of the lives of animals will not want to miss this one.

LIFE OF CRIME

US, 2013, 93 minutes, Colour.

Jennifer Aniston, Yaiin Bey, Isla Fisher Will Forte, Mark Boone Jr, Tim Robbins, John Hawkes, Charlie Tahan.

Directed by Daniel Schechter,

Life of Crime is a very generic title for this kind of kidnapping fraud drama. It is based on a novel by Elmore Leonard, set in Detroit 1978, with the title, Switch, which may not be much better than Life of Crime.

This is a rather slight entertainment, something of an amusing diversion from more serious films.

We are introduced to 2 criminals, Ordell and Louis, played by Yaiin Bey (aka Mos Def) and John Hawkes. They have a big plan to abduct the wife of a real estate entrepreneur, Frank, played very smugly with the touch of brutality and dumb deceitfulness, by Tim Robbins. He is a golf champion, with many trophies – including, says he, his wife. She is played by Jennifer Aniston, the society wife,

with a son, but lost in some bewilderment at the behaviour of her husband.

The abduction happens, though a friend of Mickey, the wife, turns up to make a move on her but finishes up knocked out. Some later comic and serious scenes with him. In the meantime, a room has been prepared for Mickey during her abduction, but she has to wear a mask to avoid seeing the kidnappers. Ordell and Louis enlist the help of a pot-bellied, rough-haired Nazi sympathiser expertly played by Mark Boone Jr to ensure complete audience antipathy – as well as the disgust of Mickey.

It does get rather complicated because Frank has said he was going to the Bahamas, but he didn't, going instead to a little love nest with Melanie, Isla Fisher. The kidnappers seem to know all about his financial frauds and demand \$1 million.

It gets even more complicated when Ordell goes to threaten Frank personally and Melanie wants to do a deal. But, the abduction experience does a lot for Mickey's self-confidence and, as might be expected, tables are turned at the end. Hence, Switch (rather than Life of Crime).

Lightly entertaining while on screen – but a bit of in one eye and out the other!

THE LITTLE DEATH

Australia, 2014, 97 minutes, Colour.

Josh Lawson, Bojana Novamovich, Damon Herriman, Kate Mulvaney, Patrick Brammall, Kate Box, Alan Dukes, Lisa Mc Cune.

Directed by Josh Lawson.

Quite a while ago, actually in a theology class, we were told that everything human, everything finite, could be the subject of humour. Otherwise it would become something of an idol, placed on a pedestal and needing to be toppled. That included sex and sexuality – and we were reminded of the tradition of Rabelaisian humour. Writer-director, Josh Lawson, was not born at the time that we received this advice, but it is something like this that he has in mind in his screenplay for The Little Death.

The Little Death, as we are reminded at the opening of the film, is from the French *Le Petit Mort*, which is a poetic way of referring to orgasm. This is a film of several episodes, some of them intercutting, where we are introduced to each of the couples by name. Already with the first story, Paul and Maeve (Josh Lawson himself with Bojana Novakovic). She confides to her husband that one of the fantasies that sometimes preoccupy her is that of being raped. Paul is rather shocked, as many of the audience might be, especially the female audience identifying more readily with the character of Maeve. The fantasy is accepted, with a challenge to Paul – with some moments of apprehension and some moments of embarrassed laughter.

After that, the different sexual fantasies, the technical name and description put up there on the screen, are more laid back. For Richard and Rowena (Patrick Brammall and Kate Box), Rowena finds that she is stimulated by Richard's tears, noted at the time of his father's death, which means that she puts pictures of his father around the house, pretends that his pet dog has run away, and tries to get him weeping until final confrontation.

Confrontations are standard for (Alan Dukes and Lisa Mc Cune portraying something of a harridan wife). It emerges that he is aroused only when he sees his wife sleeping, which means that he has wide awake nights which have repercussions on his sleeping at his job, irritating his boss (Lachy

Hulme) threatened with the sack – and his story not ending happily.

There is more humour to be had with Daniel and Evie (Damon Herriman and Kate Mulvaney) had been recommended by their counsellor (Zoe Carides) to be more experimental in their relationship. They decide to go for roleplays, she sometimes getting the giggles, remarking about his acting abilities, which he takes ultra-seriously and get acting classes.

The odd character is Steve (Kym Gyngell) knocking on everyone's door, newly moving into the suburb, bringing everyone a gift, a box of biscuit golliwogs, and to announce that he is a registered sex offender and is obliged to let them know. Those who open the door are more preoccupied with their own questions to give Steve much notice, except remember remark on the racist nature of golliwogs. To say that the offender is crucially involved in the ending does not give anything of what happens rather it is an alert for the audience to be ready for it!

There are many laugh out loud moments and bits of dialogue which means that the audience is focusing on farcical aspects of sex and putting this kind of perspective on taking sexual behaviour too seriously.

It is the same with the final story, which does not seem part of the whole, but one of those sequences about phone sex. A hearing-impaired man uses a video relay company to make his phone calls. Monica, who has shift-work for this kind of work, is a very nice and proper person, concerned about growing hearing-loss. She takes Sam's call which is to phone a sex company. It is the old joke of the unlikely individual on the other end of the line who is also preoccupied caring for her mother with dementia. She has to sign the questions for Sam, relaying them, as well as the answers. This story ends more positively with Sam obviously liking Monica.

And then there is a sudden ending, bringing some of the stories to a connection which, definitely, we and the characters were not expecting.

LOCKE

UK, 2013, 89 minutes, Colour.

Tom Hardy, voices of: Olivia Colman, Ruth Wilson, Bill Miner, Tom Holland, Andrew Scott, Danny Webb.

Directed by Stephen Knight.

Locke is an evocative name for this film because the audience, in a sense, is locked into one place for the whole 90 minutes. For those philosophical bent, they might wonder whether the title comes from David Locke. And the place where the central character and the audience are locked is in a car, moving along an English Motorway one evening.

The film has been written and directed by Stephen Knight, prominent writer for such films as *Eastern Promises*, *Dirty Pretty Things*, *Hummingbird*. Interestingly, reviewers who like his tough films neglect to mention that he wrote the screenplay for the immensely popular *The Hundred Foot Journey*.

The film opens at a huge building site which we learn is to have a record-breaking quantity of cement to be delivered for a precision pour the next morning. We learn also that the supervisor, Ivan Locke, is driving away from it. He gets into his car as does the audience, the director skilfully moving the camera within the car, looking into the car from outside, as well as showing the flowing traffic, the speed and slowing down, eliciting a sense of our being passengers with Ivan Locke.

What is interesting is the drama that Ivan is involved in, the several decisions he has to make, the growing tension because of these decisions.

The main reason that he is driving to London is that a woman that he was associated with but did not really know is about to give birth to his child. It is premature. She wants him to be present at the birth for support and security. This means that, because his wife does not know, he has to tell her the truth and experience the consequences. The complication here is that he has two sons. But Ivan Locke is a good man, a man of principles, someone who tells the truth and is prepared to accept what follows from the truth.

But what makes for further dramatic tension is his driving away from his responsible work at the building site.

What connects all these decisions is the phone in his car. His journey is filled with phone calls, calls he makes as well as calls to him. He treats most of them in a very calm way because that is his personality, but the pressure on him is enormous.

Taking it for granted that he is hurrying to the birth, the anxiety is about how the woman will cope, with phone calls from the nurse and from her doctor, explaining the necessity for Caesarean surgery. Our emotional concern is how his wife responds and the contact with his sons who are watching a football match on television. The responsibility tension is his contact with two of the men who will be participating in the pouring of the cement, a supervisor who contacts the bosses of the International Corporation in Chicago who, to say the least, are not pleased. The other man is on the spot, and Ivan has to get him to make sure that the organisation for the pour, the stop-go action in the surrounding streets is organised (with complications from the police who want a signature with only 25 minutes to get it, finding the phone number of the local councillor, contacting him at a restaurant to ensure that all is in order). The man on site has been drinking, initially denying it, and Ivan has to get him to ensure that everything is ready, which includes his running to another building site and enlisting the help of some extra expertise.

Quite some action off-screen.

This ensures that we have 90 minutes of personal drama as well as industrial drama.

It is to the credit of Tom Hardy (who has become very popular in films in the UK as well as internationally and is to be the new Mad Max) that audiences are engaged with him, sympathise with him, hope for him... It is a very effective performance, all the more so because of his sitting at the steering wheel for the whole of the film.

The film also has strong British voice talent for those at the other end of the phone: Olivia Colman as the pregnant woman, Ruth Wilson as the wife, Bill Miner and Tom Holland as the boys (the final phone conversation with one of his sons indicates that there might be some hope), Andrew Scott (Moriarty in the Sherlock television series) as the man on the spot.

Audiences might not be in the mood for watching this kind of confined drama, but it is well worth watching.

THE MAZE RUNNER

US, 2014, 113 minutes, Colour.

Dylan O' Brien, Aml Ameen, Ki Hong Lee, Blake Cooper, Thomas Brodie- Sangster, Will Poulter, Kaya Scodelario, Patricia Clarkson.
Directed by Wes Ball.

There have been so many Young Adult stories in recent years, from novels turned into films, which show dystopian societies, the revolt of young men and women, the power of the authorities and the need for rebellion, that these films form part of a now recognisable movie genre. The Maze Runner is an interesting addition to The Hunger Games series, the Divergent series, The Giver.

What if a group of older male teenagers found themselves in what seems the countryside, called the Glade, where they can't remember anything about themselves except their names. They have managed to subsist, growing fruit and vegetables, no electricity, rough housing, and their having to get on well with one another, not knowing why they are there? And, surrounding the Glade is a very high wall, with an opening, into what they call the Maze. Some of them have been nominated as runners, going into the maze but having to get out before it closed its massive entry.

Some of them become ill, stung mysteriously, going into the maze to die.

At the opening of the film, a young man arrives, confused, Thomas, who immediately tries to run but is caught. He is given a tour of the Glade and finds that some of the group like him, especially Newt, an intelligent leader, and a chubby young boy, Chuck. On the other hand, there is the hostile Gally, who insists that the rules are the most important thing and that they can never get out of the Glade.

Thomas soon appears as a leader as well as critical of the group not trying to escape. At one stage, he rushes into the maze to save someone who has been stung. He encounters huge metallic monsters, called The Grievers. He and another runner, Minho, find a central metal core with a light in a Griever which may indicate a possibility for escape.

In the meantime, they are surprised when a young woman is sent up mysteriously from the elevator, knowing her name, weary, and then defensive against the males.

It must be acknowledged that the sequences of the young men in the maze and the pursuit by the Grievers is highly and adrenaline-pumping. And this is heightened when a group, as might be expected, try to escape through the maze.

There are intimations throughout the film, especially in Thomas's dreams, where he sees laboratories and scientists going about their work. This is explained at the end – but not entirely because, as the mysterious Doctor announces before the final credits, they must move to the Phase.

The young cast is particularly strong, especially Dylan O'Brien as the strong-minded and keen-witted Thomas. Young British actors who have appeared in a number of British films, Thomas Brodie-Sangster and Will Poulter, are particularly good as the sympathetic Newt and the obey-the-rules-at-all-cost Gally. Patricia Clarkson is also effective as the seemingly sympathetic doctor.

With the young people out of the maze, it will be interesting to see what happens in the Next Phase.

PLANES: FIRE & RESCUE

US, 2014, 84 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: Dane Cook, Ed Harris, Julie Bowen, Curtis Armstrong, John Michael Higgins, Hal Holbrook, Wes Studi, Brad Garrett, Teri Hatcher, Stacy Keech, Cedric the Entertainer, Barry Corbin, Regina King, Anne Meara, Jerry Stiller. Fred Willard, Erik Estrada, Patrick Warburton, Rene Auberjonois.
Directed by Roberts Gannaway.

A film for parents and children who enjoyed the two Cars films as well as the original Planes. This will be an enjoyable outing, possibly better than the other three films.

But, for one thing, it depends on audience ability to accept cars and planes and other vehicles as the equivalent of human beings, talking in the same way, doing the same things, particularly idiosyncrasies, and, of course, the heroism of winning.

Actually, the anthropomorphism is a strange experience. Here are obvious-looking cars and planes, and vehicles old and new (perhaps that should be 'younger') who substitute for human beings, not in the way animals do when they can talk and laugh and cry, but here are machines who are human! Most of this is done, quite effectively, with eye movements and some brow movements. Then there are the slits or other openings in the planes and vehicles which can be the equivalent of mouths. And, off they go, tearing along the highway, sweeping through the air amidst forests and mountains, having parties and refuelling with gasoline, off to a tourist resort for holidays, and even doing line-dancing.

Dusty Cropduster was the hero of the first film, a little plane, coming from behind to win races, eventually becoming the champion of the world, doing a complete circling of the world. Now he is back home, the champion and well-liked, revelling in his fame, but what is Dusty to do in his old backwater town, despite all the encouragement of his old friends, The Skipper, Mayday and that whizz at fixing machines, Dottie.

Something has to happen to keep the film going, so what does happen is that Dusty finds that his bearings have gone. If he goes too fast and energetically, he will crash. Unfortunately, his type of engine is now out of date and so there is little hope for replacement.

In the meantime, with Dusty unable to do his flying, his hometown will be unable to cope with security and repairs at the annual Corn Festival. Will Dusty save the day and the Festival? (Obviously that is a completely superfluous question!).

What Dusty does is to go off to another town to join the firefighting force. He is more than a little arrogant, relying on his reputation (which they all admire) but too ashamed to tell anyone that his bearings have gone. He undergoes the training, with the demanding Blade Ranger as well as the Native American plane, Windlifter. It certainly is not as easy as Dusty had thought and he doesn't do too well with his training, being too presumptuous, and being careful with his engine bearings.

While the film is in the air, it is quite exhilarating, wonderful flying sequences, through mountains, over rivers and, eventually, in the firefighting sequences. Once again, Dusty is too presumptuous and does not work effectively as a team member, even crashing into a river and having to be pulled out by Blade Ranger.

In the meantime, a very vain and fussy bureaucrat car has arranged a meeting at a resort, full of cars, and in the presence of the Secretary of the Interior. The bureaucrat will take no advice, ignoring the advancing fires so that he can finish his speech, only to find that the danger is real and there has to be a huge evacuation, even cars on a railway station getting into a train to take them to safety, others going by road and stranded on the highway. Small vehicles have to be parachuted into the

danger area to clear the roads and the lines.

By this stage we are so identifying with the planes and cars that we are in danger of forgetting that they are not human beings! Needless to say, but saying it nonetheless, Dusty comes good, does a heroic rescue of a romantic couple who are on a bridge reminiscing about when they met and then stranded needing action while the bridge collapses under them. And they are rescued.

The animation is bright and colourful, the flying sequences and the fire sequences very effective, and there is a very good voice cast led by Dane Cook as Dusty, Ed Harris as Blade Ranger, Stacy Keach as The Skipper, Wes Studi as Windlifter.

Not the greatest of animation films, but very enjoyable in its own way.

THE RECKONING

Australia, 2014, 86 minutes, Colour.

Jonathan La Paglia, Luke Hemsworth, Viva Bianca, Hannah Mangan Lawrence.

Directed by John P.Soto.

There have been a number of films called The Reckoning. This is an Australian one, set in Perth.

Reckoning always seems to include some kind of calling to account and justice being done. And that is the case here, although much of the justice is avenging justice, vindictive justice.

An initial focus is on flashback memories of two sisters who are devoted to each other, together on a beach. We are then introduced to a Perth detective, played by Jonathan La Paglia, woken early in the morning to be told that one of his police partners has been shot.

So, on one level, this is a police investigation and detective story, trying to find the killer of the policeman and discovering a long trail of killings over several days. This involves quite some footwork for the detective and his partner (and there are some domestic complications concerning the detective's wife and daughters in the presence of his female partner). But, he discovers a memory stick in the pocket of the dead policeman and find some video, a young girl (one of the sisters we have seen at the beginning) saying that she has little time to live, is making a documentary about her search for all those responsible for her sister being high on drugs and being killed in a hit and run accident.

As might be expected, there are several twists in the narrative, not everybody being what they seem to be.

However, what makes the narrative somewhat different is the religious dimension. Rachel, the girl on the quest, who was accompanied by a young man who has just been released from a mental institution and has no qualms about violence, is particularly religious, even going to a church and insisting that the reluctant priest marry the couple instantly. She seems to have an unlimited number of quotations in her memory from Old Testament and New Testament, to put as captions in her documentary, relating to each of the guilty parties that she discovers.

(Although there is a script editor credited, when a quotations from Romans 13:4 is discovered and one of the officers in the police precinct doesn't know what it means, Jonathan La Paglia actually says it is a book of the Old Testament – and soon after, on screen, there is a quote about those who

commit heinous crimes getting not their just deserts but there just desserts!. Maybe not too many people noticed, but they are disappointing slips in a rather polished production.)

It all leads up to a confrontation, some revelations that we may not have been expecting, a sad ending for Rachel and an uncertain ending for the detective.

SIDDHARTH

Canada/India, 2013, 96 minutes, Colour.

Rajesh Talling, Tannishtha Chatterjee.

Directed by Richie Mehta.

No, not a story about the Buddha. Rather, it is a contemporary Indian story about a boy who is lost.

This film, an Indian-Canadian [?](#) production, takes its audience, vividly, into the streets of Dehli, a poorer area where a family lives, where young boys play cricket on the hard ground outside the house, and the father going into a slightly more affluent quarter where, with his megaphone, he announces to people that he can mend their zippers and mend other household articles.

It can be said that, while the film is vivid, it also presents characters and the sad events of the film in a somewhat low-key style. No Bollywood songs and dances here.

Mother and father farewell their young son, Siddarth, as he goes to work in a factory some distance away, doing a job that will bring some money into the home. And, at home, is a little sister, Pinky.

The boy phones his family when he arrives at the factory and promises to be home for a feast in a month's time. He doesn't come home. The father tries to get information, an address, phone number, and even talks to the factory owner. He is told his son has run away.

The film makes a point about the changing world, and how difficult it would have been in the past to get information, but even now is still difficult despite computers and everyone, even the poorest, having mobile phones to take pictures, to communicate – the parent generation still bewildered by much of the technology but the film showing how these young children take this technology for granted and are extremely adept at using it.

The rest of film is the sad and quietly desperate father's search his son. He travels to the factory, is courteously but am feeling the heard by the owner of the factory, and information from the young man that shared his room that the boy might have been abducted. The police offer some help as to personnel and shelters but it emerges that many young boys and girls are abducted in India.

The father's journey takes him to some homes for runaway children, to no avail. A centre in Mumbai is mentioned but most people don't know about it. There is some affirmation of human nature when some young men, who admire the father, and say they have been influenced in their own work by him, make a donation, and other means are found to get some money for the father to travel by train to Mumbai.

The father is a good man, loving his son, loving his wife and daughter, suffering through his search, his eyes open to worlds he had not dreamed of.

There are all kinds of stories of disappearances of children, trafficking, sexual exploitation, from

many parts of the world. This story is not graphic, and we don't know where the boy has gone or been taken to. Rather, sadly, we are invited to share the father's and the family's experience, and through them the suffering of so many people who experience the loss of their children.

THE SKELETON TWINS

US, 2014, 93 minutes, Colour.

Kristin Wiig, Bill Hader, Luke Wilson, Boyd Holbrook, Ty Burrell, Joanna Gleeson.

Directed by Craig Johnson.

As the film opens, the audience sees a masked man dangling two skeletal dolls, like puppets, for the entertainment of his daughter and son. We soon learn that this man has killed himself. So, it is not surprising to see his son, Milo (Bill Hader) a would-be actor in Los Angeles, gay and lonely, getting into a bath and slitting his wrists. In counterpoint, we see his sister, Maggie (Kristin Wiig) married and living in New York City, contemplating a handful of pills.

Which means that *The Skeleton Twins* opens very seriously. However, when the sister receives the phone call about her brother's attempted suicide and realises that they have not been in contact for 10 years, she goes to visit him and soon there are wry remarks, jokes and touches of comedy. She offers to taking back to New York and live in the guestroom in the house which she shares with her husband, Lance.

It is this contrast between serious themes and humorous treatment and behaviour, that gives this film quite an edge.

It should be said that Luke Wilson, at his nicest, is Lance, Maggie's husband, a truly good-natured and decent man, welcoming Milo, offering him a job (clearing grounds of sticks and brambles with Milo managing only to pick up one stick at a time) as well as an outing at a 'Dudes' Day' at a climbing centre. He and Maggie are hoping to have a family, but several complications are soon revealed, especially as Maggie moves from hobby to hobby every couple of months, scuba diving when Milo arrives, with the instructor having more than an eye on her and she, despite herself, succumbing to him.

One of the interesting features of the film is the issue of sexual abuse of minors. It comes rather later in the film, although we know that Milo has a particular interest in one of his former English teachers, Richard, who owns a bookshop in New York. We realise early that they had had a relationship but not the details which Maggie reveals and challenges Milo with, he saying that this was the first time that anyone had shown him affection and did not see it as abuse. Maggie is rather severe in her perceptions of this episode in Milo's life.

There is also a telling scene when Milo invites his absent mother (Joanna Gleeson) to a meal, Maggie completely unforgiving in her mother's neglect of them as children and scornful of her New Age career in Sedona, Arizona. A new insight into the dire effect of their parenting on the brother and sister.

Kristin Wiig and Bill Hader have been very effective in comedy films. They have been prominent on television as comics on *Saturday Night Live*. They still retain many of the characteristic of their comic styles, ironic in situations, clever with one-liners and other verbal humour, Milo bursting into a mimed song and drawing Maggie into singing it with him.

This is the story of a brother and sister who have been locked into a lack of self-confidence, whose horizons, generally, are limited to their own experiences, wracked with regrets. Which means that, in one sense, the film is very narrow, the characters enclosed in this narrow world. On the other hand, the exploration of sad aspects of human nature give it a more universal interest and appeal.

The strong cast brings characters alive, so that audiences do have quite a deal to reflect on.

SON OF A GUN

Australia, 2014, 108 minutes, Colour.

Ewan Mc Gregor, Brenton Thwaites, Alicia Vikander, Matt Nable, Damon Herriman, Nash Edgerton, Jacek Koman, Tom Budge.

Directed by Julius Avery.

Son of a Gun is a swaggering kind of title, with the touch of the macho. It is a story of criminals in Western Australia, in prison, out of prison, and carrying off a huge robbery at the Kalgoorlie Gold mines.

The international star is Ewan Mc Gregor, using his Scots accent, playing Brendan, a famous robber, who finds himself in jail, looking for an opportunity to escape, looking for a young patsy that he can rely on to make connections when he gets out of jail after a short-term sentence.

The young man is played by Brenton Thwaites, a young actor from Cairns and a stint in Home and Away. 2014 was a particularly good year for him, playing Prince Charming in Maleficent and the futuristic hero of The Giver. His role in Son of a Gun is a strong one and he keeps audience attention on himself, even when working with Ewan Mc Gregor.

The film establishes the two characters in the first part of the film, with the young JR (Thwaites) entering into prison in the usual style, assigned to a cell where his cellmate is the sexual victim of some bruisers in the prison, JR trying to help him but warned by Brendan (McGregor) to be very careful. A bond is established between the two, with JR giving Brendan advice about chess moves and Brendan saving him from the bruisers. Prison life is a mixture of routine and moments of brutality.

The film opens up when JR is released, goes to make contact with the criminal recommended by Brendan, finds himself in somewhat luxurious surroundings, attracted by a young woman from eastern Europe who is controlled by the master criminal. He is able to arrange an escape after an amusing, but serious, encounter with an arms dealer (Damon Harriman) and a lesson on guns and their power, using a helicopter – and this looks so easy, despite some shooting by prison guards, that audiences might think this is quite credible and possible. It is not only possible here but actual, so Brendan and his close associates are out and it is time to plan that gold robbery in Kalgoorlie.

There are romantic moments for JR and Tasha (Alicia Vikander from the Danish film, A Royal Scandal), some clashes with some young would-be tasks toughs and supportive tuition from Brendan.

The latter part of the film shows the robbery in detail, the escape, and, as we might have suspected, no honour among thieves.

By the end of the film, JR has certainly learnt a lot from Brendan and shrewd enough to get an upper

hand.

The film makes Western Australia look attractive as well as desolate in the mines around Kalgoorlie. And, as heist and caper films go, with its Australian touches, this is quite an – even improbable – entertainment.

STEP UP ALL IN

US, 2014, 112 minutes, Colour.

Ryan Guzman, Briana Evigan, Adam Sevani, Mari Koda.

Directed by Trish Sie.

It is about eight years since the first Step Up film was released to great enthusiasm, offering an opportunity for Channing Tatum to dance and for Rachel Griffiths to have a serious role. But that seems a long time ago. However, it is not that the dancing has been out of mind with several sequels, Step Up 2: The Streets, Step Up 3 D, Step Up Revolution. There has been no abatement of dancing and competitiveness.

So, what is left? The old group have come from Miami to Los Angeles for auditions, led by Sean (Ryan Guzman) who was in the last film. During the opening credits, there is quite an amount of dancing as a panel are looking for a particular dancer – there are all kinds of characters, all kinds of costumes, all kinds of movement during this opening sequence. But, the group does not win, because it seems that the result was rigged from the start.

They are glum for a few minutes and then intend to go back to Miami but Sean becomes full of enthusiasm and decides that the group should come back together again because he has discovered that there is a significant competition in Las Vegas. He meets Moose, from the previous films who connects him with some of the dancers and introduces him to Andie (Briana Evigan) from Step Up 2. They click and one does not need to be prophetic to know that romance will be in the air.

Off to Las Vegas, some scenes of rehearsing, then a performance by the rival group and then themselves who are now called LMNTL (elemental!). Since this is halfway through the film, both groups go into the finals, so that there will be have to be a competitive finale (and there is).

But, since this is only halfway through the film, there has to be some drama as well and Sean and Andie fallout, she not trusting him when he asks her to be lifted by him and then do a complete somersault with him catching her and lowering her to the floor. Off she goes. Fortunately there is an old couple with a history of dancing and they have a good talk to Sean enabling him to discern that an apology is in order.

So, for the rest of the film, Sean gets the group together again, Andie decides to return, they go to Las Vegas, participating in the competition with an extraordinary blend of acrobatics and mime and dance (though the timeline of the film does not seem to give them any time for rehearsal to achieve this kind of success). And, of course, that somersault destined for great applause. The compere has been backing the other group behind the scenes but there is nothing like audience acclaim for our group to win absolutely.

And the prize was worth dancing for, a three-year contract for them all in Las Vegas. Were this reviewer a screenwriting type, he would already have the screenplay for Step Up Las Vegas well underway.

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES

US, 2014, 101 minutes, Colour.

Megan Fox, Will Arnett, William Fichtner, Whoopi Goldberg, voices of: Johnny Knoxville, Tony Shalhoub.

Directed by Jonathan Liebesman.

This is one of those films that is beyond review! If you see the title and think “not me”, don’t go. If you see the title and feel a movement of exhilaration, do go.

This version of TMNT delivers exactly what it promises. With the credits and the opening sequences, there is a longish explanation of the origins of the turtles, their mission, good versus evil on the streets of New York City, and the leadership of Splinter. Many of us knew all this already but it is handy to hear it again at the beginning of the film. But, the Turtles themselves are not fully seen until about 20 minutes in.

But that means that while we are waiting to see them, although they have been glimpsed in energetic action, it offers the opportunity to think about the absurdity of the whole thing. Turtles? Mutations? Ninja skills? – And teenage?

During the film we get several explanations of what happened in 1999, Dr O’Neill and Dr Sacks working together, experiment with turtles, rats and other creatures, and a fluid ingredient that would mutate. Dr O’Neill is killed but his little daughter, April, saves the turtles, puts them in the sewer where the transformation happens: they become virtually human as does their carer, the kindly rat, Splinter. For those not in the know or who have not followed the almost 30 year history of the turtles on screen, they will scratch their heads and think this is pretty silly, to say the least.

In many ways, the concept of the turtles was something of a jokey response to the action films of the 1980s. But, it took on, comic books, an animated series for almost 10 years, three feature films in the early 1990s, continued series and experiments with keeping the turtles in the headlines.

It must be admitted that the entry on the TMNT in Wikipedia has all this detail – and more, much more.

Back to this film. It has a bigger budget than before, has quite some spectacular special effects and action, plenty of martial arts fights for the fans, vehicle chases, especially through snow-covered countryside of New York State. At one stage, the Turtles are being drained of their vital fluids by the evil doctor but the process is halted and they are recharged with adrenaline. And that is the clue for the audience, so much of the action is adrenaline-charged (and our responses as well!).

The basic plot is an old one. Evil scientist wants to control the world and make money – and, within about 10 seconds of the final climax, it looks as though he might achieve it. He abducts the Turtles as well as the now adult April (Megan Fox). It does not give much away to say that the seeming benevolent patron of the city, Dr Sacks (William Fichtner) turns out to be the arch-villain, trained in Japan, expert in martial arts, with an extraordinary multi-blade robot weapon, Shredder.

This is something of a comeback for Megan Fox who has not received good reviews for the films she has made. However, she enters wholeheartedly into the action, is something of an intrepid reporter, having studied for four years, but relegated to frothy pieces, trying to persuade her camera partner,

Will Arnett, that she has seen the Turtles, and trying to persuade her boss, Whoopi Goldberg, to let her investigate further. Instead, she gets the sack.

However, tracking down the Turtles, meeting Splinter, and realising that she was instrumental in the turtles being saved and their growing up to be these teenage warriors, she experiences so many action sequences and moments of peril that Lois Lane could well be envious.

And the turtles are definitely teenagers, the way they speak (although Leonardo is voiced by comedian, Johnny Knoxville), their brash ways of behaving, bickering amongst themselves, their taste in music...

These observations may help the undecided to make a choice, to go or not to go. If you should go and tend to enjoy some absurd and exhilarating action, you might well enjoy it.

TUSK

US, 2014, 102 minutes, Colour.

Justin Long, Michael Parks, Genesis Rodriguez, Haley Joel Osment, Johnny Depp, (as Guy Lapointe).
Directed by Kevin Smith.

What to make of Kevin Smith's new film? In fact, many critics and audiences over the years have wondered what to make of Kevin Smith himself? Cloaks, Chasing Amy, Dogma the various adventures of Jay and Silent Bob. It is definitely true to say that Tusk will not settle any questions or disputes.

It is probably best to offer a warning before the review. There will be some spoilers concerning plot characters. However, the film has some grotesque ideas, coming from mad character in the film, and the visualising of his grotesque ideas could well be disturbing. The fall shifts from comedy to touches of horror.

It all begins cheerfully enough, a lot of guffawing and giggling from Wallace and Ted, two jokers who spend their time recording pod casts and are particularly stuck on a Canadian video of a young boy who wants to imitate Kill Bill films but unwittingly amputates his own leg. The two consider this so funny, that Wallace decides to go to interview the boy. But, it does not turn out at all like this.

So, this first part of the film is both light-headed and light-hearted, with a touch of romance, although Ally (Genesis Rodriguez), Wallace's girlfriend, reminisces about how she liked the old Wallace but does not particularly like new Wallace this offhand, joker with an eye to the money. (audiences may well get surprised to find that Ted is played by Haley Joel Osment, 15 years after The Sixth Sense).

This is whether spoilers come in. Wallace reads a letter on the wall of a urinal one, the writer inviting the reader to come to his house to listen to his adventure stories. So, what better than to hear a few before Wallace goes back to New Jersey – there are quite a number of jokes where Americans versus Canadians about pronunciations, about hockey, about Americans seeing the Canadians as fools (later, Wallace in torment, says "I don't want to die in Canada"), and the Canadians bemused by the attitudes of the near-neighbours.

If you happen to have seen The Island of Dr Moreau in its various versions, Britannia Hospital and its story about a man and a pig, or the ugly and frightening imagination of The Human Centipede series

be alert.

Justin Long, best known for comedies fits the bill for Wallace very well. And contrasts particularly strikingly with Michael Parks (who appeared to such good effect in Kevin Smith's Red State) as the old veteran with stories to share, with a dignified vocabulary and somewhat willing to tolerate the crassness of his visitor. He tells his stories, but begins to control his visitor, and here is the definite spoiler, surgically transforming him into a walrus, calling him Mr Tusk, in memory of the walrus he encountered long since when his ship was destroyed by an iceberg and he alone, a young cook, survived.

The scenes of Wallace, trapped inside the walrus, either funny if you think that this is a humorous satire or spoof (which, of course, it is meant to be), or really disturbing if you empathise with Wallace and enter into his mind and emotions as he is doomed, trapped.

When Ally and Ted begin to track down Wallace to rescue him, they encounter this most eccentric former detective from the Canadian Surete, with the most bizarre appearance, hat, straight hair sticking out, slightly crossed eyes, with strange eating habits, who has been investigating the disappearances of a number of men. The character is called Guy Lapointe and in the credits is credited as Guy Lapointe (he did look familiar but it was only the IMDb information that revealed that Guy is actually Johnny Depp).

Over the final credits, Kevin Smith and a friend giggle and guffaw as they jokingly discuss the film. This reviewer found the levity, touches of mockery, rather incongruous to the experience we had just had, a mixture of the comic but also a rather pessimistic view of human nature.

Well, that must be Kevin Smith at this stage of his life and career.

WETLANDS/ FEUCHGEBEITE

Germany, 2013, 105 minutes, Colour.
Carla Juri, Christoph Letkowski, Marlen Kruse.
Directed by David Wnendt.

This is a very confronting film, although many audiences found it amusing and funny.

The central character, Helen, is a complete narcissist, generally unaware of sensitivities towards others, even of her parents, her best friend, the nurse at the hospital. She is also completely obsessive, genitally and anally so. And the plot as well as the visuals illustrate this more than many audiences might want to see and hear.

At the film's opening, Helen tells us that she is not particularly interested in hygiene, something which is very evident in what follows. With a scene on a dirty toilet seat, we are taken into the world of Helen's obsessions. All bodily functions, all secretions and excretions make their appearance. Which will be fairly abhorrent to fastidious audiences. It is not a matter of being prudish, although there is quite an amount of nudity and sexual behaviour, but of personal interests and tastes. One of Melbourne's chief film reviewers referred to the effect of the film as "endearing". Others will find it repulsive. The reviewer suggested that this would become a cult film but referred to it as a favourite for adolescent audiences.

The film is based on a controversial bestseller,

Helen is a young adult, has been adversely affected by some of her parents' behaviour, including her mother offering to catch her but letting her fall so that she would learn to trust no-one, even parents. Her mother continues to be an influence, embracing Catholicism at one stage, going to church, but having a number of men in her life. Her father has gone off on his own, is interested in younger women, as we see, but still visits his daughter. It is suggested that she has been somewhat traumatised in her relationship with her parents – which are shown in a number of flashbacks.

She comes across a young woman, becomes very friendly, explains her life to her, suggests that the friend behave somewhat similar fashion – which she does so with an incremental episode with her boyfriend – but actually becomes pregnant and wants to live more normally, much to Helen's disdain.

Helen explains that she has haemorrhoids. She also injures herself in the anal area requiring hospitalisation and an operation. She clashes with the doctor, with the head nurse, but is friendly with a nurse, Robin, and discusses a lot of sexual matters with him – and - one doesn't quite know how - he declares ultimately that he is in love with her.

There is more blood in the hospital as Helen injures herself in order to stay there. Which seems to indicate that she has something of a death wish exhibited in extreme manners of self-harm.

There would be different responses from women watching this film, with its female exposure and exposé, women identifying from the inside of the character with the male audience observing, comfortable or uncomfortable at such detail and in such close-up. There are many gross sequences as Helen certainly proves that she has no concern for hygiene, claiming that unhygienic behaviour has never harmed her, and some gross-out sequences such as men masturbating on a pizza.

This is a German film, perhaps with a German sensibility. At quite a full press preview, there was a great deal of laughter, sometimes in embarrassed disgust, but audiences perhaps feeling a sense of liberation as well as they watched and listen to Helen. There was some applause at the end.

Certainly different senses of humour and, more to the point, different tastes.

WISH I WAS HERE

US, 2014, 106 minutes, Colour.

Zach Braff, Kate Hudson, Mandy Patinkin, Josh Gad, Pierce Gagnon, Joey King, Alexander Chaplin, Jim Parsons, Allan Rich.

Directed by Zach Braff.

One of the main reasons for seeing Wish I Was Here is Zach Braff. He not only co-directed and wrote, he also stars. And the important factor for the film ever being made was that Zach Braff and his co-producers advertised online, on Kickstarter, the site for ordinary people to donate for the production of a film. There is a huge list at the end of people thanked for their contributions.

The title sounds a little fey. And this is reinforced at the opening with a bizarre picture of Aidan, the central character, in a kind of science-fiction scene. And then he wakes up. But, during the film, he has some of these recurring images, especially concerning his brother and his father.

Aidan is an aspiring actor in Hollywood, landing mainly commercials and supporting roles. He is happily married to a very nice wife, Sarah, Kate Hudson being charming. He has two very energetic children, the older is a girl (Joey King), with the symbolic name of Grace which is important at moments during the film. The younger child is a lively son, Tucker (Pierce Gagnon). The first family scene is at the breakfast table which, somewhat disconcertingly, has a fair amount of swearing – with the family having a swear jar on the fridge and dad having to contribute a great deal. Then it lightens up as Aidan goes to sit with a crowd waiting for an audition – where the role has been changed, without his knowing, to an African- American role (with all the aspirants in the waiting room noting how they had all played Othello).

Almost immediately, a very strong Jewish theme is introduced. It is interesting to note that Zach Braff's father is Jewish and his very New England traditional mother converted to Judaism. Aidan drops his children at a Jewish school which they thoroughly enjoy, Grace being particularly religious, knowing the scriptural background, interested in God issues, a girl who prays. The trouble is that they might have to move out of the school because their grandfather, Gabe (Mandy Patinkin at his best) has recurring cancer and needs the money with which he paid their fees for his treatment.

A lot of the film consists of moments which are anecdotes, the decision to mend the fence and clean the swimming pool after his father's criticisms, several conversation sequences, a visit to Aidan's brother, Noah (Josh Gadd) who lives in a trailer where the door is rarely opened, working on a blog, some fine moments where Aidan is home-schooling his children because they cannot afford to go to the Jewish school.

The film is strongly pro-family, Aidan's wife conscious that he is not always present when he is actually there, tries to find ways to bring him back. Both parents are devoted to their children. There are many fine, sometimes amusing, sequences showing family life.

Another very strong theme is that of dying. Aidan, close to his father, while Noah cannot bring himself to see his father, arranges a room in the house so that his dying father can have his final days at home. Mandy Patinkin's performance shows a lot of the reality of fearless dying, including a beautifully intense conversation with Sarah, her gratitude to him for helping her through her sister's death, talking with Aidan about the past, Gabe saying that he was not afraid and Aidan finding this most reassuring. Aidan phones Noah to come for his father's death, Noah resisting but Grace going on the phone and very movingly persuading him to come. Which means that the death scene is quietly powerful.

Mention has been made of Judaism. There are various visits to Temple, to the school, to the ceremony for Gabe's funeral. Aidan, who feels that he is not particularly religious, still focuses on questions of God and prayer, coming to talk to the rabbi in the Temple, the rabbi giving sound advice by asking Aidan how he might imagine God, with Aidan replying, using the word infinity to indicate his feel for the wonder of the universe. The rabbi urges him to reflect on how that works in his life. Aidan is really resistant to the phrase, God works in mysterious ways. And yet, a lot of the resolution of the film indicates mysterious ways, what other people might call Providence.

There is a nice ending, involving another audition and meeting with a man who was at a previous audition, Paul (Jim Parsons) and Aidan gives him good advice about his supporting role in a Star Trek kind of film. This is so much appreciated by Paul that he offers Aidan at some possibilities in theatre education that he never dreamed of.

Just before the final credits there is a collage of the events of the film and the central characters are all together a theatre performance.

Wish I Was Here illustrates that the humanity in the earlier film that he directed, Garden State (2004) is now even more evident.

THE 2014 ITALIAN FILM FESTIVAL

Each year Palace Cinemas host an Italian film Festival, sponsored by Lavazza. It is that time of year again, the Festival running in capital cities from mid-September to mid-October.

Publicists for the Festival send copies to or on-line links to several films that will be screening, an opportunity for a mini-review and information about the scope of the Festival. This year, there were seven of the films for reviewers to watch. As with previous years, there is a great variety in the range of the Italian films from the last year.

One of the most interesting was provocatively called *The Mafia Kill Only in Summer*. Despite the light tone of the title, this is quite a serious film, taking audiences back into the 1980s when the city of Palermo witnessed many assassinations, killings in the street, especially of judges who had come into the city to try to put it in order and rid this part of Sicily from Mafia influence. (The Mafia is still there, and Pope Francis, recently excommunicated many of them.) But the film is made accessible by showing the story through the eyes of a young boy, at school, winning a journalism competition, taking Giulio Andreotti as his model, but growing into an adult where he could look back but was much less effective in his vocation of communication. So, there is some amusement in this wry look at what was happening in Sicily.

Two other films are set in Sicily but in the city of Catania. One is a rather grim story of a young boy, uncertain as to his personal identity, especially with gender, who runs away from home and abusive father and tries to find his life on the street. The other one is also grim, *The South is Nothing*, this time about a young teenage girl, androgynous in appearance (for a lot of the film we think that she is a boy) who grieves about the disappearance of her older brother, depends on her widower father who is being forced to sell his fish market store and move out of Sicily to find some kind of prosperity.

Financial difficulties are the subject of a film set in the Apulia region, east of Rome, *Quiet Bliss*, where a family business founders because of hard times and is declared bankrupt. The sister of the owner, a somewhat embittered and harsh woman, decides to go back to her mother's country property to raise fruit and vegetables, eggs and other produce in order to survive. Her mother is a kindly woman, her daughter is a lazy and ignorant girl, defiant of her mother, and who finds herself pregnant. The other woman in the house is the mother's sister, wanting to be an actress and participating in plays in the Parish Centre. The film looks beautiful in its countryside setting, and there is some humanity in it even though a lot of the experience is harsh.

The other films sent for review include an award-winning documentary, *Sacro GRA*, a portrait of the ring road around the city of Rome and the people who live near it, with their different occupations. There is a slight comedy, *Stay Away from Me*, about a psychiatrist who is unfortunate in relationships, accidents always happening to him or to his girlfriends, unsure of who was responsible for the jinx. The final film was called *Those Happy Years*, an ironic title, of course, because an adult is remembering his years as a young boy, his self-centred artist father, his loving mother and her trying to find herself.

SIGNIS REVIEWS NOVEMBER 2014

BEFORE I GO TO SLEEP
BEST OF ME
FORCE MAJEURE
FURY
HECTOR AND THE SEARCH FOR HAPPINESS
INTERSTELLAR
JOHN WICK
KILL THE MESSENGER
LOVE, ROSIE
MULE, The
OBVIOUS CHILD
PRIDE
ROCK THE CASBAH
TAMMY
THIS IS WHERE I LEAVE YOU
TWO DAYS, ONE NIGHT
WALK AMONG THE TOMBSTONES, A
WHIPLASH
WINTERSLEEP
YOUNG AND PRODIGIOUS T.S. SPIVETT, The

BEFORE I GO TO SLEEP

UK, 2014, 92 minutes, Colour.
Nicole Kidman, Colin Firth, Mark Strong, Anne-Marie Duff.
Directed by Rowan Joffe.

A more accurate title for this film would be When I Wake. In fact, when Christine (Nicole Kidman) wakes every morning she cannot remember anything from the past, especially anything from the day before when she had gone through the whole routine of waking, being puzzled, being told her she was. She is suffering from a strong form of amnesia.

In some ways this is a very old-fashioned type of thriller, set in England, with a strong cast, memories of psychological thrillers like those of Alfred Hitchcock. It is based on a novel by S.J. Watson.

Nicole Kidman is again paired with Colin Firth, after their successful performances in *The Railway Man*. When Christine awakes, her husband, Ben (Colin Firth) is by her side and explains what has happened to her, using photos and names and dates on a panel in the room, reassuring her about her life. But, as the day goes on, she receives a phone call from a Dr Nash (Mark Strong) who tells her he has been treating her for several weeks. He advises her to go to her cupboard and retrieve a camera, on which, each day, she has added comments about her experiences in the possibilities of her memories. In the novel, she keeps a diary. The novelist has said he is very pleased with this idea, much more visual, of her keeping a camera diary.

In her meetings with Dr Nash, she gradually finds out a little bit more about her life before amnesia. Gradually, some flashes of memory return, especially about the bashing she received which has caused the amnesia. Ben explains to her that they were married in 1999, that they had a son, Adam,

who had died at the age of eight or nine.

The other main character in the film is Christine's friend, Claire (Anne-Marie Duff) and they make contact after many years. Through speaking with Claire, she discovers some aspects of the past which had been obliterated from her memory. But, she seems to be content that she now has a grasp on all the facts and can deal with them, especially relying on Ben.

Since this is a thriller, it is obvious that not everybody will be actually what they seem to be. So, it is a drama about identity, discovery of identity, surprised by facts, and becoming embroiled in more danger and violence.

The writer-director of the film, Rowan Joffe, made a version of Grahame Greene's Brighton Rock in 2010.

This is a film which will appeal to older audiences, where they will feel familiar enough with the style of film and enjoy it. One of the problems is whether there are holes in the plot, especially where the loss of memory is concerned over several years, but given the strong performances, the interest of the characters, the difficulties may not come to the surface until well after the film is over.

THE BEST OF ME

US, 2014, 118 minutes, Colour.

Michelle Monaghan, James Marsden, Luke Bracey, Liana Liberato, Gerald Mc Raney, Caroline Goodall, Clarke Peters, Sebastian Arcelus, Jon Tenny, Sean Bridgers.

Directed by Michael Hoffman.

Since 2000, movie audiences who have a touch of romantic, sentiment and even sentimentality, have been looking forward every couple of years to a film version of one of Nicholas Sparks' novels. It began with *Message in a Bottle*, a high-profile film with Paul Newman, Kevin Costner and Robin Wright. Most audiences seem to agree that the best film version and the most popular was *The Notebook* with Ryan Gosling, Rachel McAdama, James Garner, Gena Rowlands. The films include *Dear John*, *The Lucky One*, *Night in Rodanthe*, *The Last Song*.

The Best of Me is more complex than many of the other novels and films. Like *The Notebook*, it has two time focuses, the present and 20 years earlier. We are introduced to the present and that is where the main story develops. But, all the way through, there are many flashbacks to the earlier time, the main characters in their early adulthood, their meeting, in love, the consequences of a number of surprising events.

James Marsden is Dalton, who is first seen on an oil rig, helping fellow-workers when a vast explosion occurs, which knocks him into the water, leaving him there for a long time, when he is eventually rescued and hospitalised, everybody, including himself, amazed that he has survived. We see Michelle Monaghan's Amanda gazing at the stars, unhappily married, with a teenage son. What do they have in common?

They both received a message telling them that their old friend, Tuck (Gerald Mc Raney) has died and has left his possessions to them. When they meet, there is a hostility between the two which makes us suspicious. They go to Tuck's house, look at the possessions, discover photos, and the tension lessens between them.

The story in the present is fairly straightforward. The couple have not seen each other for 20 years and, as they meet we find that Dalton has never stopped loving Amanda. Amanda, on the other hand, is married and has a family. Dalton is free, Amanda is not, and there is her son to think about. We follow Amanda's confrontations with her husband, her support of her son, the reactions of her husband. On the other hand, Dalton, who comes from a poor redneck family dealing drugs, comes up against his hostile father and his brothers.

It is the story in the past that is presented much more interestingly. It shows the background of Dalton and his violent father and his wretched treatment of his son. Amanda, the other hand, comes from an affluent family and is destined to go to college. They meet by accident, form some sort of friendship, Amanda taking a lot of initiative, Dalton rather shy, leaving his home and being taken in by Tuck who is a generous father-figure.

The way the screenplay gradually reveals the details of the past, some of them quite unexpected, gives some attention to the drama and makes the audience interested in what happens to the couple, especially in view of the fact that in the present they have not seen each other for those 20 years.

Plenty of opportunity for smiles, even more opportunity for tears. But, there is a cause of complaint to the writer and the director: the melodrama of the final ten minutes of the film. At first, we think that it might do what seems over the top, then it seems it won't - then it does, defying a great deal of credibility. But, allowing for this, *The Best of Me* offers an opportunity for feeling and sentiment.

FORCE MAJEURE/TURIST

Sweden, 2014, 118 minutes, Colour,.

Johannes Kuhnke, Lisa Loven Kongsli, Clara Wettergren, Vincent Wettergren, Jakob Granqvist, Kristofer Hivju.

Directed by Ruben Ostlund.

Many of us with a smattering of romance languages might draw the quick conclusion that the title of the film means a major force, something that the trailer would seem to indicate with its scenes of an avalanche. Not at all.

The main clarification, which needs some Googling for most of us, indicates a technical meaning, a legal meaning, and a focus on responsibilities in a contract, like marriage. With this in mind, we look at a happy Swedish family who are on holidays in the Swiss Alps. It all seems very nice, no need for any worrying about force majeure. The action takes place over five days. In the early days of the holiday everyone is full of family love, affirmation of the children, going skiing, having a break from work and ordinary life...

Then comes the avalanche, not as terrifying as it looked in the trailer, rather, a different kind of avalanche but with dire consequences.

The family is at lunch with many people at the outdoor tables when the avalanche occurs – but it is a controlled avalanche, the authorities concerned about the massing of snow and having various mechanisms around the snowfields to monitor what is happening. But, as the snow advances on those who are lunching, it seems more ominous and people get to their feet, looking and wondering at what is happening; some even run away.

And that is the problem with the family. The mother stands her ground, thinking about her children. The husband, alarmed, moves away from the table. And that is his fatal move, it is the force majeure occasion in the marriage relationship. At various times, especially with groups of visitors, the husband tries to explain himself away, talk about photos, thinking about the family. His wife is in no way convinced and his behaviour and her reflection on it gnaw away at her attitude towards her husband, questioning her love for him.

This means that the film is a Swedish drama, looking intensely at characters, their external behaviour, their interior lives. The screenplay gives quite some opportunity for discussions, especially with an old friend and his very young companion, having a meal with a couple, wondering what they would do in similar circumstances.

The wife begins to keep to herself, alarming the husband, who finds himself locked out of their unit in the chalet. Realistic breaches between the couple are presented as well as symbolic, and, not giving anything away, the final scene where passengers are anxious about a bus on the mountain curves which cannot get round and people feel in danger, means an alarm for the wife and an opportunity for the husband to step forward and help.

And the question remains whether the couple will be able to regain their love in view of what has happened, whether the wife will be less severe in her demands of her husband, whether the husband will be honest in admitting what happened. When they return to Sweden, what will be the status of their marriage and how will they relate to the children?

This is a film for those who like intense Swedish dramas, and audiences who like exploration of characters in crises. The Swiss mountain scenery, of course, is very beautiful.

FURY

US, 2014, 134 minutes, Colour.

Brad Pitt, Shia La Boeuf, Logan Lerman, Michael Pena, Jon Bernthal.

Directed by David Ayer.

It is surprising to find a World War II film, with such a big budget 70 years after the events portrayed. After all, Brad Pitt's previous film was the futuristic zombie film, World War Z. In many ways, Fury is a strong reminder of so many of the films of the past, the events of the American troops moving forward into Germany in the last months of the war.

In fact, Fury is the name written on the gun of an American tank. We focus on the tank and its five-man team. There a number of smaller roles in group military scenes as well as in the town occupied by the Allies but the main focus is on the group of five. Brad Pitt is the commander, strong-minded, tough, with a knowledge of German, and an ability to read his men and control them. Shia La Boeuf is a tough young man and a continual Bible reader, able to quote Isaiah chapter 6 and God calling the prophet into action. Michael Pena is Hispanic. And Jon Bernthal is a grizzled veteran, aggressive, sometimes obnoxious, but with a deep-down heart.

The other member of the group has been killed and they are sent a very young man, played by Logan Lerman, as the replacement driver.

One of the themes is the father-figure, mentor role played by Brad Pitt in helping the young man to adjust to the war situation after being only eight weeks in the army. Norman does not want to kill,

lets a young German survive, to the anger of the other members of the group. In many ways, the film is the story of the blooding of Norman, his being transformed into a fighter and a killer.

There is also another theme for Norman. When the Allies capture and occupy a town, the commander sets himself up in a house, a reluctant woman allowing them in. Quite a lengthy part of the film is taken up with quiet time, a meal, cleaning up in the house. Pitt suggests that Norman and the young woman in the house go into the bedroom, a sexual initiation. This also has an emotional effect when the house and the town are bombed.

In the latter part of the film, Pitt's tank is the only one to survive an onslaught. Soon they encounter several hundred German soldiers on the march and decide that they will stand their ground. While they cause a lot of destruction and death, it is finally a moment of self-sacrifice. Some commentators have found that the last 10 minutes undermine the previous part of the film – this review disagrees because the experience of Norman parallels his previous encounter with the young German soldier.

The re-creation of war, the military, the town occupied and bombed, the final stands are meticulously recreated. The effects and action are impressive. However, one needs to be in the mood to watch such a grim film and to reflect on the issues it raises about war and men in war.

HECTOR AND THE SEARCH FOR HAPPINESS

UK/Germany, 2014, 118 minutes, Colour.

Simon Pegg, Rosamund Pike, Stellan Skarsgaard, Toni Collette, Christopher Plummer, Barry Atsma, Chantelle Herman.

Directed by Peter Chelsom.

The title sounds like one of those self-help books – and, in fact, it was such a book and is translated into film to invite all those on a search for happiness to share the journey of Hector. Not that Hector is always likeable and easy to identify with, though Simon Pegg does his best to do some comedy but with serious undertones. Hector is a bit over-earnest at times, over-eager, not always empathetic to his clients. He is a psychiatrist, with comfortable practice, a good income, but increasingly irritated with the clients who do have some irritating traits. Hector is also lucky to have Clara, Rosamund Pike (rather different from her *Gone Girl*) as his longtime partner. That she has stayed with him all this time is something of a mystery.

One of his clients has some psychological insight and suggests, along with a touch of fortune-telling, that Hector should go on a trip. Fortunately, he has the time as well as the money to go on such a long trip, searching for happiness. Clara is more than a bit surprised and, though he sometimes keeps in touch with her during the trip, it would be understandable if she were not there when he comes back. Spoiler: she is!

The first destination that Hector chooses is China. On the plane, he causes a bit of kerfuffle and is moved to business class where he sits next to a rather self-centred businessman played by Stellan Skarsgaard. In the event, Hector accompanies Edward into Shanghai, beginning to take notes formulating his principles for happiness or situations which are not happy. Edward is rich which allegedly enables him to be happy. Edward also introduces Hector to a young Chinese woman, an attractive and very sympathetic student and, dabbling in a bit in extra-marital search for happiness, Hector spends the night with her only to find that she is not at all the girl that he thought she was. Plenty of lessons there.

The next destination is Africa, something of the Africa we see in the movies which may or may not be the real Africa. However, he comes to visit one of his fellow students from his American university days. Michael is a doctor, helping the locals in the best possible way and in partnership with one of the locals. That might have been all right, Hector seeing some happiness in altruism, but, one night, on his return to headquarters, some thugs waylay the car and take Hector as a hostage. He does indeed have a very difficult time in captivity, no amenities, his abductors rather sophisticated in their talk and in their hopes. Happiness is not being tortured.

Hector had encountered a European drug lord, Diego, Jean Reno, and they got on well, he providing a good prescription for the drug lord's wife. Fortunately, Diego's name can put terror into terrorists and Hector is released. Quite a lot of reflection on happiness or not here.

By this time, we wonder whether Hector is going to visit all the continents but he takes off for Los Angeles to catch up with Agnes, Toni Collette, his good friend from study days along with Michael.

This is where the film does improve, especially with Toni Collette's strong performance, a decent, common-sensed woman, now married with children, a bit unsympathetic to Hector's self-indulgence and offering him plenty of words of wisdom and challenge. She also takes him to see their old professor, now doing research on the activities of the brain and persuading Hector to take part in an experiment with the experiencing of various emotions which will light up the figure of the brain on the computer. The great benefit of this part of the film is that Christopher Plummer plays the professor, very urbane and challenging in his lecture, very practical and common-sensed in his advice to Hector.

By this time, Hector has quite a lot of points which have been up there on the screen for our consideration. And then he goes home, we presume a happier and wiser man, anchored in realities with its ups and downs rather than idealising a state of earthly happiness.

The film is quite entertaining in its way, especially if you are really interested in getting points for happiness, tolerable if you want some entertainment (with a few morals tossed in).

INTERSTELLAR

US, 2014, 169 minutes, colour.

Matthew Mc Conaughey, Anne Hathaway, Jessica Chastain, Matt Damon, Michael Caine, Mackenzie Foy, Casey Affleck, Topher Grace, Ellen Burstyn, John Lithgow, David Oyelowo.

Directed by Christopher Nolan.

During the last 10 years, a new film from writer-director, Christopher Nolan, has become something of an event. He has made the very successful Batman trilogy, Batman Returns, The Dark Night, The Dark Night Rises. Somewhere in there is a less well-known drama about magicians, well worth seeing, The Prestige. And in there as well is the extraordinary story of dreams and dreams within dreams, Inception. Quite a career following an initial black and white 70 minute experimental feature, Following, the now classic exploration of a character, the screenplay going from the present into the past, Memento, and the re-make of the Scandinavian police thriller with Al Pacino, Robin Williams and Hilary Swank, Insomnia.

Expectations were very high for interstellar.

For Nolan fans, there is so much to relish. *Interstellar* is the story of a post-apocalyptic future in the United States, the collapse of the environment, crops failing, people hungry, aspects of ordinary life still functioning but grim prospects for survival. *Interstellar* is also the story of NASA experiments to find planets in the galaxies where humans might be able to survive. These two themes are interwoven over a period of decades, birth still battling to survive, extraordinary experiences in space.

While *Inception* was tantalising with the exploration of psychology, dreams, parallel worlds, *Interstellar* as much of the same except that the focus is very explicit on science and technology as well as imagination and dreams. It may be that some audiences will find the scientific language and detailed explanations beyond their ken and will accept them or feel overwhelmed by them. Depending on an audience's interest in space exploration and the particular mission to find other planets, this scientific perspective may be too much.

It would seem that the screenwriters, Christopher Nolan and his brother Jonathan, have been influenced by Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* of 1968. There are many similarities in the plot, especially in Kubrick's vision of a space traveller going further and further into the future and rediscovering the past.

This is a long film, almost 3 hours, has so much to do like the eye and the year, especially in space, in the spaceship as well as in the various planets. (some of the spectacular sequences were filmed for IMAX screening and this is a recommendation for those who want to see *Interstellar*, to go to the IMAX cinema.)

The success of the film also depends on audience response to Matthew McConaughey. While filming this, he won an Oscar for that Best Actor in *The Dallas Buyers Club*. In recent years he has been in many successful dramas including *Mud*, *The Paperboy*, and filmmakers can rely on him to sustain audience interest in such a long film as this. Michael Caine, who has appeared in all of Nolan's films in the last 10 years, is the scientist overseeing the voyage into space. His daughter, who goes on the expedition, is played by Anne Hathaway.

The screenplay posits relativity in time, travel through black holes, a year in space corresponding to many years on earth, which means that the travellers stay younger as people on earth grow older, shown in video messages to the explorers. Matthew's precocious daughter, Murphy, who did not want her father to leave but had enabled him to make contact with NASA because of a seeming ghost or poltergeist in the house and series of gravity, appears in the second half of the film with Jessica Chastain in the role.

The mission to find explorers who have gone before, leads to some exciting travel through space, some crises which are handled well, dangers on planets which are found to consist of water and enormous waves (spectacular in IMAX) or dissident mountains (again spectacular in IMAX and filmed in Iceland). It is here that Matt Damon appears as a significant character even though he is credited for the film.

The last part of the film may be confusing or challenging, or both. It presupposes the relativity of time, time folding and unfolding back on itself, communication and lack of communication, the mysteries of time and the future.

Interstellar is a film of its time, in more senses than one. It is spectacular, thought-provoking, indeed, a cinematic achievement.

JOHN WICK

US, 2014, 101 minutes, Colour.

Keanu Reeves, Michael Nyqvist, Alfie Allen, Willem Dafoe, Adrianne Palecki, Bridget Moynihan, John Leguizamo, Ian Mc Shane.

Directed by David Leitch, Chad Stahelski.

John Wick is a violent film. It is the story of a hitman, now retired, whose wife has died and he is in grief. When he is accosted at a service station by a smug and stupid son of a Russian gangster boss who wants his car and comes to his home to steal it, he goes into action. With balletic style, he shoots all the intruders and begins another journey of vengeance.

This is a film for fans of action shows, many of the bloggers calling it the coolest film of the year! Audiences who do not like a violent plot let alone continuous violent action, would be best warned to leave this film be.

It is a star vehicle for Keanu Reeves. For several decades, Reeves has had a penchant for action films. We think of him as Neo in the Matrix series. In more recent times he has appeared in martial arts films like 47 Ronin and Man of Tai Chi which he also directed. While his John Wick is a particularly American character, his dark clothes, his lithe movements, almost balletic as he moves, aims and fires all at once with deadly success, are a reminder of martial arts.

The villain of the piece, the Russian, is played by Michael Nyqvist who made an impact in the Swedish version of The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo and has now come to appear in a number of American films, Abduction, Mission Impossible 4. He gives a strong performance which gives a little more depth to the film. His wayward and self-indulgent son is played by British actor, Alfie Allen.

One of the interesting features is that a number of actors appear in cameo roles, including Willem Dafoe as another hitman, Ian Mc Shane as the manager of a club of hit-persons, John Leguizamo as the manager of a garage. An original feature of the film is a hotel in central New York which is not as it initially seems. The guests are all assassins who work by a code, administered by Ian McShane. There is a solemn concierge who makes all the arrangements, especially for a service entitled "dinner reservations" which is key to ordering a company of "cleaners" who come in and restore a bloody crime scene back to normal.

While there is a lot of brutality about the film, there is a certain fascination with the story, the motives of vengeance of the retired hitman and the enigmatic style with which Keanu Reeves plays his roles.

KILL THE MESSENGER

US, 2014, 112 minutes, Colour.

Jeremy Renner, Mary Elizabeth Winstead, Rosemarie de Witt, Oliver Platt, Robert Patrick, Tim Blake Nelson, Michael Kenneth Williams, Andy Garcia, Michael Sheen, Richard Schiff, Ray Liotta.

Directed by Michael Cuesta.

Everybody loves a conspiracy theory. How many people killed President John F. Kennedy? Was Pope

John Paul I murdered? Was the moon landing in 1969 faked? In *Kill the Messenger*, the question is raised as to the CIA importing drugs into the United States, especially to Los Angeles South Central, to make money to buy arms for the Contras in Nicaragua during the 1980s, during the Reagan administration?

This is a film about journalism, about investigative journalism. We remember All the Presidents Men and Deep Throat revealing information about the Watergate scandal to Woodward and Bernstein. This film is not in that league but it is very interesting nonetheless. It is based on the research by San Jose journalist, Gary Webb.

The film opens with a visual collage of American presidents from Nixon on proclaiming a war against drugs. Gary Webb is working at a small newspaper but is asked by a young woman, Paz Vega, to take some court documents that have been released by accident. He follows through, going to the court, raising suspicions in some of the lawyers when a key state witness is giving evidence about his being an agent for the government, bringing large supplies of drugs into the United States.

Mary Elizabeth Winstead plays Webb's editor, and Oliver Platt plays his boss. They are wary because this is a huge story and they don't have the resources or the reputation. Nevertheless, Webb goes to Nicaragua following up some leads and interviews an imprisoned drug boss, played by Andy Garcia, who gives him even more information, including a source in Washington DC, played by Michael Sheen, who is wary and later phones Webb to urge caution.

When his article is published, there is an extraordinary response, especially from television stations asking for interviews and he is named journalist of the year in Sacramento. What follows is the drama of conspiracy to cover up, especially from suited agents who even raid his home in the middle of the night. Then there is the campaign to discredit him, criticising his sources, criticising his reliability and his personal life.

The screenplay gives a lot of attention to Webb's home life, his moving from Cleveland to California in the aftermath of an affair with a fellow journalist. He has an ever-loving and ever-patient wife, played by Rosemarie de Witt, three children, especially a 16-year-old who has had him on a pedestal. Webb is assigned a post in the quiet town of Cupertino, California, in the hope that the case will go away.

There is a dramatic scene at the making of the award for journalist of the year, his family supporting him, journalists tending to shun him. There is final information about what happened to Webb and some late 1990s television footage of John Kerry, amongst others, indicating that there was truth to the story and the CIA involvement in drug dealing, along with a lot of footage of politicians from Los Angeles Central, calling the CIA to task for targeting African- Americans as potential for drug customers and so ruining many lives.

The film is interesting, at times exciting, a lot of the time focusing on the domestic life of Gary Webb as well as his work at the local paper, not a masterpiece of movie communication but offering a lot to think about in terms of government, cover-ups, and, especially, investigative journalism.

LOVE, ROSIE

UK, 2014, 110 minutes, Colour.

Sam Claflin, Lily Collins, Suki Waterhouse, Tamsin Egerton, Art Parkinson, Christian Cooke, Jamie Winstone.

Directed by Christian Ditter.

It was only after the film was over that this reviewer realised that we are present in Dublin. Everybody speaks with such clear British accents. Half of the film is located in Dublin, the other half in Boston.

This film is based on a 2004 novel, *Where the Rainbow Ends*. Perhaps the film does end at the end of the rainbow but the film could have been called *Long Years Journey into the Evident*. So, this is the story of Rosie and Alex, childhood friends, teenage best friends, adult distant friends and the ups and downs of their lives.

Rosie and Alex are shown as young kids, bonding, sharing experiences with each other, each at home with the other. But, at Rosie's 18th birthday, she drinks too much, flirts, can't remember anything afterwards. In the meantime, Alex, for some reason that he (and we) can't quite work out, does not see Rosie romantically and enters into a relationship with the vain Bethany. On a kind of rebound, Rosie has a one night stand with Greg, satisfying to him after a few moments, unsatisfying to her, when she has to go to hospital because of her not being able to find the condom he used.

The best played laid plans... Alex has a scholarship to Harvard to study medicine and off he goes. Rosie was intending to go to America to do a hotel management course but, morning sickness, and...

Supported by a wonderful and wise father, and her mother, Rosie gives birth but instantly bonds with her daughter and decides not to put her up for adoption.

Years pass, Rosie gets a cleaning job at a hotel, works with her best friend and confidante, Ruby, brings up her daughter, with the usual bouts of colic, sweetness, first steps, and the years pass. Greg come back on the scene and, for some moments, we hope that all will be well and Rosie, Greg and the daughter will become a family. But.

In the meantime, Alex gets tangled with a supremely snobbish young woman, invites Rosie to visit Boston, a visit which is a disaster. And so on...

By the time 12 years have passed, the daughter is verging on teenage and disagreeing with her mother, there is a death in the family which brings grief, Bethany arrives on the scene as a top model and goes to Boston to see Alex. Nothing ever seems to go right for either Rosie or Alex.

Lily Collins and Sam Claflin portray Rosie and Alex over a period of 12 years, from 18 to 30, and have a good on-screen rapport. So, what begins like one of those raucous teenage films, drinking, loud music, fumbling sex, gradually becomes the story of adolescents moving into adulthood. Which means that it turns out better than might have initially been expected.

OBVIOUS CHILD

US, 2014, 88 minutes, Colour.

Jenny Slate, Jake Lacey, Gaby Hoffmann, Richard Kind, Polly Draper, David Cross.

Directed by Gillian Robespierre.

The title of this film comes from a song by Paul Simon.

It is the story of Donna (Jenny Slate) who attempts to be a stand-up comedian. The film opens with

her routines at a club, the personal story, the sexual and physical emphases.

In this brief film, we see various episodes in Donna's life, relationship to her pleasant father, Richard Kind, to her rather superior mother, Polly Draper. She becomes involved in a one night stand with a pleasant young man, Max, Jake Lacey, who admires her performance. She does not expect to see him again but later discovers that she is pregnant. He also turns up a number of times, wanting to keep the contact with her, going out on a date. She resists him, even going out to the apartment of a sleaze at the club, played by David Cross.

She is uncertain about her life, working in a bookshop which is closing down, getting advice from various friends. Her pregnancy becomes the focus at the end with the decision to get an abortion. She has two weeks to consider the situation, trying to sort out things, but finally deciding to have the abortion. At the end, she has calmed down and is seen with Max, watching *Gone with the Wind*.

Her character has been criticised by number of bloggers, accusing her of complete self-centredness as regards the birth of the child.

PRIDE

UK, 2014, 120 minutes, Colour.

Bill Nighy, Imelda Staunton, Paddy Considine, Dominic West, Ben Schnetzer, George Mc Kay, Andrew Scott, Jessica Gunning.

Directed by Matthew Warchus.

The title, *Pride*, might immediately suggest Gay Pride Marches. And the suggestion is not wrong. However, this is a much more complex film in its themes: support for the miners in the 1984 British strikes as well as themes of Gay Pride and, eventually, because of the times, raising the issue of AIDS.

This film may well marginalise different groups from the outset.

With a glimpse of a television interview with Arthur Scargill, the leader of the striking miners, those not in favour of Scargill, of the strike, of the miners and of the labour movement, may not be fans of the film. On the other hand, there is also an initial television interview sequence with Margaret Thatcher speaking, the speech where she emphasised the strength of her leadership and assured everybody that she was not a softie. Those who remember the Thatcher era or who do not approve of her and her policies, may not be fans of the film either.

And then there is the gay and lesbian issue. A fellow-reviewer told me that when he went to see another film, there was a trailer for *Pride*, and a man near him growled loudly, 'effing faggots', and walked out of the cinema until the trailer was over. Anybody sharing that homophobic comment will not like this film at all.

While the strike was in 1984 (and we remember *Billy Elliot* was set in the same time and context), this was 30 years ago. The portrayal of the gay and lesbian group echoes that of 1984 rather than of the present. There is far more understanding these days, despite homophobic outbursts, and despite communities, especially those Bible-based, but not exclusively, who are still repelled by homosexuality. (As *Pride* is being released, some of these issues were raised by the Vatican Synod during October 2014, with discussions and struggles to find outreach pastoral language that gives priority to compassion rather than to judgement.

This theme is very much to the fore in *Pride*. At the Gay Pride March in London, 1984, a small group of enthusiasts collect money to support the miners, feeling that because they understand oppression and hostility, media criticism, dislike and misunderstanding from the community, that they decide to collect the money, calling themselves Lesbians and Gays in Support of the Miners. Further, they want to find a community to give the money to and decide on Wales. They stick a pin in a phone book page, ring the number and the old lady at the other end doesn't quite understand what she heard but welcomes them.

It is often said that if we don't understand an issue, we should meet and be with someone who represents that issue so that it has a human face, a human character, and, even if there is disapproval, there is the possibility for understanding and respect. As might be anticipated, this is to the fore in the film when the group go down to Wales and are initially received with hostility by the miners and the community. But, as the weeks go by, as the individuals share with the locals, especially when a rather flamboyant actor, portrayed with zest by Dominic West, shows them how to dance, modern-style, they gradually win over most of the locals.

One particular member of the Miners' Council disapproves completely of the miners taking supportive money from the group. Her character is very bitter. We realise that while she is entitled to have her views, and express them, we also realise that her hostility and righteousness come from deep anger and judgemental attitudes to life. We are shown that hostile attitudes like outbursts of homophobia can lead to malicious behaviour and cause mischief in a community. Perhaps this is one of the main messages of the film, that holding opinions is one thing, acting out with malice, or hatred, is quite another thing.

While there is a cheerful mood overall in the village which accepts not only the charity but also the different persons and unfamiliar types, there are some very serious undertones to many of the characters.

There is a gallery of characters from the village, including a very serious Bill Nighy and bubbly Imelda Staunton. Paddy Considine is the most sympathetic character, the member of the local council who was commissioned to meet the group, speaks in a gay bar, and begins to understand men and women who are different by being and working with them. The other standout character in the Welsh village is Sian, a housewife who is not afraid to speak her convictions (and who, we are told in the credits, became a parliamentarian after being encouraged to do studies).

Ben Schnetzer is Mark Ashton, very serious about social concern who gets the group going, is behind it in begging for money, keeping up morale, putting on a music concert event to counter the adverse headlines caused by the malicious woman in the village phoning journalists. Others in the group include Adam Scott (Moriarty in the Benedict Cumberbatch *Sherlock* series), Dominic West as his partner, and George Mc Kay as a 20-year-old, struggling with his sexual orientation, his very respectable home and parents, the welcome that he receives in Wales, the support from the group, and his eventually confronting reality with his parents.

The film ends with the Gay Pride March 1985, the end of the year-long strike which included this story of collaboration between gay and lesbians and miners (with final credits information about the Labor Party's incorporation of gay and lesbian rights into their platform because of the mutual support during the strike and the beginnings of mutual understanding).

20 years ago, an American Archbishop visited Australia and in his conference with the Catholic media explained that he took a year to write any pastoral letter in his diocese, consulting all those with connections to the particular theme so that while he was writing in the Catholic tradition of

teaching, he was also writing with the gospel mentality and pastoral outreach. Any person doing something equivalent these days could well have a look at Pride, whether they agree with everything or not.

ROCK THE CASBAH

Morocco, 2013, 101 minutes, Colour.

Morjana Aloui, Nadine Labaki, Lubna Azabal, Hiam Abbas, Omar Sharif.

Directed by Laila Marrakshi.

We don't often see films from Morocco, so this is a welcome opportunity for the audience to immerse itself in a country where many films are made, mainly American and biblical period films, but whose way of life, in an Islamic country, is little known.

While there are some serious things in this film, it opens with panoramic helicopter views of a Moroccan city, the coast, the beach full of people, a sunny Mediterranean country. And, in the background, Bing Crosby and Bob Hope singing 'We're off on the road to Morocco (which has the classic lyric, "like Webster's dictionary, we're Morocco-bound").

We meet an old man walking in the spacious park grounds of his mansion, telling us about his movie-going in the past and our sometimes mistaking the movie for reality. He is played by Omar Sharif, reminding us of his more than 50 year film career, acting at the age of 81. But, as we watch him walk, goes into a room where a body is being prepared for burial. He confides to us that it is his. He will make a number of appearances during the film, a genial ghostly figure, commenting on his life and his family.

Because this is one of those films where a significant figure in the family dies, everyone gathers for the funeral rites – in the reading of the will.

One of his daughters arrives from the United States where she is a film star, portraying terrorists (and we have a glimpse of one of her films towards the end with the family watching, her grandmother taking it rather literally). Her husband is a director of horror films and she brings her little son to Morocco. She has left the Moroccan way of life behind as well as her family and, though sometimes lonely, she is an American. She has three sisters, though one of them has died long since. Another is a teacher, devout, patriotic, a touch hard, with a supportive husband and a son who has a camp manner and wants to sing in Broadway musicals. The other sister is bored with life, lazy, and indulging herself in corrective surgery for her vanity.

Interesting is the widow, full of grief and tension, snapping at the servant who has been with the family for 30 years. She is played by the Palestinian actress, Hiam Abbas.

The film is divided into three days: the living, the burial, the separation.

Which gives us plenty of time to get to know the characters, their strengths and weaknesses, the interaction of the sisters, the importance of their mother, the importance of the maid and her son who was involved with the daughter who died. There is also the dead man's brother, unmarried, rather eager to get his hand on his brother's will as the male heir with priority in Moroccan law before women, even the deceased's wife and daughters.

But, as we might guess, these reunions are far from happy and we become aware of secrets and lies,

secrets gradually being revealed, some devastating consequences for lives.

The film has a strong feminine sensibility, the writer-director, Laila Marrakshi, who has written the female characters with insight and some sympathy.

Looking at this affluent Moroccan family, with action mainly within the house, though there are some sequences in clubs and streets outside the house, we realise that Morocco offers a rather more open society (even if still fairly patriarchal), behaviour, dress for women, prayers and rituals than in, say, the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Always interesting, always humane.

TAMMY

US, 2014, 96 minutes, Colour.

Melissa Mc Carthy, Susan Sarandon, Kathy Bates, Alison Janney, Dan Aykroyd, Mark Duplass, Gary Cole, Nat Faxon, Toni Collette, Sandra Oh, Ben Falcone.

Directed by Ben Falcone

This is very much a take-it or leave-it kind of comedy. It all depends whether you like Melissa Mc Carthy or not. She has been around for quite a while but came into wide prominence with her comic turn in *Bridesmaids*. Since then she has been successful in such films as *Identity Thief* or as Sandra Bullock's contrasting police partner in *Heat*.

Tammy was co-written with her husband, Ben Falcone, who also directed the film (and appeared in a cameo role as the manager of a fast-food outlet who sacks Tammy and is pelted with food by her). Melissa Mc Carthy often plays larger-than-life roles and this one is no exception. But the trouble is that Tammy is not a very likeable person at all (either by many of the characters or by the audience). She is moody, childish and her behaviour, generally self-absorbed, as well as being something of a slob. It is very surprising to find that she is married to Greg (Nat Faxon) who, perhaps understandably but not justifiably, is in a relationship with, of all people, Toni Collette.

But this is a road movie because Tammy is so exasperated with every one, everything and her life, that she decides to go on the road, but having to borrow a car because the opening of the film shows her crashing into a deer because of a distraction and smashing the car. And, because she was late, and so many times, she has been sacked.

Her parents are played by Dan Aykroyd and Alison Janney. Her grandmother is played by Susan Sarandon. Her grandmother's friends, a lesbian couple, are played by Kathy Bates and Sandra Oh. And then there is Gary Cole who is attracted to grandma and Mark Duplass, a nice fairly simple soul, who is genuinely attracted to Tammy. If nothing else, the film boasts a very, very strong cast with Susan Sarandon standing out as the extroverted, alcoholic, few-holds-barred grandmother.

Of course, there are all kinds of incidents along the road, especially because of grandmother Pearl, which includes a jail sentence and robbing a diner to get bail to get her out.

The culmination is at a fourth of July party held by the couple where grandmother behaves very badly, Tammy feels hurt, and the host, Kathy Bates, gives her a few solid words of advice.

Happy ending is implied – and reconciliation with mother, father, grandmother, and the nice young

man. But, whether it will work out that way...?

THIS IS WHERE I LEAVE YOU

US, 2014, 103 Minutes, Colour.

Jason Bateman, Tina Fey, Jane Fonda, Adam Driver, Rose Byrne, Corey Stoll, Kathryn Hahn, Connie Britton, Timothy Olyphant, Dax Shepard, Debra Monk, Abigail Spencer, Ben Schwarz.

Directed by Sean Levy.

Some years ago, there was a Jewish film called *Seven Days/Shiva*, about a family observing Shiva, sitting in the house for the week, mourning the dead. This film is a very American version of Shiva, often raucously so. It is based on a novel by Jonathan Tropper, who wrote the screenplay for the film.

This is a story of the death of the father of the family and the assembly of brothers and sister as seen from the point of view of the second son, Judd, with Jason Bateman in the role, using his talent for comic timing but having a much more serious role than usual. Within minutes of the opening of the film, he discovers that his wife has been having an affair with his boss. He sits glumly and then receives the news that his father has died.

The sister is Wendy (Tina Fey), unsatisfactorily married with two children (one of whom is continually seen with his potty, doing his training in public – and one wonders what this little actor will think and feel when he watches this film in 10 years time, 20 years time!). The older brother, Paul (Corey Stoll), has stayed close to his father, managing the family store, and trying with his wife, Annie (Kathryn Hahn), quite intensely, to become pregnant. Then there is Philip (Adam Driver), much younger, brought up by Wendy as a mother figure, now irresponsible, self-absorbed, bringing his former therapist Tracy (Connie Britton) who thinks she is in love with him.

As can be seen by this small summary, the potential for conflict is mighty – and is seen in many sequences, verbal clashes, physical clashes, comparisons, psychological rivalry...

And all is presided over by the matriarch, Hillary, who is played by Jane Fonda, still looking glamorous in her mid 70s, but, as part of the humour of the story, she has silicone enhanced breasts (of which she is not at all ashamed). She has written a book in the past about families, with thinly disguised portraits of her own children. She has now called them together, loves them, tries to help them, while still rather airily going about her carefree way of life.

As if the family is not enough, there is the neighbour, Horry (Timothy Olyphant) who was in love with Wendy but suffered brain damage in a car accident and is still at home. His mother, Linda (Debra Monk) is in and out of the house, providing some of the refreshments. And yet another character. Rose Byrne is Penny, who still lives in the town, has had a crush on Judd in the past, finds matters complicated when he returns, but is a woman who is very direct, speaks her mind, and often with commonsense.

Stir all of this together, and we have the close family sitting in the one room, forbidden to go out of the house (which is interpreted exceedingly freely), have them go to Temple, presided over by the siblings' friend, now a rather trendy Rabbi resenting his family nickname of Boner.

Here we have multi-multi problems, often taken seriously, sometimes exuberantly, and sometimes treated farcically. Many audiences may think it too much – especially a final revelation much too

late, dramatically speaking, in the film and barely prepared for, which makes it somewhat implausible.

Some years ago there was a film called *Life as it Is*. A religious reviewer found it very objectionable, stating that it is better to have stories about Life as it should be. In fact, our lives are life as it is, messy, sinful, hurtful as well as striving for some kind of happiness and decency. This is what this film is like, raucous and rude, silly and serious, with an underlying family warmth that does not always come out the right way.

A WALK AMONG THE TOMBSTONES

US, 2014, 114 minutes, Colour.

Liam Neeson, David Harbour, Dan Stevens, Boyd Holbrook, Astro.

Directed by Scott Frank.

Many of us used to enjoy reading the crime novels of Lawrence Sanders, especially back in the 1990s. It is surprising to find that, previously, only one of his novels had been brought to the screen, *80 Million Ways to Die*, starring Jeff Bridges as the former policeman, private detective, Matthew Scudder. It would have seemed a very promising franchise, a series of films with Matthew Scudder.

It is only now that Liam Neeson portrays Scudder. In recent years Liam Neeson has been doing a lot of action roles, especially in his series, *Taken*, but also in, *Unknown*, *Non-stop*. While there is some action in the film, this is rather a private eye investigation film.

It opens in 1991 with an alcoholic Scudder involved in a shooting confrontation with some robbers, but also killing a little girl by accident. The action shifts to 1999 when Scudder has left the police force, has given up drinking and has been attending AA meetings for all these years. He looks a little bit more spruced up than previously but one wonders how many cases he has actually had.

He is approached by a young man who wants him to help his older brother, Boyd Holbrook and Dan Stevens. The latter reveals that his wife has been abducted, he has paid the ransom but the results have been disastrous. Scudder is reluctant to take on the case, because Kenny, Dan Stevens, lives in a luxury apartment and is clearly a drug dealer (or trafficker as he prefers). On a compassionate whim, he finally decides to take the case.

The film is interesting because there are several abduction cases which Scudder investigates. They also lead him to quite a range of characters, with the abductors revealed halfway through, which means that from a detection story it becomes a pursuit story. The abductors are particularly ruthless, David Harbour, physically resembling Michael C. Hall as *Dexter*, a sadistic serial killer.

There is no romance. The main emotional support comes from the young African-American lad, T.J., whom he encounters in a library. He is unwell though not admitting it, has some ambitions to be a detective and tries to tag along with Scudder. Eventually, he uses his wits and becomes very involved in the final confrontation.

A values perspective is offered during the final encounters with the killers. The AA 12 steps are voiced at each moment.

Liam Neeson is expert at this world-weary kind of character. On-screen as a character actor since the early 1980s, he has become a top-billing star for more than 20 years after his performance as Oscar

Schindler. In his early 60s, he still has a commanding screen presence.

This all makes them very interesting but, of course, given the nature of the plot and the cruelty of the abductors, there are a couple of scenes of rather graphic violence. But, Lawrence Block would probably be pleased with the film as will fans of private detective stories.

WHIPLASH

US, 2014, 107 minutes, Colour.

Miles Teller, J.K. Simmons, Paul Reiser, Melissa Benoist, Austin Stowell, Chris Mulkey.

Directed by Damian Chazelle.

One of the pieces played often in this film has the title, Whiplash. But Whiplash has overtones of torture, beating, suffering. And that is what happens in this very strong and fascinating film.

The writer-director, Damian Chazelle, studied music himself and draws on his own experience in shaping this story. He brings quite an intensity to the characterisations and conflicts.

Miles Teller, who has appeared in a number of rather obnoxious and forgettable sex comedies, makes his mark as young drummer, Andrew, who hopes to be a top performer. He is at a music college, studies in a band, is overheard one day by the chief director of the school's main band, Fletcher, played by J. K. Simmons, a fine character actor for many years. This has to be his best performance.

One day, Fletcher marches into the smaller band rehearsal and summons Andrew. At first, Fletcher gives the impression of friendship and encouragement but very soon is too demanding of Andrew, Andrew going too fast, too slow, not the right timing, Fletcher throwing things at him, mocking him about the one tear in his eye... And it goes on from there.

Audiences with movie memories of martinets and the harsh treatment of those under their command may remember Louis Gossett Jr's treatment of Richard Gere in *An Officer and a Gentleman* or R. Lee Ermey in Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*. This is on a par with those performances. There are some moments when Fletcher seems to be human, especially in his grief at a student who has died – but that also has its harsh and bleak sides.

Most of the film is the confrontation between Fletcher and Andrew. At least Andrew has the support of his fond father, Paul Reiser, and, for a short time, dating with a girl who sells tickets at the local cinema. But, Andrew has great perseverance as Fletcher does his best to humiliate him – and the others in the band, especially the fellow-drummers.

The key question is how far should a teacher, a mentor, a parent-figure, put pressure on a student. Towards the end of the film, there is a confronting discussion between teacher and pupil. The teacher says that he does not want his students to be ordinary. He claims that "a good job" is the worst of compliments, being satisfied with the ordinary.

It also raises the question of the teacher, mentor, parent living through the student, a precarious success.

The trouble is that there is some traumatic effect on the student when there is so much pressure

from the teacher. For the audience, this is clear in looking at Andrew, his bleeding hands, his intensity and using every moment for practice, cutting off relationships, the consequence of complete dedication to craft and wanting perfection.

So, the film shows both sides of this pressure question and its consequences, confronting the audience and its belief in excellence and achievement as well as feeling towards those whose lives are altered for the worse because of the pressure.

It builds up to a psychological confrontation, a musical confrontation, and a tour-de-force performance by Andrew which makes a difference to Fletcher's perceptions of him.

For those who appreciate music, especially jazz, the film has a strong score which plays throughout the whole film.

WINTER SLEEP

Turkey, 2014, 196 minutes, Colour.

Haluk Bilginer, Melisa Sozen.

Directed by Nuri Bilge Ceylan.

Wintersleep is the latest film from the distinguished Turkish director, Nuri Bilge Ceylan. It is fair to say that his films are only for a specialised audience, not for the multiplex audience.

His earlier film was *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*, immersing the audience in the mountainous countryside, the lives, happy and unhappy, of the inhabitants. This description is true of *Wintersleep* (although the screenplay is based on some stories by Anton Chekhov). As the winter season moves in, we are almost trapped in a snow-covered town, sharing lives with a few of the inhabitants, listening to their interactions, liking and disliking some of them, spending a great deal of time listening to their conversations.

Ayden, a former actor now writing the history of Turkish theatre, lives in retirement with his young wife, Nihal, managing a hotel for visitors – there are rather few. He is sometimes reclusive, is rather commanding of his wife who begins to resent this, having long discussions with his somewhat acerbic sister. One of the main conversations with his sister must go for about half an hour, very interesting if you have become involved, tedious and off-putting if you have stopped listening. There is a later conversation with his wife which does not go on for so long but has the same effect.

There is some drama when Ayden is driving with his manager and a young boy throws a stone which shatters the glass of the car window. This leads to some conflict, the father of the boy who has spent time in prison reprimanding him but resentful of the situation. His younger brother, a local imam, is a good man of peace who tries reconciliation. Just when we might have forgotten about this subplot, it is reintroduced towards the end of the film, a visit from Nihal, a gift for the family, the reaction of the boy, of the cantankerous brother, of the genial imam.

Ayden has some friends with whom he goes hunting, spends a lot of time drinking and talking with them. In between the conversations there are some visitors at the hotel, especially an Asian couple who have cheerfully enjoyed their stay.

The screenplay is intelligently written, well worth listening to. The design of the film and the photography are exemplary. The director's pacing, with more than three hours at his disposal,

means that this is a beautifully directed film, destined to be something of a cult classic, confirming the reputation of the director who had already won the Best Director award in Cannes 2008 for *Three Monkeys*, and The Grand Prize of the Jury in 2003 for *Uzak* and for *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* in 2012. *Wintersleep* is something of a culmination for the director, winning him the Palme d'Or at Cannes 2014.

THE YOUNG AND PRODIGIOUS T.S. SPIVETT

Canada, 2014, 91 minutes, Colour.

Kyle Catlett, Helena Bonham Carter, Judy Davis, Callum Keith Rennie, Niamh Wilson, Jakob Davies, Dominique Pinon.

Directed by Jean- Pierre Jeunet.

An entertaining film, serious and humorous, some interesting characters, some offbeat situations, and a general feeling of niceness (except for Judy Davis's character who has an angry outburst and some expletives which seem a bit out of place for the intended young audience). The photography captures the beauty of the Canadian and American countryside, especially if you see it in 3D (highly recommended because it is excellent use of 3D).

And who is T.S. Spivet? Actually, this is a question that the academics at Harvard are asking.

Let's go back a little. The setting is a farm in Montana. father, Callum Keith Rennie, is an old-fashioned cowboy type, not so well-educated, but practical. We might wonder how met his wife, Dr Clair, a very sympathetic performance by Helena Bonham Carter, who is a dedicated entomologist, continually inside studying her insects. They have two children, twins. One of them takes after his father, out in the paddocks, playing with guns, a roustabout. He bonds very well with his younger twin. T.S. who is intellectually curious, absorbed in experiments and calculations, expert in maths and physics. The twins are 10 years old.

When there is a sadness in the family, T.S. decides to send in one of his project constructions for a competition. Not only does he win, he is invited to travel to Harvard to receive this award and speak. What is the 10-year-old to do?

And this is the delight of the rather tall tale where T.S. cannot tell the family what he has done. He impersonates his father on the phone so that Harvard (that's Judy Davis on the other end of the phone) assumes that the winner is an adult.

Then the film become something of a road movie, a railroad film, as T.S. runs away from home, uses his wits as he travels across the country, encountering all kinds of people, all of whom are sympathetic, a woman selling food in a diner, a farmer giving him a lift, various characters giving him wise advice...

The people in Harvard must be very balanced types because it doesn't take them long to accept T.S. There are many comic touches as he prepares for his speech, is dressed formally, surprises the public that he is a young boy, but manages to get out some words for his speech. He delights everyone. We can see that he is young, but everybody can eventually tell that he is definitely prodigious.

Of course, there is a happy meeting with his parents, their pride in him, and, one presumes, a prodigious life in physics and experiments in Harvard and beyond.

The films made by French director, Jean- Pierre Jeunet, noted for his often delightfully eccentric films, especially *Amelie*. He also directed *Delicatessen*, *A Very Long Engagement*, as well as in the *Alien* series, *Alien Resurrection*. One feels his delight in making the film, creating the characters, with the fine photography and the special effects, especially for 3D, with the suspicion that he might have been young and prodigious himself.

It definitely is very entertaining.

THE VATICAN MUSEUMS 3D

This is a documentary being screened at special cinemas, described as *An Event*, in the vein of the screenings of plays from the National Theatre in London or operas from Lincoln Centre in New York City. It is an Italian production, hosted by the director of the Vatican Museums.

It is said that millions of tourists visit the Vatican museums, especially the Sistine Chapel, each year. But this means that many more millions do not have the opportunity to visit the museums and wonder at the paintings, statues, frescoes. And, even when we might have an opportunity to do this visit, there is so much to see, so many crowds, not as much time as we might have hoped, and we achieve some glimpses of the works of art. This means that this documentary is a kind of supplement for those who have visited and, hopefully, an eye-opener for those who have yet to visit.

The director explains the origins of the Vatican museums, the discovery of the classic statue of the priest, Laocoon and the serpent's, in the 15th century and Pope Julius the second, the Pope who hired Michelangelo to paint the Sistine Chapel roof, establishing the museums.

The first part of the tour is a look at the classical statues from the Greek and Roman period. While interesting in themselves, they serve as a prelude to what most audiences would be wanting to see, the mediaeval paintings and the Sistine Chapel.

The director does a commentary in Italian, with a voice-over, rather plain and less-than-involving, giving the information in English. It is a pity that one can still hear, as with television and radio news, the original voice underlying the voice-over.

But the main part of the film is quite exhilarating. The 3D is effective in showing the scope of the museums, the vast corridors, the rooms full of paintings, the Sistine Chapel. But it also has the strange effect, when we look at paintings in close-up, of producing 3D effect on the paintings themselves which is not what we see when we look at them up close.

The main benefits of the film are the time spent with Raphael's paintings and with Michelangelo's. Audiences may not be so familiar with Raphael's paintings and this is a wonderful opportunity to see some of his great works, huge paintings in the Vatican halls, in their large perspective as well as in detailed close-up. Audiences will be in great admiration of the work of Raphael.

But then, there is the Sistine Chapel, a look at some of the key paintings on the roof of as well as time spent gazing at the overall impact of Michelangelo's *The Last Judgement* as well as appreciating so much of the detail. One of the difficulties with the commentary is that as soon as the director does some explanation of a particular part of the painting, the film editors cut immediately to the next sequence, whisking us away, without giving the audience sufficient time to look and to appreciate what they have just heard.

Statistics are given about the length of the corridors, the size of the rooms, the number of works of art in the museum, with some glimpses of the work of other painters, including van Gough. But it is the paintings of Raphael and Michelangelo that audiences will be happy to have had the opportunity of seeing.



REVIEWS DECEMBER 2014

ALEXANDER AND THE TERRIBLE, HORRIBLE, NO GOOD, VERY BAD DAY

CAPTIVE, The

CONGRESS, The

DROP, The

FOLIES BERGERE

GREEN PRINCE, The

HORRIBLE BOSSES 2

HUNGER GAMES, The: MOCKINGJAY PART I

LET'S BE COPS

MAPS TO THE STARS

MEN, WOMEN & CHILDREN

MULE, The

MY MISTRESS

MY OLD LADY

NIGHTCRAWLER

ONE I LOVE, The

PADDINGTON

PARTICLE FEVER

SERENA

THOUSAND TIMES GOONIGHT, A

TURKEY SHOOT

TWO DAYS, ONE NIGHT

WHEN THE QUEEN CAME TO TOWN

ALEXANDER AND THE TERRIBLE, HORRIBLE, NO GOOD, VERY BAD DAY

US, 2014, 81 minutes, Colour.

Steve Carell, Jennifer Garner, Ed Oxenbould, Dylan Minette, Kerris Dorsey, Bella Thorne, Meagan Mullally, Jennifer Coolidge, Dick Van Dyke.

Directed by Miguel Arteta.

They say that films with very long names turn out to be not very good. It is difficult to know who "they" are – but in this case, they are quite wrong. Alexander definitely has a terrible, horrible, no

good, very bad day but it is not a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad film.

It's a family film, generally for family audiences but also about a family. At the opening, we see them struggling home in a knocked-about car. They unlock their front door and we, and they, hear what seem to be crocodile noises! And then the film goes back 24 hours so that we can discover that very horrible day.

Alexander is quite an enterprising young man, although he certainly gets himself into a mess and get the family itself into quite some messes as well. Surprisingly, he is played by Ed Oxenbould, and very well too. But the surprise is not his acting. It is that he is an Australian actor and is to appear in the family film, *Paper Planes*. He is perfectly convincing as an American. Although it is interesting to note that in the film, his character, Alexander, has a passion for things Australian, his room covered in posters, his wanting to do a project on Australia at school (though his arch-rival, always putting him down, Philip Parker, and popular with everyone is assigned Australia).

Alexander has interesting genes because his father is a rocket scientist, recently losing his job as companies are re-structured, but offering to work on a computer game for a group of young experts. He is played genially by Steve Carell. And mother, Jennifer Garner, is very successful as well. She writes children's books, testing them out at home with great approval. When she goes to the library bookshop reading of one of the other books from her company, they discover there is a horrible, very bad misprint right throughout the book, dump instead of jump! Which leads to some difficulties – and some hostilities – for the guest reader, Dick Van Dyke.

Alexander has an older brother and sister. Anthony (Dylan Minette) is preparing to go to the prom with, of course, the beautiful girl in the class (in who in fact is a snob that no one would want to go with). He also get has to get a suit – and find one that does not suit him. And it his driving licence test day – with a tricky examiner concerning mobile phones, Jennifer Coolidge. He has an older sister, Emily (Kerris Dorsey), who has been rehearsing for the school play – she is Peter Pan, but develops a cold, gives into too much cough mixture with a few 'high' disastrous results.

So, we can see, what a terrible, horrible day the rest of the family has – except the baby Trevor who does suck on a colour marker with green results. But, the rest of the family seem to give all their attention to the baby – and poor old Alexander feels that everybody neglects him.

It was important that this review to give the initial attention to Alexander because of his feelings of neglect – rather than to the rest of the family who, despite the terrible day, do finally have good results.

And then there is Alexander's birthday party, quite a surprise with a very Australian theme.

All's well that ends well – and this amusing film, with a moment or two of rudeness, runs only 80 minutes, which is all to the good.

THE CAPTIVE

Canada, 2014, 112 minutes, Colour.

Ryan Reynolds, Scott Speakman, Rosario Dawson, Kevin Durand, Mireille Enos, Alexia Fast, Bruce Greenwood.

Directed by Atom Egoyan.

Celebrated Canadian director, Atom Egoyan, has had two films released in 2014 with abduction and abuse themes, firstly, *The Devils Knot*, based on actual events of the 1990s, and this film, *The Captive*, a fiction which dramatises possibilities concerning the kidnapping of a little girl and keeping her prisoner, something which the world has become more aware of, especially since the disappearance of Madeleine McCann [?](#) in Portugal.

The film caused controversy in the Cannes film Festival, 2014, many of the reviewers deriding the screenplay, holes in the plot, thinking it a tawdry film. One can agree that the film leaves a great deal to the imagination and memory of the audience, moving between different time eras without immediate explanation, keeping graphic scenes of the treatment of the girl off the screen, with the result that some might be tempted to think it is all too easily presented.

However, the film does set up a loving father and mother, very ordinary types, with a landscape gardening business in the south of Canada, close to Niagara Falls and the American border. Their little girl, Cassandra, is a keen skater with admiring parents. After practice, she and her father stop at a diner to buy a pie and when he comes back to his truck, she is gone.

The film does not keep the audience in suspense about who did it, showing the man, a wealthy man with position in business and in society. Perhaps it is a weakness in the film, when audiences have looked at and listened to some graphic stories over the years, that the years in which Cassandra has been in captivity are glossed over. We see her six years after the abduction, now a teenager, living a very comfortable life except for the reality of the imprisonment, a victim, it would seem, of the Stockholm Syndrome, even going online to search out potential victims for her captor.

As the film moves back and forwards to and from the time of the abduction, to 6 years later, to 8 years later, we see what has happened to the parents and we see two members of a special squad to deal with paedophiles.

The parents, played by Ryan Reynolds and Mireille Enos, have taken the abduction very hard, not knowing whether their child is dead or alive. The father has something of a quick temper, a violence charge against him, has had financial difficulties, suggesting to one of the police that he may have sold his daughter. He still keeps the back seat of the car as it was when Cassandra disappeared. In the meantime, the mother has a cleaning job in the house of the abductor, her daughter able to watch her mother at work through a surveillance system, elaborately set up so that the abductor can observe, even putting cameras in police areas.

One of the police, Nicole, is played by Rosario Dawson, who has had bad experiences from her childhood and is sympathetic to the case, seeing the mother regularly, the father refusing to go, weary of his wife's angry outbursts of blame. The other is an angry officer, Scott Speedman, always

suspicious of the father – and who enters into a relationship with Nicole. Nicole, who has been an exemplary officer, is guest speaker at a charity dinner (which is attended by the abductor who targets Nicole).

Almost by accident, a clue and lead emerge after eight years, which leads to a rather melodramatic and violent ending.

On reflection, there are many limitations in the structure and impact of the film, but, while it is on the screen, it keeps the attention.

THE CONGRESS

Israel, 2013, 122 minutes, Colour.

Robin Wright, Harvey Keitel, Jon Hamm, Kodi Smit-McPhee, Danny Houston, Sami Gayle, Paul Giamatti.

Directed by Ari Folman.

The title is not particularly helpful, even though it comes from the original novel, *The Futuristic Congress*, by Stanislaw Lamb. There is a Congress in the middle of the film but the film is concerned with much, much more than the Congress itself.

In 2008, Israeli director, Ari Folman, made an award winning film, *Waltz with Bashir*. It was concerned with war in Lebanon, massacres and consequent nightmares for some of the participants and victims. What was striking about *Waltz with Bashir* was that it was an animated film, an animation feature for adults, very serious, graphic, challenging.

It is taken some years for Folman to follow-up with another feature film. Quite a number of international companies contributed to financing it, a difficult project, with both animation and real life performance.

It is not the kind of film that will appeal to a wide audience. Rather, it will have an appeal to those who like to exercise their imagination in response to film, especially to a film which relies on graphic animation for its impact.

The star of the film is Robin Wright, a star in Hollywood and overseas since her breakthrough role in *The Princess Bride*. *The Congress* relies on Robin Wright and her impact and her status. There is discussion of *The Princess Bride* with a scene where Robin Wright ruefully looks at a poster. At the opening of the film, in real life, the actress is discussing her career with her agent, Al (Harvey Keitel) who takes her to see a producer, Jeff (Danny Houston) who upbraids her for not following the path of a successful career, making bad choices in films, bad choices in life. The new (and final) contract that he is offering her is for a complete scan, physical and psychological, so that she will not have to act any more but that companies will produce programs relying on the information and perspectives from the scan. We do see some glimpses of a science fiction film so produced, *Rebel Robot Robin*!

In the fictitious real life sequences, Robin has two children, and they live at the edge of an airport in the Mojave desert. A young son, Aaron, (Australia's Kodi Smit-McPhee) is losing his sight and this makes demands on Robin for her decision, especially when she visits Dr Baker (Paul Giamatti).

She opts for the scan, a spectacular sequence, and then drives, 20 years later, to The Congress, transforming during the trip into an animated character, arriving at the Abrahama Hotel, full of animated celebrities and staff, goes to the Congress where she sings, but a revolution is going on and she falls victim.

Robin does have the opportunity to return to real life, searching for her son, meeting Dr Baker, making an option to support her son.

Needless to say, there is much more going on, especially with the vivid imagination in the animation. A point is made towards the end of the film that drugs are used in order to overcome depression and find some kind of truth, but drugs can also be used in a hallucinogenic way, creating a different truth. The animated world, on the other side of reality, is visually bright, active, hallucinogenic.

One might say that Robin Wright was fairly game in agreeing to perform in this film, open to some criticism about her life and career, but contributing to its continuance by appearing in this very unusual film.

THE DROP

US, 2014, 106 minutes, Colour.

Tom Hardy, Noomi Rapace, James Gandolfini, Matthias Schoenaerts, John Ortiz.

Directed by Michael R. Raskam.

The Drop has a screenplay by Dennis Lehane, whose novels, Mystic River, Gone Baby Gone, Shutter Island, have been made into significant and powerful films by Clint Eastwood, Ben Affleck and Martin Scorsese. This film has been directed by the Belgian, Michael R. Raskam.

Early in the film, there is an explanation of money collection in Brooklyn, the Italian standover thugs having been replaced by migrants from Chechnya, still keeping up the tradition of violence and brutality. Money is collected from various enterprises, put in small brown paper bags, covered with newspaper, and taken to various bars in Brooklyn and quietly dropped into a concealed safe. The gangsters have a random choice of bars so that any robberies will not be anticipated. The money is collected in the early hours of the morning.

The audience finds itself in a particular bar, managed by Marv (the final performance by James Gandolfini, reprising similarities to his role as Tony Soprano but this time, something of a failure, desperate for a last chance). Behind the bar is his cousin, Bob, who has worked with Marv for many years. The bar is generally busy, has its regulars like a group toasting a dead friend or Millie, who Marv once thrown out until she pays her bills but Bob, he is that kind of person, pays for her drinks.

Bob is the central character for the film. He is played by Tom Hardy who has proven himself a significant actor over the years, an actor who can take on a variety of roles and whose facial expressions, body language, communicate with subtlety the inner life of his characters. He was the brutal Bronson, one of the moonshine brothers in *Lawless*, significant in *Inception*, the villain in *The Dark Night Rises*.

One night, masked robbers steal the money and the Chechens are not very happy. There is a twist in discovering who organised the robbery and the consequences for the robbers, one being run over, the other being set up for a big robbery, on the night of the drop. This character, Eric, is played by the Belgian actor Matthias Schoenaerts who was the star of Michael R. Raskin's *Bullhead*. He also appeared effectively in *Rust and Bone*, a good actor who can bring the sinister to his roles. The other central character is Nadia, (Noomi Rapace, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*), Eric's former girlfriend and now a friend of Bob, especially when a pitbull terrier has been bashed by Eric and put in the garbage, Bob hearing it as he passes by and rescues it. (The name of Denis Lehané's short story is *Animal Rescue*.)

The dog is important for the film, appealing to Bob's warm instincts, his treating it, as Marv taunts him, like his child. Nadia is happy to help with the dog.

These are all elements that commentators make explicit on the film – but it is interesting that no one talks about the role of the Catholic Church in Bob's life. It is interesting that Denis Lehané has introduced these elements and that the director has portrayed the contemporary church and its liturgy quite accurately as well as some of the controversial issues of the time. Bob goes to Mass every day but does not go to Communion. He sits in the church, prays, one day the priest letting him in early. In the church there is a statue of St Roch, St Rocco, with his dog – which means that Bob's dog is given the name of Rocco. The detective (John Ortiz) investigating the robbery and other crimes in the neighbourhood is also a Mass-goer, and discusses this with Bob, asking why he does not go to Communion. The detective himself is not keen on the Sign of Peace (which is shown in one sequence) and is all against the style of contemporary hymns. He is also concerned, and discusses this with Bob, that the church, with its small attendance, is about to be sold and turned into condominiums.

As we learn more about Bob, and the complexities of his life and attitudes, especially violence and his loyalty to Marv, we realise that, under a seemingly serene surface, he is a man of violence but yet having convictions about justice and right. He is a character that Graham Greene, with his novels' tormented religious characters, would appreciate, especially Bob speculating as to whether, after his death, God would turn him away from heaven.

Audiences interested in this kind of New York crime film will find much to appreciate in the plot, its twists, the central characters, their dilemmas, all presented in dark shades, where life is complicated, and there is more grey than black and white.

FOLIES BERGERE/ PARIS FOLIES/ LA RITOURNELLE

France, 2014, 98 minutes, Colour.

Isabelle Huppert, Jean- Pierre Darrousin, Michael Nyqvist, Pio Marmai, Marina Fois.

Directed by Marc Fitoussi.

Because *Folies Bergere* is so well acted, it might give the impression that it is deeper than it actually is, screenplay at least.

No, it is not that *Folies Bergere* some of the action does take place in Paris (and the original title of the film is, in fact, *Paris Folies*). Rather, it is the kind of madness, folie, that goes through the middle aged heart and mind, wondering about a marriage, daring to test out the reality with the risk of temptation.

The setting is Normandy, a farm with the raising of cattle, beautiful and large white cattle, which we see parading in a competition as the film opens, with Xavier (Jean- Pierre Darrousin, always a fine actor) standing by his bull and hoping that he will win. His wife, Brigitte (Isabelle Huppert, always a fine actor as well), combing the bull, suggesting it wear a tiara if it wins, though she puts on the tiara for the celebratory photo. We are plunged into the countryside, the difficulties in the marriage when Xavier is always making comments about his wife and her behaviour. She has developed a psychosomatic rash and in a more than rash judgement, she decides to go to Paris to consult a doctor (whom Xavier phones and discovers has not been in practice for some time).

A different way of life is suggested by the young people who come down to celebrate a loud party next door to the farm, while some of them do come across to look at the birth of a calf, not their ordinary experience. One of the guests is Stan hello thank you, a man of about 30 who is attracted to Brigitte and invites her to the party. She does go, but finds it too loud, but takes his address in Paris.

This is to be a two-day holiday for Brigitte, freedom from the farm, from her husband, from a life that she has lived but is unsatisfactory.

The meetings with Stan and outings are not all that they are expected to be, especially when she finishes up having to babysit two youngsters – and then disappears again, leaving her mobile phone, visiting Stan's shop to recover it, much to his displeasure.

While she enjoys the sites of Paris and its atmosphere, she is smoking outside her hotel room when the alarm goes off, not for her, but for a Danish visitor, Michael (Michael Nykvist, also a fine actor). He is something of a charmer, with a wife, though not strongly attached to her it would seem. Brigitte goes out with him, finds the tourist wheel rather queasy, enjoys a show, but then has to have dinner with her sister-in-law, with Michael sitting down beside them, pretending not to know French or understand the insults she is piling on him.

As might be expected, Xavier comes to Paris, sees his wife, is dismayed. But he does go to visit his son who, against hopes, is training to be an acrobat. Xavier is impressed with his performance and bonds with his son again.

After the trip to Paris, with wise words from his assistant at the farm, Regis, the couple go over to

see a dyspeptic bull – and the conversation, realism about the bull, but really an allegory about themselves, means that they have to come to terms with themselves and their marriage.

(Someone who was impressed with the film thought it was the new version of Madame Bovary – which it may be, but that is giving it too much status for its rather likeable, even pleasant, exploration of middle age and marriage.)

THE GREEN PRINCE

Israel, 2013, 101 minutes, Colour.

Mossab Hassan Youssef, Gonen Ben Yitszhak.

Directed by Nadav Schirman.

Sounds like the title of a fairy tale. But, this is no fairytale.

Rather, The Green Prince, is the code name for Mossab Hassan Youseff. He appears throughout the film, mostly in a straight-to-camera response to an interviewer. Mossab is the son of one of the founders of Hamas – his father is seen speaking to the crowds in some television footage. Mossab is a son of Hamas and supported the movement until he was taken by Shin Bet, questioned, tortured and persuaded to become an agent for Israel.

It is interesting to note that this theme was used very effectively in a recent Israeli fiction film, Omar.

We have 90 minutes to attend to Mossab, his early life, the pressure on him to work for Israel and the lengths to which Shin Bet went to to ensure that he was not found out and that he seemed a passionate Palestinian. Israeli military even went into his home, terrorised his mother and then exploded devices in parts of the house.

The other person who is interviewed is Gonen Ben Yitszak, genial compared to Mossab's serious demeanour, who explains his own Israeli background and his studies and being seconded to Shin Bet. Gonen was Mossab's controller for over a decade, leading to apprehension of Hamas leaders.

There are many realistic television footage sequences inserted into the two interviews.

The film takes a turn when Mossab leaves Israel and goes to the United States, living in San Diego, even writing a letter to his father explaining the situation and urging him to denounce his son publicly and what he has done, so that there would be no recriminations on him or the family. The final credits indicate that his family have had no contact with Mossab.

Mossab is alone in San Diego when, unexpectedly, Homeland Security agents take an interest in him, apprehend him, wanting him to be deported, basing this on his early, teenage action with Hamas, not giving any credit to his years as an Israeli agent. This situation touches Gonen and he decides to go to the United States and make a case for Mossab, even asking Shin Bet about going – but they do not reply which he takes as a silent assent to what he is doing. Yet, it is a risk.

The last part of the film shows Mossad in the United States, living a lonely life contrasting with Gonen, married with three children, a lawyer in Tel Aviv.

The style of the film is not highly imaginative or cinematic, geared more to television documentary style. But it is the intrinsic interest in the characters, in the work of Israeli spies and what this might mean for the peace process between Israel and Palestine that keeps the attention.

HORRIBLE BOSSES 2

US, 2014, 108 minutes, Colour.

Jason Bateman, Jason Sudeikis, Charlie Day, Jennifer Aniston, Kevin Spacey, Jamie Foxx, Chris Pine, Christoph Waltz, Jonathan Banks, Lindsay Sloane.

Directed by Sean Anders.

There was a lot of funny stuff in Horrible Bosses, especially in the portrait of how horrible the bosses were and their treatment of their employees, the employees rebelling against the bosses and getting themselves involved in the crime world. There was plenty of plot, plot-twists and a great deal of farcical comedy. Not forgetting some jokes that we used to call 'dirty'. Nowadays, the term is 'crass comedy', a signal to those who would prefer missing out on it, a signal to those who don't mind and, as with so many of Hollywood comedies over the last 20 years, there is a big audience out there for crass comedy.

Actually, the above paragraph could have been written for Horrible Bosses 2.

This time, our three employees are out on their own. They have an invention, The Shower Buddy, which puts shampoo in the shower rose so that you get that as well as the water. They appear on a breakfast show (with satirical digs at the manner of the hosts) and seem to be on the way to success when a new boss phones them for a deal. We have seen Christoph Waltz as a villain so many times, we know that he is going to be a horrible boss even as they don't. And he has a slimy son, Rex, Chris Pine, who toys with the trio's hopes, offering them a deal, then taking it off the table. It is Dad who does offer a deal and off they go, hiring staff (with Kurt, Jason Sudeikis, as lewd as ever), with Jason Bateman doing his now familiar, but acceptable, straight man shtick, and Charlie Day's Dale as befuddled as before.

It is no secret that the boss will renege on his contract, so what are they to do? They make a phone call to that horrible boss, Dave (Kevin Spacey) but he takes the opportunity to berate them again. So, some advice from Dean (MF) Jones, who counselled them in the previous film, a welcome return by Jamie Foxx. Why not kidnaped (Kurt writes kidnape) the obnoxious Rex, hold him to ransom, and get some of their money back!

Before they develop their plan, they decide to use laughing gas, so, of course, back to Dale's dentist office, with Julia returning as well, a brittle Jennifer Aniston, who is conducting a sex addicts' meeting in the office. Plenty of opportunity for 'crass humour' here.

This is also one of those films which visualises the perfect plan so that we admire what they intend and then are dismayed at, and laugh at, all that goes wrong in the execution. It does include one of the funnier car chases you are likely to see, especially when they want to lead the police away from their warehouse and have to wait a long time because they had just got across a level crossing and the police have not.

There is a good twist towards the end, and we realise that it's not going to be an all's well that ends well story. New situations, Kevin Spacey getting in on the act, and Jamie Foxx complicating matters... So, if they are all up to it, will be Horrible Bosses 3.

THE HUNGER GAMES: MOCKINGJAY, PART ONE

US, 2014, 123 minutes, Colour.

Jennifer Lawrence, Josh Hutcherson, Liam Hemsworth, Woody Harrelson, Donald Sutherland, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Julianne Moore, Willow Shields, Sam Claflin, Elizabeth Banks, Mahershala Ali, Jena Malone, Jeffrey Wright.

Directed by Francis Lawrence.

After all the excitement of the original Hunger Games and its being renewed in Catching Fire, Mockingjay Part 1 is a very sober affair. It is dark, in story and visually, with a grim perspective. It is an interim film like The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers and the second part of The Hobbit series, as well as in the breaking of the last story of Harry Potter and in the Twilight films. In some ways it could be considered as a feature length trailer for the final episode.

Gone are the Hunger Games, the dividends in the forests, reportedly dressed television audience, except in the memory. This time, it is rebellion. While President Snow is still in power, and Donald Sutherland is once again sinister and cruel, he has fewer advisors, especially since Plutarch (once again reminding us of the value of the late Philip Seymour Hoffman) has left him and is now adviser to the alternate President, played by Julianne Moore, a strong presence, planning both the attacks as well as the defences in the rebellion and, ultimately, making stirring and rousing speeches.

Katniss, Jennifer Lawrence still impressing us as a strong heroine, is now linked with the rebels, but still unhappy in the fact that Peeta is still imprisoned by President Snow. The young rebels are dismayed by some of his television broadcasts (interviewed by lower-key and less-dapper Stanley Tucci). They consider him a traitor. Not Katniss. She is persuaded to make a video, urging people to the rebellion but she does not impress with the rehearsals. With the appearance of Effie Trinkett and Haymitch (pleasing to see Elizabeth Banks again, though she has to make do with rebel scarves and drab dresses), and Woody Harrelson, (finding a lack of alcohol among the rebels very trying), Katniss is advised to visit some of the bombed districts. Visiting the hospital, seeing the girl and dead, she is very upset and makes an impassioned and very convincing propaganda video.

President Snow sends out another attack force and the rebels go underground. In the meantime, the decision is made for a special squad to go to rescue Peeta and bring him back. Although the mission has some success, again President Snow has sinister intentions

Gale is once again present, going on some of the dangerous missions, devoted to Katniss. She herself is devoted to Peter.

Fans will enjoy the film, though in a lower key fashion, Mockingjay Part 1 is a very sober affair, building up in anticipation of the final part of the story and of the series.

LET'S BE COPS

US, 2014, 102 minutes, Colour.

Jake Johnson, Damon Wayans Jr, Rob Riggle, James D' Arcy, Andy Garcia.

Directed by Luke Greenfield.

If you are invited to a fancy dress party, what would you choose to wear? The two 'heroes' of this comedy decide to go as cops. They get ready. They think they look smart. They arrive – and make an impression because, in fact, it is only a masked party and the guests take them for real. From this unlikely premise, comes a comedy which turns rather serious.

And who are these heroes? One is Ryan (Jake Johnson) who had the talent to be a significant sportsman but had to bail out because of injury (later revealed as a stupid jump rather than being hurt on the field). The other is Justin (Damon Wayans Jr), rather timid in his manner, who is an ideas man in a company which makes computer games. When he presents his spiel for Patrolman, the executives mock him. Which means that both are in a somewhat bad place.

But, wearing the police outfit, and people at the party mistaking them for real police, they succumb to the obvious temptation. Let's be cops!

Part of the comedy is their wandering the streets, intimidating people, leading them on, even being accepted by real police. They get a great kick out of all of this. What could go wrong?

They become involved with some local people who are being pressurised by thugs for a drug and arms-dealing boss. As they investigate further, and make contact with actual police, they decide that they will do a bit of detective work, which leads them, of course, into dangerous ground. The chief gangster and his henchmen impose protection fees on various shopkeepers, and are violently intense (James D' Arcy). And then there is one of the chief detectives (Andy Garcia) who definitely complicates matters.

There is an early quote from Danny Glover in Lethal Weapon, getting too old... But, the Lethal Weapon reference must have given the screenwriters some ideas because that is what the plot turns into, entanglements with the thugs, confrontations with the boss, and some exercise of those lethal weapons.

There is a touch of romance as well. At the end, of course, Ryan has found his vocation, and Justin has an idea for a videogame. He changes from a rather meek type to a forceful type and all will be

well (and, depending on box office, for a sequel). One of those comedies if you have nothing better to do.

In many ways the whole thing plays something like a computer game itself.

MAPS TO THE STARS

US, 2014, 111 minutes, Colour.

Julianne, Moore, Mia Wasikowska, John Cusack, Evan Bird, Olivia Williams, Robert Pattinson, Sarah Gadon.

Directed by David Cronenberg.

Canadian director, David Cronenberg, has had a significant career for over 40 years, one of Canada's best and well-known directors. In his early years, Cronenberg made a number of small-budget horror films and has continued this trend over the decades. His dramas, like *Dead Ringers*, *To Die For*, *Eastern Promises* have been impressive, but always with the touch of something weird.

Maps to the Stars is not a horror film as such but there are some elements. This time it is the weird that predominates. It is Hollywood weird.

The *Maps to the Stars* are something that tourists want when they visit Los Angeles, indulging in the cult of celebrity, curious about the life of the Hollywood names, wanting to see how this other half lives. At the opening of the film, a young woman, Agatha (Mia Wasikowska) arrives by bus in LA, just like all those other hopefuls. We soon see that she is not like this. She is returning home, her face and parts of her body scarred by injuries in a fire. She initially makes the acquaintance of an actor-writer who moonlights as a limousine driver (Robert Pattinson).

We are introduced to quite a number of characters whose lives intertwine. A central focus is on Havana, an ageing star (Julianne Moore in a performance that won her the Best Actress in Cannes 2014) who is literally haunted by her mother challenging her and deciding whether she should do a role that her mother made famous. But, she is ageing, neurotic, narcissistic, self-indulgent, with the expected problems of sex and drugs. She employs Agatha and relies on her – until she becomes suspicious and gets rid of her.

One of the problems of this quite weird and ugly look at Hollywood is that none of the characters are sympathetic, even Agatha. One of the characters who shocks us is a 13-year-old actor, Benjie (Evan Bird) far too precocious for his age, already indulging in the LA lifestyle, making a sequel to his successful film, *Bad Babysitter*. He acts like some of the role models that he sees around him, and is consumed by jealousy of the little boy who plays the child that his character babysits, with some dire results.

And then, there are his parents. His mother (Olivia Williams) is his manager, one of those highly controlling mothers but one who is smart concerning financing and contracts but who is quite emotionally unstable. Her very unlikeable husband, a TV personality and author, is played as a really

awful man by John Cusack.

While the film is very well-crafted, one begins to wonder about spending time with these unpleasant, sometimes vicious characters. But Cronenberg, the Canadian outsider to the US, is continuing in the tradition of films that take us inside Hollywood, for example *Sunset Boulevard*, *The Player*, immersing us in what we hope is a heightened and exaggerated look but which, over the decades, we realise is in many ways truthful.

MEN, WOMEN & CHILDREN

US, 2014, 109 minutes, Colour.

Adam Sandler, Jennifer Garner, Rosemarie De Witt, Judy Greer, Dean Norris, Timothee Chalamet, Olivia Crocicchia, Kaitlyn Dever, Ansel Elgort, Denis Haysbert. Narrated by Emma Thompson.
Directed by Jason Reitman.

There is a paragraph in Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* which describes the consciousness of the social media generation, that they have little idea of how life was before Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and all the other media that they take for granted and use continuously, even excessively. The consciousness and behaviour of the younger generation is something of a mystery to their parents and teachers.

This is what this particular film is about, but it focuses particularly on the sexuality consequences of social media, the availability of pornography to children at a young age, the potential for addiction – while not letting off the adult generation who take advantage of the Internet, also for pornography as well as for dating sites. Hence the title being all-inclusive.

At first, the film might seem quite depressing to an adult audience, watching the self-indulgent behaviour of parents, their double standards as regards their children, as well as seeing the children involved so early in visiting pornographic sites with consequences for their own emotions, even lack of ability for intimacy.

Audiences might be put off by the explicit references. Because this is a real problem, a more robust sensitivity should lead audiences to face these situations. Ultimately, as with most American films, characters go through crises, in this film some more desperate than usual, but come to some kind of understanding, even hope.

The film focuses on four families, the children all going to the same school and providing interconnections for the plot.

The film uses an unusual device, a cosmic reflection on the place of our planet and human beings in the vastness of the universe. It uses the Voyager journey into space, carrying memorabilia of Earth. The focus is on the writings of Carl Sagan, the film ending with a quotation about his view about Earth being just a dot in the universe. Further, there is a narration throughout the film, observing the mundane realities as well as the cosmic dimensions – and it is spoken, often frankly and bluntly, with

the perfect British diction and clarity of Emma Thompson.

The main focus is on the parents of a 15-year-old boy, Dan. His parents are played by Adam Sandler (bearded and giving a serious performance with no hints of his usual comic style) and Rosemary DeWitte². The father cannot access the Internet on his own computer and goes to his son's, shocked to find that the boy has accessed many porn sites. And the father himself, sexually needy, visits these sites as well as an escort site which he follows up. His wife, bored, also goes to the computer for dating sites, following through with some dire consequences.

Dan has one of the main cheerleaders, Hannah, as a girlfriend. She supports him as he plays football. She is the daughter of a single mother, Judy Greer, who is living her life through her daughter, photographing her, often in suggestive poses and placing these on a website for her daughter. She urges her to participate in auditions for a reality show. In the meantime, Hannah boasts (lies) to her girlfriends about her sexual exploits with an older man, but then finds that Dan has been affected by his site-trawling and is impotent at his young age, responding only to the pornography.

In quite a different family, Patricia (Jennifer Garner) is a very strict mother, monitoring every move of her daughter, Brandy. Patricia examines her daughter's computer every day as well as checking on all the calls on her mobile phone. Brandy is something of a loner, though she has also set up a website with bizarre photos of herself. Tim (Ansel Elgort) is a lonely young man, top footballer who refuses to play the game, to the contempt of the rest of the team. His mother has abandoned him and his father (Dean Norris) and announces a new engagement on Facebook rather than direct information to her former husband and her son. Tim and Brandy get on very well together, talking genuinely, true friends – until Patricia intervenes cruelly with sad consequences.

In the meantime, there is Allison, also a cheerleader, who believes Hannah's stories. She is anorexic, has a crush on a boy, follows it through – again with some dreadful consequences for her to the shock of her father (J.K. Simmons).

As can be seen, there are quite a lot of characters, quite a lot of situations that demand attention and reflection.

This is certainly not the last word on the problems of social media and the consequences on young people's ability for communication, their lack of communication, their sexual obsessions, the consequences for genuine relationships and intimacy. But, within its two-hour running time, it does raise many questions, implying that there should be authentic responses and hope for integrity.

THE MULE

Australia, 2014, minutes, Colour.

Angus Sampson, Hugo Weaving, Ewen Leslie, Leigh Whannell, John Noble, Geoff Morrell, Noni Hazelhurst.

Directed by Tony Mahoney and Angus Sampson.

Those with long memories might think of Francis, the talking mule, so popular in the 1950s and with

television screenings. Those whose memories do not go back so far will probably think of drugs and smuggling and those who carry the drugs, the mules. The latter is the meaning of mule for this film.

It starts with broad humour, Ray, Angus Sampson (who co-wrote and co-directed the film) is in a very awkward and embarrassing situation with customs officials at Melbourne airport. Some of the humour continues as the film goes into flashback.

It is a scene at the local Paradise Club in Melbourne's western suburbs, in Sunshine (lots of shots of local streets, homes, railway lines). They are about to make the award for their outstanding member of the year. The gawky Ray unexpectedly wins, much to the exuberant delight of his mother, Noni Hazelhurst. At home, he is quiet, fussed over by his mother, his step father telling him how lucky they are in life, even as his wife reminds him he has done his limit on his beers for the meal.

Another aspect of the humour is that the action is set at the time of the winning of the America's Cup in 1983. The developing battle between the US and Australia is seen throughout the film, people watching the television, at home, at the club, in the motel at the airport, so that paralleling Ray's experiences, there is the victory over the Americans, the cheeky Aussies toppling the top dogs. Meantime, all is not so funny at the club and the film and, step by step, the film goes into the serious mode and the world of drugs and smuggling. The local kingpin, played by John Noble (the progressive Bishop in the series, Devils Playground) relies on a huge Lithuanian thug as well as a young Asian to do his violent dirty work. But he also has one of the local dimwits, Gavin, played by Leigh Whannell (who was one of the originators of the Saw series of horror films), try to persuade Ray to take the prize holiday in Thailand and bring back some drugs.

Despite expectations, Ray decides to go, goes to a number of parties in Thailand and, for reasons that puzzle us for the rest of the film, decides to swallow the sachets of heroin. We then go back to his arrival and the treatment by the customs officials and his willingly going with them. But, he refuses an x-ray, has a young female lawyer who believes in him to help him, and will not confess to having the drugs.

Which means then that he is in police custody for seven days, taken to a motel near Melbourne airport, supervised by the police – who then get a judge to extend their holding him another three days, then another day and a half. It also means that we share Ray's diet experiences, his refusing to excrete the sachets, to the annoyance of the police, and a scene where audiences might be looking away when he makes a decision after an accident as to what he is going to do with the sachets...

This is a suburban version of the drug big time, the kingpin having his limitations, ordering his thugs to exercise his violence, ordering Gavin to find out what is going on, putting the pressure on Ray's family, especially his stepfather who complicates the plot development when it is revealed that he has a gambling problem and a financial dependence on the kingpin.

We can't but be on Ray's side as he stays with his constipation, is visited by his mother with food, is encouraged by his lawyer, is visited by Gavin, has a police guard in the room who nods off, watches television and is particularly inept. But it is two officers who are in charge who provide interesting characters and interactions. Hugo Weaving plays the aggressor, bad cop, Ewen Leslie is the well-

dressed, rather quieter, good cop. The two provide some unexpected plot twists making the end of the film more interesting and more dramatic.

With the number of Australian stories about drug mules from Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and their dire experiences in prisons in those countries. This is an Australian version, rather different in tone, but nonetheless, well done and surprisingly interesting.

MY MISTRESS

Australia, 2014, 104 minutes, Colour.

Harrison Gilbertson, Emmanuelle Beart, Rachael Blake, Socratis Otto.

Directed by Stephen Lance.

The use of the term “mistress” suggests a sexual theme. But, it is not quite the theme or treatment that we might have anticipated.

First of all, this is a story set in Queensland, in the suburbs. The “my” of the title is a 16-year-old boy, Charlie (Harrison Gilbertson). We first see him jumping on the top of an old car, smoking, having a drink, riding his bike home. A teenager story?

Then, almost immediately, he finds his father hanging in the garage and having to cut him down, going into a party in the house, a crowd with loud music, to tell his mother (Rachael Blake).

Throughout the film, the plot focuses on this relationship between son and mother, quite tense, Charlie developing a hostility to his mother, his mother concerned and frustrated.

But, on the way home on his bike, he has noticed a woman moving into a house and her impatience with the removalists. Later, he goes to the house out of curiosity, goes inside and he, and we, perhaps, are rather shocked to find that the “mistress” of the title is a dominatrix. She is played by French actress, Emmanuelle Beart.

Over the years, there have been several serious Australian films about sexuality, including some of the more perverse aspects, like *Sleeping Beauty*. This film is different, looking at the reactions of the teenager, especially after the bereavement of his father’s death, his visits to the house, his growing infatuation with the dominatrix, who has the down-to-earth name, Maggie. He gets a job working in her garden, though she lays down strict conditions. But, he is impressionable and vulnerable, fantasises about her at home, is curious about her clients.

With sado-masochism in the suburbs, it is a bit hard to take it all, chambers and whips, all that seriously. There is a key scene where Maggie hides Charlie in a coffin with a peephole while she dominates a client with humiliating behaviour. Charlie gets the giggles. Which means that while the film highlights the seriousness as we look at what goes on, it often seems quite ludicrous. Maggie’s comment to Charlie is that this experience is not what the client wants but what the client needs.

When it is revealed that Maggie has a little boy who is in foster care, the film takes on a much more

human dimension. As Charlie becomes more and more involved, even driving Maggie to see her little boy, we wonder what will and can become of this relationship. Maggie has a lot of genuine feelings, is sympathetic to Charlie, but the relationship must come to an end.

Harrison Gilbertson acts well, giving some credibility to Charlie and his feelings, his understanding and lack of understanding, his dilemmas as a schoolboy. Emmanuelle Beart has portrayed somewhat similar characters in French films, but her character is not really explained, especially how and why she is in Queensland and who set her up in the house. Maybe these are distractions to the main emphasis of the film, but some explanation would add to the credibility of characters and plot.

While there are a couple of sado-masochistic scenes, the film is rather restrained, visually, leaving some aspects to the imagination of the audience. In an era when young people are exposed to sexual behaviour, reinforced by material available on the Internet, *My Mistress* does raise some questions about the effect on young people, and for the future.

MY OLD LADY

UK/France/US, 2014, 107 minutes, Colour.

Kevin Kline, Maggie Smith, Kristin Scott Thomas, Dominique Pignon, Noemie Lvovsky.

Directed by Israel Horovitz.

Not a very helpful title. Yet, it is the title of the play by the writer-director of this film. It sounds too slangy, offhand, perhaps indicating a more comic tone than is the reality.

The setting is Paris. Maggie Smith portrays a 92-year-old widow who lives in an old-fashioned apartment. Suddenly, a man in his late 50s, Mathias, played by Kevin Kline, turns up and starts searching the building. It seems that he has inherited this from his father, a man with whom he could never bond, whom he felt was always putting him down. Pleased that he now has some property, especially since he is broke, has had three wives, has had a drinking problem, he is almost instantly disillusioned – the arrangement his father had made with Madame, with whom he had a liaison long since, was that Madame could stay and, according to a seemingly odd French law, she would be paid to stay there. When he explains that he would like to stay, she tells him that he would have to pay her rent as well as the subsidy for her living there.

What is he to do? Well, he takes a lot of photos of the house and off he goes to a real estate agent to find out its value were he to sell. Then he takes photos of the furniture and hawks them down at a local shop.

There is no telling what he might do when he pops open the bathroom door only to find Madame's daughter, Chloe, occupying it. They do not get off to a good start.

The film is even more serious when Mathias discovers that his father had the long liaison with Madame, that her husband knew about the relationship and went off to Africa hunting, Mathias finding a lot of heads mounted in the room he occupies. Chloe reveals that she too knew of the

relationship. Mathias is dismayed, especially in his memories of his mother and her depression.

When Mathias approaches a buyer for the apartment, inviting him when he has lunch with Chloe and she becomes upset, we seem to see the direction in which the film might go. But, it doesn't. In his bewilderment, Mathias takes to the bottle again. He discusses the situation in the past with Chloe, which brings them to some kind of understanding and peacemaking.

Part of the enjoyment of the film is listening to the dialogue, as the film is clearly based on a play and is quite theatrical in the amount of talking and discussing, the setting up of scenes inside the house, outside in the garden, as well as the visits to the shops and agents, and in interlude when Mathias sees a young woman singing opera arias and, as the cloud seemed to be lifting from his seemingly gloomy life and he joins in the singing of the banks of the Seine.

Maggie Smith is completely convincing as the 92-year-old Madame, still astute, still sharp of wit and, from her own experiences, rather tolerant of others. Kristin Scott Thomas plays Chloe. She is an actress who can play a plain-looking woman with conviction and can transform her appearance into a woman of plain beauty. Kevin Kline obviously relishes acting with Maggie Smith and Kristin Scott Thomas.

While there are a number of moral surprises, taken a bit more lightly by the French than those of the Anglo-Saxon and Irish perspectives, there is more depth to the story and the characters than we might have anticipated.

NIGHT CRAWLER

US, 2014, 117 minutes, Colour.

Jake Gyllenhaal, Riz Ahmed, René Russo, Bill Paxton.

Directed by Dan Gilroy.

With "crawler" in the title, there is the association of "creepy". And this is true of the central character, his behaviour, and the development of the plot. But, for this review, this is a very well made film and one of the best films of 2014.

The night crawler of the title refers to photographers who listen in to police radio information, especially at night, know where the accidents have occurred, where crimes have been committed, and are almost immediately on the spot, taking photographs, intruding, with little sensitivity towards the reality of what is happening, only interested in haste, rushing to the television station, making financial deals. These are the night paparazzi who are not interested in celebrities but in blood... If it bleeds, it will make the headlines.

Jake Gyllenhaal gives another tour de force performance, after *Prisoners*, as Louis Bloom, about 30, a loner, with the touch of the autistic. In a prologue to the film, we see him at night cutting through wire, stealing wire and other goods from a building site, selling them to another builder and asking to be hired. The buyer asks why he would employ a thief. But Louis has ambitions, and is prone to take notice of potential role models for work. He is an avid user of the Internet, reading a great deal

of self-help material, gleaned maxims for business and success, and how to use them with potential employers.

When he comes across an accident one night and sees the photographers in action, he questions, gets advice, buys a camera and a listening device and off he goes. A manager at a television station, Nina (René Russo), takes an interest in his work which encourages him to bring her more and more material, as he chases crime scenes and accidents. With his rather acute business sense, he decides to take on an intern, advertising in the media, and interviewing a young man, Rick (Riz Ahmed, British actor in a number of films including *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*), who is eager to get a job and to get some pay. Sitting in his car, Louis acts with Rick as if he were in a fine office, discussing situations, payments, even the possibility for Rick to become vice president of the company.

The key elements of the latter part of the film involve Louis trespassing on a crime scene, lying to the police as to how much he saw, deciding that he would follow the criminals after filming them and their car numberplate, discover where they lived, follow them and then ring the police, filming all the time, with Rick sent down the street in a more dangerous situation.

Louis has no real emotions for Rick and puts him in danger. However, he is attracted to Nina despite the age difference but she wants to act professionally.

Louis will keep going as long as he can, building up his own video company, become more and more expert at crime scenes and filming – and wheeler dealing with the television companies for higher fees.

Louis achieves the American Dream at no cost to himself but as a cost to others – if he were to see this film he would be in admiration of his own character without realising how ugly is the world that the film is creating and how it is critiquing unscrupulous American dreams.

THE ONE I LOVE

US, 2014, 91 minutes, Colour.

Mark Duplass, Elizabeth Moss, Ted Danson.

Directed by Charlie Mc Carthy.

The One I Love is a small, independent film, produced by the Duplass Brothers, starring Mark Duplass who has moved into acting in a wide variety of films. He is Ethan. As Sophie, his co-star is Elizabeth Moss, who appeared in the television series *Mad Men* and in Jane Campion's *Top of the Lake*.

As the film progresses, older audiences might well be wondering about it, where it is going and whether they are identifying with the characters and the situations or not. They might have in the past, but this is a story for young marrieds, especially in their 20s or, perhaps, in their 30s. Older audiences might be remembering their past but this story, with its plot of self-discovery and issues of love and breakdown of love and marriage, and finding it rather uninteresting, even a bit tedious

or boring.

The film has a voice-over about how the couple met, chased from a swimming pool by an angry owner, and their attempt to recreate this atmosphere on the first anniversary by going back to the pool. But it soon emerges that the love and the marriage are becoming more and more tentative. Wisely they go to a counsellor. He is played by Ted Danson who is, in fact, the stepfather of the director, Charlie Mc Carthy, whose mother is Danson's wife, Mary Steenburgen. The director's father is Malcolm McDowell[?]. Mary Steenburgen contributed to the lyrics for one of the songs and she and Ted Danson receive gratitude in the final credits.

The counsellor urges the couple to go to a country retreat where, hopefully, they will rediscover their love. This is the important part of the review because there is an unexpected twist and should not be revealed. What one might say is that it is something of a Sliding Doors experience, though wholly in the present. This makes demands on the acting talent of the central couple. Adult audiences, younger, will probably find the plot twist fascinating, challenging them to see how they identify with Ethan and Sophie and how they behave in the changing situation.

Judging from the comments of the adult, younger, audiences emerging from the film, they found it was open "great" so there is an audience for the film who will appreciate characters and situations. For audiences over 40, it could be something of déjà vu, but it also could be something that they realise of interest and appreciation to others, but not themselves.

PADDINGTON

UK, 2014, 95 minutes, Colour.

Hugh Bonneville, Sally Hawkins, voice of Ben Whishaw, Nicole Kidman, Julie Walters, Peter Capaldi, Jim Broadbent, Matt Lucas, Madeleine Harris, Samuel Joslin, Matt King, Geoffrey Palmer.
Directed by Paul King.

What a happy and delightful film experience! It all seems just right.

Within a few minutes we are in 'darkest Peru', sharing The Explorer's experience in being saved in the forests by a bear, making the acquaintance of the bear and engaged in conversation with him and his wife and nephew. We immediately accept this – so that there is no trouble throughout the whole film when humans seem to take it for granted that Paddington could speak and engage in ordinary human activities. Although, when he is lost, and the police are given a description including that he is a bear, the London bobby does remark that there is very little to go on!

While Paddington (who has not yet received this name) lives happily with his uncle and aunt (voiced by Imelda Staunton and Michael Gambon), all indulging their acquired love of marmalade, there is a terrible earthquake, destroying their home, and uncle, which means that Paddington's aunt thinks that it is time for him to go to London where The Explorer had told them they would always be welcome.

Paddington makes his way to England, gets out of the Port of London and waits, after being rudely chosen by the crowds, at Paddington Station, his tag around his neck, waiting for a kind family to find him and welcome him into their home. As the Brown family pass by, father is not particularly attracted by the bear, but mother is delighted. Their daughter, Judy, takes after father with cool disdain, whereas Jonathan, their son, immediately takes a liking to him. And, for what the family could call him, what better than the station that they were at, Paddington?

It is to the great credit of Ben Wishaw that Paddington's voice is so believable, very pleasant, always polite, even when he gets into a mess. And he fits right in to the family, and gets used to London, West London particularly, as mother and Paddington go to the Portobello Road to try to find out information about the red hat that The Explorer had given the uncle (and Paddington imitates his uncle by always having a marmalade sandwich under the hat in case of an emergency).

The film has a wonderful British cast, led by Hugh Bonneville and Sally Hawkins as Mr and Mrs Brown who fit the roles perfectly.

Mother and Paddington go to the shop run by Mr Gruber (Jim Broadbent). Paddington become something of a hero because he mistakenly thinks that a thief has dropped his own wallet, pursues him in an exciting chase through the streets, and is the cause of the thief dropping all his stolen wallets right in front of the police. Even Judy, at school, is impressed by the students' acclamation of Paddington, finds that she likes him and can claim him.

There is a very enjoyable episode when Paddington and father go to the Natural History Museum trying to find out who The Explorer really was. The museum is museum-like in its use of those chutes which used to whiz items through in the old department stores. But, not achieving any success, father has to dress as the cleaning lady to get them through security, although delayed by the guard who casts a kind of amorous eye over the lady!

There is a villain. She is Millicent, the granddaughter of The Explorer, who has malevolent motivations for tracking down Paddington, including getting the next-door neighbour, Mr Curry (Peter Capaldi) to help her entrap Paddington, including being let down from the roof, like Tom Cruise in Mission Impossible, to the theme from Mission Impossible! Nicole Kidman clearly enjoys herself as the villain, crafty, imperious, no holds barred.

There is a great deal of farcical and slapstick comedy which fits right in, as well as quite an amount of verbal humour, lots of humorous asides. The initial impression of the British is that they are not welcoming at all and poor Paddington wonders what will happen to him, especially when he writes letters home to his aunt Lucy in 'darkest Peru'.

While saying it is a nice film, this does not mean that it is a kind of sweet little film. No, it is a strong comedy, a good blend of sentiment and action, which children will enjoy and, indeed, their parents will be very happy to have seen it.

It will resonate strongly with those of British heritage, or those who have absorbed British culture –

and it offers in every invitation for everyone to appreciate this very British entertainment.

PARTICLE FEVER

US, 2013, 99 minutes, Colour.

David Kaplan, Nima Arkani- Hamed, Martin Alexa, Monica Dunford, Fabiola Gianotti.

Directed by Mark Levinson.

Who would have expected any fever about particles? The answer is: thousands of physicists around the world – and many non-physicists. This is a documentary for the latter audience rather than specialist physicists, though they may enjoy seeing the visuals of the LHC (Large Hadron Collider), CERN, Switzerland. (They may well be critical of the explanations given – and be appropriately challenged by how they would write a screenplay for ordinary lay viewers and to communicate with them.)

Many of us will remember talk of the LHC in 2008 and the experiments to see whether material could be sent spinning around the 17 km of tunnels under parts of Switzerland and France where, when the time was right, particles would collide with each other and reveal, or not reveal, a key particle in an atom which keeps the other particles together. Well, perhaps not every audience will remember those events. It is more likely that they will remember July 2012 when, after several years, ensuring that there were no mishaps in the functioning of the Collider, the experiment was set in motion.

Out of the media hype was the hope of expectation that the scientists would find the “God-particle”. It would give insights into what happened at the Big Bang and immediately afterwards. Named after the British physicist, Peter Higgs, there was already a title for this particle: the Higgs boson Particle.

The documentary doesn’t immediately plunge us into the physics. Rather, some genial hosts provide a great deal of Talking Heads information, especially David Kaplan who introduces us to the whole experience. There is documentary material of his visiting CERN in earlier years, inviting us into show us the whole plant, revealing the extraordinary amount of engineering that went into setting up this vast Collider. One realises that the audience should be in absolute awe of the designers, the engineers, the technicians, the maintenance personnel who kept this world’s largest machine, several stories high, in working order.

We are taken back to 2008, the excitement and the wondering whether the particles would be able to circulate freely in the 17 km tunnel. When there is success, the fever rides high. One of the things that older audiences will notice is that how young the majority of the physicists are. There are some grey hair and grey beard types, including Peter Higgs himself who was present in 2012, receives a rapturous elevation and can be seen to be very emotionally moved.

David Kaplan has quite a number of friends and contacts in Switzerland so he interviews many of

them. And, before they succumb to any particle fever, they are highly enthusiastic, committed to the physics, especially to the theories and the variety of theories which will be proven or disproven by the 2012 experiment. They are strong on theory, relying on mathematics – and for anyone in the audience (most of us) who get gobsmacked by seeing blackboards full of mathematical formulae, using symbols that they have no idea about, one blogger advises, ‘don’t be scared, just as in a horror movie with something monstrous, turn away!’.

The excitement is high in 2012, not only in Switzerland, but in various places around the world which are connected, enabling physicists and the public to witness the events as they happen.

For those who are thinking of seeing the film, it is probably no good asking your friends about it. They will start to stumble in any explanation which could throw light on the physics or the maths. Rather, be inspired by their enthusiasm, and the fever that they have picked up from watching scientists, many of whom live in a world of theories, as well as the people on the ground, so to speak, who rely on the science and the engineering, and so decide to see the film. There is no exam afterwards.

However, while most of us will not retain much of the detail at all, we have been let into the world of physics, of theories, of speculating about the God-particle, about the Big Bang and its energy, about evolution, about the Higgs boson Particle - and the possibility of its collapsing in on itself which could mean the collapse of the universe. Physicists, of course, are hoping against hope that this will not happen.

A most impressive cinema documentary experience.

RISE

Australia, 2014, 104 minutes, Colour.

Nathan Wilson, Martin Sacks, Marty Rhone, Mack Lyndon.

Directed by the Mack Lyndon.

The title Rise does not give anything away. It is only halfway through the film when there is a background song is introduced, Rise, a song whose lyrics have a spiritual dimension, indicating that no matter how down people are in life, there is or is the possibility that they can rise.

Rise is an Australian small-budget film based on a true story, a story experienced by the writer-director, Mack Lyndon, himself in 2008. He has created an uncomfortable story out of his experience, an accusation of rape, his being found guilty in his trial and his going to prison. Any story about rape makes for uncomfortable viewing. The difference with this film is that it is all seen from the point of view of the accused, nothing from the point of view of his accuser, a fight for innocence in the an appeal to the courts. Because courts have been far less sympathetic towards victims of rape in the past and there is a ground swell of sympathy for injustice for accusers, and newspaper headlines frequently offer stories of accused who are either found not guilty or receive a penalty which advocates for women who have experienced rape think far too lenient. (One of these comes

to visit the accused in jail, talking of an appeal to the courts for him to receive a stronger sentence.)

That having been said, the film is very much a prison film, in the tradition of those films, but, on the whole, it is a far less melodramatic picture of prison life than usual. Not that there are not some bizarre characters, responsible for violent crimes, and some guards who are certainly anti-prisoners.

During the first ten minutes or so of the film, we see Will as a little boy, impressed by a sign on a bus that urges everyone to be kind. He grows up to be a nurse, a caring professional, who has a night out on the town, clubbing, meeting up with a girl, going back after drinking and having what he considered a consensual sexual experience. He is very much surprised when the police arrive at his house, interrogate him, cuff him, charge him.

Nathan Wilson, in his first role, proves to be a sympathetic Will. He suffers the usual indignities of going into prison, being assigned a cell, rubbing up against tattooed toughs, advised not to tell fellow prisoners why he is in jail for fear of reprisals. While he has some difficult times, even with a visit from his rather hysterical mother, he adjusts to prison life, makes friends, especially a disabled life-prisoner (Marty Rhône) and is assigned to care for, and an old veteran, 26 years in jail for armed robberies, who takes Will under his wing and has something of a conversion experience himself. There is his cell-mate, Baxter, played by the director, Mack Lyndon himself.

But then, the film moves to a religious dimension, one of the prisoners, George, being devout, giving Will a religious book, engaging in conversations, going to the services provided by the prison chaplain. Will himself becomes a man of faith – always in a somewhat low-key Australian style – but becomes more confident, prays, has faith that his friend, who has enlisted the help of a high-powered barrister, will be able to get his conviction overturned.

When the film becomes more overtly religious, and with the title song, Rise, it seems to be in the vein of a number of films from the United States, made by Christian groups, backed by Christian churches, especially those made by the Kendrick Brothers, Courageous, Fireproof. (The final credit of this film name Elevation Church – which has its own website.) Because the religious element is generally low-key, secular Australian audiences might be able to accept it more readily than they do the American versions.

In most ways and technically, the film is very straightforward. Nathan Wilson pleasantly convincing as Will – and, when he smiles, he could pass for a younger version of Matt Damon. Veteran, Martin Sacks, is the old prisoner who befriends Will and is influenced by him for the good.

Which means that the film is very earnest in its way, making the case for justice for a man accused of rape affirming that he was innocent. There is a final moment when Will and the woman who accused him walk past each other and look at each other, with Will having made effort to be forgiving.

SERENA

US, 2014, 109 minutes, Colour.

Jennifer Lawrence, Bradley Cooper, Rhys Ifans, Toby Jones, Sean Harris, Sam Reid, David Dencick, Christian Mc Kay,
Directed by Suzanne Bier.

On paper, this film has a lot going for it. It teams Oscar-winner, Jennifer Lawrence, for the third time with Bradley Cooper (The Silver Linings Playbook, American Hustle). Rhys Ifans is unrecognisable as the villain and there is an interesting supporting cast of British actors. And the director is the Oscar-winner, Susanne Bier. However, it seems that very few people are interested in the film or like it.

Actually, it is very much like one of those 1930s or 1940s melodramas, possibly with Barbara Stanwyck in the central role as Serena. This kind of film is out of fashion now, better appreciated on television, Turner Classic Movies and other similar channels.

Having said it that, it is best to look at Serena for what it is rather than what audiences might want to be.

The film is very colourful, often beautiful, to look at, set in the forests and mountains of the Carolinas during the Depression. It recreates the mood of a logging town and its activities, hard work, sometimes hard lives, Bradley Cooper is George Pemberton, an enterprising man, who wants to exploit the forests – and we have several scenes of the chopping down of the trees, the logging, the rail carriages to carry the wood, and some accidents. George is a businessman who has dreams of owning property in Brazil and exploiting the forests there.

When he goes to the city and sees an elegant young woman doing dressage and sitting elegantly on her horse, he decides to, literally, pursue her and very soon they are married. This is Serena, played by Jennifer Lawrence in different mode from all her other films, not reminding us of Katniss Everdene in The Hunger Games films, nor the brassy wife in American Hustle. Serena has survived severe fires as a girl of 12, but has lost her family. When she arrives at the logging town, she instantly shows that she is a strong woman, a partner in the business with her husband, critical of the men getting snakebites and determining that they should buy an eagle who will swoop on the serpents. And she impresses the men by training the eagle herself.

There are some strange characters in the town, especially a former prisoner, Galloway, played by the unrecognisable Ifans, devoted to Pemberton, devoted to his Serena, especially when she tends him after a severe accident with an axe. There is also Pemberton's partner and accountant, Buchanan (David Dencick) who is certainly attached to Pemberton, the screenplay raising questions about his sexual attitudes.

The screenplay of the film is topical when the townspeople, led by the sheriff (Toby Jones) discuss environmental issues – which don't persuade Pemberton at all.

Serena seems unconcerned with the fact that her husband has sired a son with one of the local maids. But, when Serena rides a horse after helping Galloway with his wounds, this becomes more important because the melodrama starts with a miscarriage and a growing jealousy by Serena of the young mother.

And, melodrama it is, moving away from the dramatic history of the early part of the film, bringing up tensions between Serena and her husband, Serena using Galloway as an instrument of vengeance, and flights and murders.

Part of the melodrama is Buchanan and his envy of George Pemberton and the temptation to betray him. There are other members of the team who are suspicious of the bookkeeping and the entries and are willing to make deals with the authorities.

Throughout the film there has been a symbolic image, a panther wandering the mountains, mostly unseen, but deadly. George Pemberton and his friends are eager to hunt the panther, which, when the eventual confrontation takes place, we appreciate is an image of Serena herself.

A THOUSAND TIMES GOOD NIGHT

Norway/Ireland/Sweden, 2013, 117 minutes, Colour.

Juliette Binoche, Nikolai Coster- Waldau, Maria Doyle Kennedy, Lauryn Canny.

Directed by Erik Poppe.

A Thousand Times Good night takes the audience into some contemporary war zones, especially Afghanistan and Kenya. It was filmed on location and offers powerful images of these places, ordinary people, terrorists, suicide bombers. Since the film is about a war photographer, the images are vivid and striking. The director himself, Erik Poppe, was also a war photographer and had made documentaries about dangerous places.

The film won the Ecumenical Award at the Montréal film Festival in 2013. Erik Poppe also won a SIGNIS award for his fine film about guilt and repentance in a Lutheran context, Troubled Waters (2009).

Juliette Binoche always makes a significant impression in her films. This is definitely the case here. From the very beginning, her character, Rebecca, is dressed in Muslim clothing, photographing a women's ritual which, to our horror, is the preparation of a young woman to be a suicide bomber, her prayer and contemplation, the elderly women and the dignity and ritual with which they strap the bombs to the young woman, putting her veil on her. And all the time, Rebecca is vigorously photographing everything. A driver takes them by car into the central streets of Kabul, Rebecca wanting to get out of the car, the explosion following, killing people, wounding Rebecca. This is quite an impact for an opening to the film.

For a while after this, the drama moves very quietly as Rebecca is in hospital in Dubai, her husband, Marcus (Nikolai Coster- Waldau) coming to her bedside and then taking her back to their ordinary life in Ireland. He is a scientist. They have two daughters. With Rebecca, and with Marcus and the daughters, we experience the tension where a mother goes out on dangerous missions, the rest of the family in fear that she will be killed, and, without their admitting it, resenting her absence from home. Gradually, the family quieten down and Rebecca is almost at the stage where she thinks she

should not go back on any dangerous commission. However, she is upset when, because of Pentagon influence, New York publishers tell her that they cannot use any of her pictures.

At this stage, the film is an arresting study of a family and their trying to deal with serious challenges. It might be noted that, with a husband as the photographer, this would be a more acceptable situation even if it was not liked. It is a situation where a woman is working in what is considered a man's world.

The older daughter is involved in a school project about Africa and has the opportunity to go to visit a United Nations settlement in Kenya, near the border with Sudan, with hundreds of refugees, many of them orphans. Rebecca goes with her daughter, even giving her a camera. All is well as they tour the settlement but, suddenly, a group of masked terrorists attacks the compound, the daughter taken to safety but Rebecca automatically going back into photographic action, in really dangerous situations. This means that the tension within the family continues.

At one stage, Rebecca tries to explain to her daughter what it is that drives her to these situations. She has a good eye so is successful as a photographer. But, she says she has always had an inner anger, situations requiring some kind of justice and action and that photography provides proper and creative outlet for her anger.

The film has an open-ended finale, Rebecca returning to Afghanistan, following up the original story, taking photos of yet another young girl as a suicide bomber. But, after the experience of tensions with her daughters, she looks at this same situation much more emotionally. She stands... And the film ends. We do not know what she will decide, what she will do with the rest of her life. This open ending challenges the audience, whether they agree with her or not, whether they have the same experiences of the dangerous situations she observes, whether there is a need for this kind of professional war photographer.

At this is an intelligent as well as an emotional film, highlighting for audiences who have more comfortable lives, how dangerous many areas in the world are and help people, severely oppressed, threatened with death and torture, suffer more than we might ordinarily comprehend.

TURKEY SHOOT

Australia, 2014, 90 minutes, Colour.

Dominic Purcell, Viva Bianca, Robert Taylor, Belinda Mc Clory, Nicholas Hammond, Carmen Duncan, Roger Ward, Suzannah Mc Donald, Juan Jackson.

Directed by Jon Hewitt.

Turkey Shoot was originally an exploitation film from Australia in the early 1980s, directed by Brian Trenchard Smith who made a number of these films. It was produced by a young entrepreneur, Antony Ginnane, who brought a number of overseas actors to perform in sensational melodramas, often with more than a touch of sex and violence. For those interested in Antony Ginnane and his influence on the Australian film industry in the 1980s, the best source is the documentary by Mark

Hartley, 2008, *Not Quite Hollywood: the Wild, Untold Story of Ozploitation*. This includes scenes from the original film, interviews with Ginnane, explaining why he made these films and the impact they had (and with a manic Quentin Tarantino being interviewed about his love for these films).

Whatever the ups and downs of Anthony Kinane's career (he was not beloved by many in the Australian industry), in 2014, over 30 years later, he has produced a remake of *Turkey Shoot*. It has been written by Jon Hewitt (himself an enthusiast of Ozploitation) and his wife, Belinda Mc Clory, who has a significant role in this remake.

Instead of a camp for misfits and their being subjected to death hunts back in the 1980s, we are introduced to a futuristic world of Reality TV. This time, a ruthless producer (McClory) approaches a prisoner, Rick Tyler (a tough Dominic Purcell) who had previously, as we have seen, been sent into Libya to assassinate the President, succeeding, but the media indicating the mission was a failure and so *World War: Africa* has been instigated at the wish of the American President.

There have been attempts on Rick's life while in prison but now he has the opportunity to stay and be victimised or appear on the huge-ratings's TV show, *Turkey Shoot*, which opens with all the razzmatazz of American television, has two grinning and vapid hosts who chortle on about death as if it was something trivial.

Most of the film is about Rick being hunted like a turkey by expert assassins from around the world, especially Ramrod (Robert Taylor) who was with him when he allegedly massacred women and children. There is a lot of macho posturing – including a woman assassin from Japan.

A lot of complications ensue, with a Rick cleverly evading his attackers and eliminating them. However, he is summoned to the dying General Thatcher (Nicholas Hammond, 49 years on from *The Sound of Music*) who is having something of a deathbed conscience-crisis. He thinks that *World War: Africa* has gone on too long and has degenerated into a military and moral mess. Rick is assisted by a military officer, Jill (Viva Bianca) – who can also pilot a helicopter as well as form a romantic attachment to Rick.

While the film has relished a whole lot of violence, by the end, it wants to have its cake and eat it: shows violence, then regrets it and makes a plea for a better more peaceful world.

The film has a great deal of energy, but its prospective audience is those who love computer games (and see similarities between this film and *Battle Royale*, *Death Race* as well as *The Hunger Games*).

TWO DAYS, ONE NIGHT

Belgium, 2014, 100 minutes, Colour.

Marion Cotillard, Fabrizio Rongione, Olivier Grenier.

Directed by Jean- Pierre and Luc Dardenne.

When we see the names of the Dardenne brothers on any film we can be sure that it is a film of

quality and it will be a film which makes telling social comment on contemporary issues. This is certainly true of *Two Days, One Night*.

What we have is a look at contemporary Western Europe, on employment and unemployment, and competition for jobs, difficulties in the workplace, especially for people suffering from mental illness and, especially, depression.

This is indicated by the title: the action takes place over a day, and night, a day. They are Saturday, Saturday night and Sunday. However, the film opens on Friday afternoon, with a vote at a solar panel factory in a Belgian town, where the workers vote to accept a 1000 euro bonus and not to let Sandra, who has been absent from work for some weeks, to get her old job back. Two of the 16 workers voted for her. One of them, Juliette, urges her to go to see the manager so that there can be another vote on the morning when Sandra has had the opportunity to canvass the workers and persuade them to have some compassion for her – which does mean sacrificing their bonus.

Oscar-winner Marion Cottillard plays Sandra. In their earlier films, the Dardenne Brothers used little-known actors, except for their regular Olivier Gourmet, who makes an appearance in this film at the end, playing Jean- Marc who has opposed Sandra, undermining the attitudes of the other workers. In their previous film, *The Kid with a Bike*, they chose a well-known star, Cecile de France. The use of a star does mean that the Dardennes' films get wider release. And deservedly so.

Sandra is married to a chef, Manu (Fabrizio Rongione), and they have two children. Sandra has not quite recovered from the illness, sometimes does not want to get out of bed and face the day. She loves her husband who, she fears, may be moving from love to pity because of her condition. However, it is Manu who encourages Sandra over the weekend to make the visits, often driving her from one to the other.

On the Friday, Juliette gives Sandra a number of addresses and connects her with one of the workers who is favourable and who confirms his vote for her. Encouraged by this, Sandra and Manu, set out on the Saturday morning.

It may have been at this moment that a certain amount of dread arose, that we would spend the next 90 minutes going from house to house – and wondering how interesting that would be. The film is worth the perseverance. Sandra does go from house to house but we meet a number of ordinary but interesting characters, some sympathetic, some desperate, some grateful to Sandra for help in the past, some whose financial situations rely on the promise of the bonus.

These are ordinary people in the street, dependent on their jobs, most of whom have some feelings for Sandra, but a number of them, even wishing her well, cannot vote for her.

By the Sunday afternoon, Sandra feels desperate and empties a bottle of Xanax, Manu finding her and rushing her to hospital. She is not in there long and perseveres in some final visits.

There are some dramatic tensions as the workers go in for the vote on Monday morning, some solutions suggested, with the Dardenne Brothers drawing on their compassion for human nature

and promising some hope.

WHEN THE QUEEN CAME TO TOWN

Australia, 2014, 78 minutes, Colour.

Lorraine Bayley, narrated by Bert Newton.

Directed by Maurice Murphy.

It was in February 1954 when the young Queen Elizabeth and her husband, the Duke of Edinburgh, toured the Pacific, New Zealand and Australia. That was 60 years ago! To celebrate the event, this documentary compilation of newsreels of the time has come to Australian screens. The interesting question is, who would like to see this film?

For anyone 20 or under, the Royal Tour will seem like ancient history, a kind of antiquarian exercise. Actually will seem this way to people under 30, perhaps even under 40. But for those who were there, it will be a nostalgia tour.

Sharing a personal note with others who remember the events. We stood for a long time outside St Vincent's Hospital in Sydney to catch a passing glimpse of the Queen, which was probably the main experience for most Australians, though one man in the film says, as she passed, it was like watching her in slow motion, a glimpse of her that he would never forget. Be that as it may, as schoolchildren, those from the Southern Highlands as well as the coastal area, were all gathered in Wollongong Oval. This means that we had, rather distantly, a 360° view of the Queen as she was driven round the Oval. In the film, we see only the young girl who made the speech for the Queen in Wollongong, battling the wind blowing her hat off her head. You will see what I mean about the kind of film that it is and who will enjoy it.

It should also be said that for monarchists this experience will be majestic. For Republicans, it could well be rebellion-rousing!

One of the aims of the film is to show what Australia was like 60 years ago, most of the oldies being interviewed (and there are quite a lot of sharing their memories) have a deep hankering for the niceness and peacefulness of the 1950s. Someone mentions there was no need of Neighbourhood Watch. Perhaps it was. Perhaps we were rather isolated from the rest of the world and that did not matter too much. We do see scenes of Torres Strait Islanders dancing as well as the Pitinjara men performing a corroboree, the first in the presence of a woman to whom they confided the secret meaning. But Bert Newton reminds us that aborigines were not citizens in their own country.

The film is narrated (more nostalgia) by Bert Newton and his text makes him sound like a deeply royalist fan. Then there is a classroom set, with Lorraine Bayley (more nostalgia) narrating to a group of little girls, all dressed as little princesses, what the Royal Tour was like in terms of fairy tales. And the film is divided into several chapters, each introduced with a pale pastel colouring. Speaking of pastel, one of the chapters talks about the Australian passion for fashion, praising her Majesty for wearing ordinary clothes that women could, and did, imitate (she had 100 outfits and I think we saw

most of them during the film).

There is historical background of George VI becoming King, his death in 1952, the Coronation of the Queen and her setting out on a six month voyage at the end of 1953, with glimpses of her time in Fiji and in Tonga. There is also some coverage of the visit to New Zealand.

It looks as though every town and city that she visited gets a look in in this film, some visuals as well as comments from those who are there and remember. These remind us that England was the mother country, we were all loyal, the flag-waving was extraordinary. She is seen in public receptions, opening State parliaments, opening the Federal Parliament – as well as seen cattle in Royal Show, meeting Don Bradman and cricket greats, watching a surf carnival on Bondi Beach...

Director Maurice Murphy wrote the script for the film as well as directed. Interestingly, while we see Robert Menzies, the Prime Minister, accompanying the Queen and on covers of the Women's Weekly (quite a number of these), he is not mentioned in connection with the Queen except for one of those oldies, laughing and reminiscing, quoting his, "I did but see her passing by..."

There is a great line from one woman who presented the bouquet to the Queen and remembers that when the Queen fact her, she said "that's okay".

It is interesting for those looking at the Queen, her energy, her etiquette and protocol, and to remember that she was only 27. And the Duke of Edinburgh seems unfailingly smiling.

60 years is a long time in anyone's lifetime, especially judging from the members of the audience during the screening. It was certainly another world. Australia has changed extraordinarily. But, the Queen is still there. The Duke of Edinburgh is still there. But the film does remind us that Australians welcomed the Queen as Queen of Australia in those days but so much has changed, so much, that one wonders how relevant the monarchy is, in fact, to present-day Australia.