

Infernal Affairs
Twist
Girl with Pearl Earring
Three Marias
People I Know
Along came Polly

SIGNIS REVIEWS
2004

2046
21 GRAMS
29 PALMS
50 FIRST DATES
AGAINST THE ROPES
AGENT CODY BANKS: DESTINATION LONDON
ALILA
ALONG CAME POLLY
ANYTHING ELSE
ASH WEDNESDAY
ASSASSINATION OF RICHARD NIXON, The
BAD SANTA
BAD EDUCATION
BASQUE BALL
BELOW
BLIND FLIGHT
BON VOYAGE
BREAKING NEWS
BROTHER BEAR
BU-SAN (DRAGON INN)
BUONGIORNO, NOTTE (GOOD MORNING, NIGHT)
BUTTERFLY EFFECT
CALCIUM KID, The
CAPTURING THE FRIEDMANS
CAT IN THE HAT, The
CAT'S MEOW, The
CATCH THE KID
CHARLIE
CHASING LIBERTY
CHEAPER BY THE DOZEN
CLEAN
CODE 46
COLD MANOR CREEK
COMME UNE IMAGE (LOOK AT ME)
COMPANY, The
CONSEQUENCES OF LOVE, The
COOLER, The
CRONICAS
DATE WITH TAD HAMILTON
DAWN OF THE DEAD
DAY AFTER TOMORROW, The
DE-LOVELY

DEAR FRANKIE
DICKIE ROBERTS, FORMER CHILD STAR
DREAMERS
EDUKATORS, The
EMILE
EMMET'S MARK
ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND
EVELYN
EXILS
FAHRENHEIT 9/11
FEAR OF INTIMACY
FEAR X
FLOATING LANDSCAPE
FOG OF WAR, The
GAZ BAR BLUES
GIRL WITH A PEARL EARRING
GIRL FROM RIO, The
GIRL NEXT DOOR, The
GOODBYE LENIN
GOTHIKA
GRAND THEFT PARSONS
HARRY POTTER AND THE PRISONER OF AZKABAN
HAUNTED MANSION
HEAD OF STATE
HIDALGO
HOLY GIRL, The
HONEY
HONEYMOONERS, The
HOUSE OF SAND AND FOG
HOUSE OF FLYING DAGGERS
HUMAN STAIN, The
HUNTED, The
I'LL SLEEP WHEN I'M DEAD
IMAGINING ARGENTINA
INFERNAL AFFAIRS
KILL BILL VOL. 2
KITE, The
LA CASA DE LOS BABYS
LADYKILLERS, The
LAST SAMURAI, The
LAWS OF ATTRACTION
LIFE AND DEATH OF PETER SELLERS, The
LIFE IS A MIRACLE
LOVE ABOVE ALL
LOVE'S BROTHER
MAN DANCIN'
MIGHTY WIND, A
MISSING, The
MONA LISA SMILE
MONSIEUR IBRAHIM AND THE FLOWERS OF THE KORAN
MONSTER
MOOLAADE
MOTORCYCLE DIARIES, The
NOBODY KNOWS
NON TI MUOVERE
NORTHFORK
NOTRE MUSIQUE
OLD BOY
ONE PERFECT DAY
OPEN RANGE

OSAMA
OTHER SIDE OF THE BED, The
OUR HOUSE
OUT OF TIME
PAYCHECK
PEOPLE I KNOW
PERFECT SCORE, The
PIECES OF APRIL
POIDS LEGER
PORNOGRAFIA
RETURN, The
ROSENSTRASSE
RUNAWAY JURY
SADDEST MUSIC IN THE WORLD
SCARY MOVIE 3
SCOOPY DOO 2: MONSTERS UNLEASHED
SECRET WINDOW
SEGRETI DI STATO (SECRETS OF STATE)
SENTIMENTS, Les
SHAPE OF THINGS, The
SHATTERED GLASS
SHAUN OF THE DEAD
SHREK 2
SINCE OTAR LEFT
SOMERSAULT
SOMETHINGS GOTTA GIVE
SON FRERE
SPRING, SUMMER, WINTER, AUTUMN ... AND SPRING
STARSKY AND HUTCH
STATEMENT, The
STRANGE BEDFELLOWS
STUCK ON YOU
SYLVIA
TAKING LIVES
TALKING FILM, A
TORQUE
TOUCHING THE VOID
TRIPLETES FROM BELLEVILLE, Les
TROPICAL MALADY
TROY
TWIST
TWO MARIAS, The
UNDER TUSCAN SKIES
VALENTIN
VAN HELSING
WHISKY
WOMAN IS THE FUTURE OF MAN
WONDERLAND
WONDROUS OBLIVION
ZATOICHI

KILLING LOVER TRADITION

Killing Lover Tradition is a story, very melodramatic, set on the borders of Iran. It focuses on life in a village during the winter, especially a young boy at school, his father who works in illegal woodcutting and smuggling, his mother with her children and her emotional nervousness about the situation in the village. A group of woodcutters lead to the arrest and imprisonment of the father. His prospective son-in-law is in love with his daughter and is doing his military service with the police. He takes the man to prison. On his return, he wants to find out the truth and eventually tracks down the group of woodcutters who brutally

murder him. The little boy, who has offered to pay off his father's debt for a broken saw, works after school for the woodcutters. He actually sees the murder - and in the final scene when his mother comes to the prison, his hair has turned white.

The location photography and the Iranian mountains in the snow are beautiful, picturesque, at times threatening as trees fall in the forest, birds fly away and the snow and ice seem dangerous. The action, however, is highly melodramatic, especially in the character of the often hysterical mother. The film is of interest in showing village life in Iran at the beginning of the 21st century.

LIZARD

Lizard is a very surprising comedy to come from Iran or any other Muslim country. It is as if the writer and director had seen Sister Act, Tony Curtis in The Great Imposter and The Life of Brian.

Its theme is religion, the existence of God, the nature of prayer, the trust in Providence, the role of the mullah, the interpretation of the Koran, the importance of the letter of the law compared with works of mercy and charity. However, this is all put in the context of a comedy.

The focus is on a hardened criminal who is sentenced to jail for life with the director of the prison saying he would reform him. In fact, the prisoner is somewhat reformed by the end of the film but mainly because he has the opportunity to escape dressed as a mullah and to experience what mullahs find in Iranian society, as regards respect and disrespect. Primarily, of course, it is respect and he is soon being asked for all kind of advice, to preach. His trying to get a forged passport at night in secret becomes the occasion for everybody to interpret that he does works of mercy on the quiet. He soon gets a reputation of being a great preacher, even a healer.

The central actor looks the part of the criminal in the early part of the film but, growing a beard, looks very impressive as the mullah. There is all kinds of satire at the expense of formal religion, especially with two young men, one continually asking questions and taking notes, the other very earnest but finding the temptations of the world rather overpowering. The new mullah is rather more liberal in his interpretation of standards as well as of the compassion of God.

This is a surprising film to be release in 2004 in Iran, especially with religion and the state so intertwined and the authority of the mullah almost absolute. A film, comically questioning the authority, is quite controversial in this context.

BEAUTIFUL CITY

Beautiful City is an ironic name for this film, focusing as it does on interpretation of Koran and Islamic law concerning capital punishment.

The film opens in a juvenile centre where a young man turns eighteen, the age at which he can be executed for murder. He is transferred to the prison for those to be executed. His friend in the juvenile centre, a thief, wants to help and persuades the authorities to let him go for a month to help his friend. He approaches his sister, the man who has to pay blood money so that the murderer of his daughter will be executed, he also encounters the wife of the father of the murdered girl, a woman he had married after her death. She has a disabled daughter who needs an operation and the money that would be paid for the blood money.

The characters interact, the father changing his mind several times, listening to mullahs and their interpretation of the Scriptures as well as the sympathetic director of the juvenile centre. The mother of the girl wants the money for the operation and also has a plot whereby the young man would marry her daughter and give her a sense of security. He, however, has fallen in love with the sister of his friend, a divorced young woman with a child, pretending to be married to an older man so that she would have protection in the neighbourhood.

Writer-director Esghar Farhadi made a very interesting film the year before, Dancing in the Dust, again about marital troubles, about a young man who went into the desert and fell under the spell of a snake

charmer. This film is very powerful on Islamic law and capital punishment, but the resonances would be for those familiar with such law. The financial complications where the parent of the victim has to pay blood money is difficult to comprehend. The film is also difficult insofar as it works as a moral case and does not resolve the problems, leaving it to the audience to work out what they might do.

THE RIVERSIDE

The Riverside is one of the first films in the world made about the war in Iraq in 2003. It focuses on the Kurds, the bombings in North-Eastern Iraq, the reaction of the Iraqi government and their oppression of the Kurds. The film shows a town being hit by bombs, the population fleeing and trying to reach the Iranian border.

The film is not only topical, it uses hand-held camera in many of its sequences to give a sense of urgency and reality, especially for the people confused during the bombings and trying to flee their town. However, the initial focus is on a young bride, dressed in her bridal wear, who has stepped on a mine in a field near the border. She is trapped, her husband runs to get help but is away all day. The film shows the anguish of the bride as she becomes more tired and thirsty, trying to keep her foot on the mine to prevent its explosion. At first alone, a number of refugees reach her.

The screenplay focuses on different refugees, showing their plight, intercutting them with one another and with the bride, until they all finally reach the bride, try to help her by encouragement, telling stories, singing. They are unable to help her with the mine - until the end of the film when the husband arrives and the weary bride lifts her foot inadvertently and is killed.

The range of people shown fleeing include a middle-aged man carrying the body of his son in plastic, wanting to take him back to Iran and bury him in Iranian soil. There are three elderly men, advised to follow the pylons for the electric wires till they reach the border, an old woman with a cow carrying all possessions which gets loose and runs away, an old grandmother carrying her two infant grandchildren, a soldier with several arms, trying to get to the border to sell them and finally, a group of refugees fleeing the town.

The film is quite eloquent in its comment on the effects of war on ordinary people - throughout the film some comments are given by the radio and television commentators about America and its bombing, the reaction of the Iraqis, the action of the Germans and the Russians and the comment on how politics affects ordinary people.

LOVER OF SCARECROW

Lover of Scarecrow is a rather exotic tale, set in the 1940s on the border between Iran and Azerbaijan. It focuses on a military uprising, a colonel taking over and one of his lieutenants shooting him before he was able to shoot some blindfolded hostages. The film opens with the lieutenant being wounded and escaping through the forest, coming across a young woman, dressed in very traditional garb, who wants a scarecrow to keep the crows from her fields. She finds him at the river bank and thinks that he could be the scarecrow. The film focuses on the recovery of the lieutenant, his falling in love with the young woman and her mythology of everything in nature being humanised. She has a cantankerous old father. There is also a tinker who is in love with her and who reports the presence of the lieutenant to the colonel. The film focuses on life on the farm, visits to the local town, the pursuit by the colonel of the lieutenant (with some memories of the colonel's past which seems to connect him with the old man). There are possibilities for a happy ending - but they are frustrated as the tinker leads the colonel to the lieutenant. However, the young girl is pregnant and there is hope for the next generation.

The film is paced for an eastern and middle-eastern sensibility, which might try the patience of some western viewers. However, the introduction to the mythologies of the area, the way of life in those times, the military situation, the pursuit of the lieutenant and the melodramatic ending keep audience interest.

AT THE RIVER'S END

At the River's End is an experimental film, as if the director, who also wrote the screenplay and edited the film, had been studying the works of Carl Jung on dreams.

The central character is seen only at the end of the film. For the most part of the film, the camera is his subjective eye, interacting with characters, their looking straight into the camera to interact with him, his particular perceptions of what was going on around him. With the narrative, the central characters is writing his memories, writing down his dreams. As the film continues, it is sometimes difficult to know whether there is any reality or whether everything is a dream. The past sequences of his childhood and adolescence, especially accompanying his father to bathe in the river in the mornings, seems to be something of a dream, especially as he recounts the death of his father, only to recount that his father died in an entirely different way in his shop. There is a modern period, also subjective, where the young man is writing his story, sharing an apartment with two friends. However, by the end of the film, when we see the face of the central characters, his father appears in the apartment. Again, it is difficult to know what is dream and what is reality, especially as his father takes him then to an old part of Teheran, with his memories of World War II and a Polish refugee who was a singer, her restaurant which has since disappeared - but the gate of which opens onto the countryside and a lake. On the banks of the lake, the son confronts his father - and then moves into the water himself - where the film ends.

The film is experimental in style, using a very widescreen format as well as the subjective camera, with scenes in both Isfahan with its beautiful setting and Teheran with its more mundane setting. The film uses the same visual style for reality and dream - unless everything is dream. It is an attempt for a young man to come to terms with the past, especially as embodied by his father, memories of his interactions with his father, his dislike of his father, wishing him dead - but then having some opportunity to reconcile with him.

BUTTERFLY IN THE WIND

Butterfly in the Wind starts promisingly as a woman is released from prison after ten years. She goes on a quest, quite desperately, into the deserts of Iran to search for her daughter who has been taken by her husband. He had betrayed her at the airport and she had been imprisoned for drug-smuggling.

She meets a strange character in the desert who refuses to help, even though he knows where the husband is. It emerges that the husband has been responsible for the death by fire of his wife and child. With the insistence of the woman, they travel into the desert. Here the film becomes rather melodramatic (and not good on continuity or realism). There is a vivid sandstorm and they are buried under it. Their reaction, their getting out of the car are quite believable but the car looks and sounds in too good condition afterwards. They continued lost, have to walk, come across a tribe riding camels and are given water which they then put in the car and finally arrive at the village. The confrontation with the husband (after some flashbacks) is even more melodramatic and the ending rather appalling as the wife, who had pushed her husband so that he would not shoot the man who helped her, is sentenced to seven years' jail. The film perpetuates the perspective that women are more unfairly treated in Iranian criminal law.

THE CHOCOLATE

The Chocolate is a drama, more suited to a telemovie than a feature film. It tells the story of a friendship as well as a swindle. The central character is an engineering graduate who has not continued his studies. Involved in accident with a very popular film star, his father persuades him to pretend to be crippled so that the actor can pay for the hospital, the physiotherapy, and look after him. What happens is that the two become friends. Meanwhile the young woman with whom he has been brought up falls in love with him and he with her. However, he is very hesitant about committing himself. Meanwhile, the actor has very few friends and is dominated by his mother. With further complications about the family, wealth and poverty, the brother-in-law of the actor goes berserk and attacks his sister and her child. This culminates in them fleeing to Canada and the brother-in-law pursuing the actor and his friend. During a fight, the friend realises that he must help him and reveals that he is not crippled at all. The friendship continues.

A CANDLE IN THE WIND

A Candle in the Wind takes its title from the Elton John song which is heard briefly in the film. It focuses on a young man in Teheran, the future before him. However, he is depressed, alienated from his father,

living with his mother who is separated from her husband. He cannot settle, does translation work spasmodically, falls in love with a young woman who is religious and is killed. Things begin to go downhill for him then, his friends introduce him to drugs and for years he lives a life of idleness, drug-taking, rave parties and dependence on his so-called friends. One of them, a doctor who supplies drugs, eventually commits suicide, the other, an estate agent, with a family, finally finishes in prison. After his father dies, the young man discovers that he has AIDS. However, he is judged as HIV-negative. This triggers (dramatically for the film) a very rapid conversion experience. He then tries to live a good life and a religious life.

The actor, Jamsid Mashayekhi, won Best Actor award for this performance in the 2004 Iranian awards. He had also appeared as the crippled veteran of the Iraq war in *Triple Chronicles* as well as the brother of the drug addict in *Friday Soldiers*.

The film was acclaimed in Iran, but is too slow, morbid and melodramatic for western audience. However, it is a strong look at the growth of drug addiction, especially among the young adults in affluent families, who find that their lives are aimless, that religion does not touch them - except, at the end of this film, in a dramatic conversion.

WIND CARRIERS

Carriers Wind is a brief ethnographical film with a plotline. It is the real-life story of a man in the Baluchi area of Iran with five wives, fifty children, who form a community of their own. The film opens with wind, the need for people to get tarpaulin over the crops so that they will not be blown away. This creates an atmosphere of anxiety for livelihood. This theme continues as we see the people working in the village, in the fields, washing themselves in the river, enjoying meals, having celebrations together. The old man is a strong patriarch of his family and village. However, when a young man wants to marry one of the women, this upsets the whole balance of the village and the film moves into a melodramatic format.

The film is valuable for its documentary-like look at the landscapes, the way of life, the people and their customs in this particular area of Iran.

STRANDS OF HAIR

Strands of Hair is a short-running film but is very difficult to sit through. The plot focuses on a divorced woman, her relationships, a company, her friends, her son and his involvement in demonstrations as well as his girlfriend.

However, the film is experimental insofar as most of its action takes place with people talking on phones, especially mobile phones. The credits sequence indicates this with the wide range of phone calls and people answering.

However, this means that it is very difficult to establish a rapport with the characters, even identify who they are and their relationships. The effect is that the film is more like visual radio. One can shut one's eyes, simply listen to the words and focus on what is happening. The visuals take place in the city as well as in the mountainous countryside but are merely a backdrop to the talk on the phone.

The film's writer, editor, director, shows initiative in experimenting with new forms of cinema but unfortunately, the whole approach to the words, the phones and the images does not work well dramatically.

A CHILD POET

A Child Poet focuses on a young boy and his relationship with his father. His father is ill and has to retire. The boy is literate and the father not. The film focuses on the boy and his activities, at school, at home, with the father, wondering about the death of his mother. The father and son clash because the father has not told him about the death of his mother. Eventually, the letter for their allowance comes through, they

go shopping, but their bicycle is stolen. The young boy pursues the thief. The father gets some lessons in reading and writing and there is a future for father and son.

The film has echoes of the Italian film *Bicycle Thieves*. However, it is very much in the vein of so many Iranian films of the 1990s with their focus on young children.

THE AFGHAN BRIDE

The *Afghan Bride* is a spectacular and interesting story. The locations are a huge castle fort in Afghanistan, the Afghan countryside and cities, Pakistan and his countryside and Lahore. The widescreen photography takes full advantage of these locations.

The film focuses on a young man, Gol Mohammed, who has been imprisoned by the Taliban because of his objections against their policy of education of girl students. When he is released, he returns home to the surprise of everyone who thought he was dead, including his intended in marriage and her father who has promised her to someone else. The father is persuaded to wait for Gol Mohammed to earn the money and come back and wed his daughter.

The teacher goes into Pakistan to work to earn money. He has to be smuggled in and, when getting the money, smuggled out. However, he is caught again and imprisoned in the castle fort. The prisoners are in rebellion against their harsh treatment and many of them are massacred. He is wounded. He is able to make his way back again to the town where the father is persuaded that he will lose face and be reported by spies if he doesn't allow the young man to marry his daughter. The film ends with a great celebration.

Not overly melodramatic, the film is beautiful to look at, interesting to watch and reveals a great deal about the experience of Iranians and Afghanistans during the Taliban era and during the American bombing. Television continually shows George Bush and the bombings - and the film is based on a tragic situation where the guests at a wedding fired shots into the air and a bomb was dropped on them.

HYAM - THE BROKEN OLIVE

Hyam is a story about Palestine. It is set at the beginning of the Israeli siege of the town and the camps of Jenin.

The initial focus is on a wedding ceremony and is presented in all its happy detail. The young couple are about to leave for England where the husband has citizenship. In their drive along the roads in Palestine in a taxi, they are stopped at a roadblock and are treated with great suspicion. While the wife is let go, the husband is interned for the night and interrogated. The Israeli officer admits that it was a mistake, gives him back his mobile phone which, in fact, contains a tracking device. The Israeli politician wants to track down the wife and capture her, mistaking her for her aunt, a noted terrorist.

As the siege of Jenin begins, the politician dominates the military commander. The politician wants the young woman at any cost. This strategy means that as the troops enter Jenin, they are the victims of the Palestinian uprising. Ultimately, many people are killed and the Palestinians make a last stand. Decisions have to be made and the young man and woman are urged to flee to England and there is an impassioned patriotic speech at the end of the film.

The film could be seen as Palestinian propaganda but in the same way as a Jewish story about the Palestinians could be seen as Israeli propaganda. There is a great deal of passion, of course, in the presentation of the Palestinian situation and indeed it seems a time and a place of terrible suffering and oppression and humiliating treatment by Israeli guards and police as well as by military attack on land by tanks as well as by air and helicopter fire.

The making of the film is straightforward. However, at the beginning of the 21st century there are very few films about the Palestinians and it is necessary for world audience to see stories from both sides of the conflict.

THE HUNTED (US, 2003, d, William Friedkin)

In the 1970s, director William Friedkin was at the peak of his career: an Oscar for *The French Connection* and acclaim for *The Exorcist*. It was never quite the same for him again. He has had some successes with films like *To Live and Die in L.A.* He has had harsh criticism for films like *Sphinx* and *Jade*. The rest of his films have been somewhere in between. Which is where we find *The Hunted*. There is not so much new about the screenplay, except that we have a veteran of US military activity in the Balkans so affected by the violence that he goes out of his mind and becomes a deadly killer. Eventually the authorities have to call in the retired expert who trained him to hunt him down. And that is what happens, firstly, at the edge of the city and then out in the forests. Most of the film is a chase story of the cat and mouse variety. Tommy Lee Jones has done this kind of thing before. Benicio del Toro is intense as the hunted man. Connie Neilson represents the police who have to cooperate with the hunter. Friedkin has always been able to suggest fear and terror on the screen and, in a modest way, that is what he does here.

THE SHAPE OF THINGS (US, 2003, d. Neil LaBute)

Neil LaBute is a talent worth watching. He is a playwright, a novelist and a film director. When he first appeared on the scene in the mid-1990s with *In the Company of Men*, he was derided by many commentators as being a severe misygonist. *The Company of Men* were truly destructive of women. His reputation was confirmed by his next film *Your Neighbours and Mine*, a picture of three couples whose intertwined relationships revealed the shortcomings in commitment and sexual identity.

Then LaBute changed tack. He made the very funny satire on obsessive television fans, *Nurse Betty*, and then surprised everyone with his adaptation of A.S.Byatt's novel about poetry in the 19th century and in the 20th century, *Possession*.

One might say that with *The Shape of Things*, he has combined all these elements. Originally written for the stage (and using the original stage cast), he has opened out his drama for the screen. This time he has four characters interacting, testing their commitment and relationships. This is quite effective in itself, although one has to accept a certain theatricality about the dialogue and the staging in this screen version.

But LaBute retains his themes from his adaptation of *Possession*. He makes his audience question the nature of art, the control of the artist, the morality of this kind of control, especially when other people are drawn into the artistic experience, whether they can be used or not. To explain further would destroy the impact of the last part of the film which certainly surprised me - very much.

LaBute is served well by Paul Rudd as an agreeable museum security guard who helps artist, Rachel Weisz, with his work. The other couple, Gretchen Mol and, represent simple goodness and smarmy double dealing.

The film is quite talkative, especially on ethical and moral issues. This may irritate an audience looking for action. It could absorb an audience eager to bring a thoughtful response to the film.

PIECES OF APRIL (US, 2003, d. Peter Hedges)

A movie genre that sprang up and developed, especially during the 1990s, was the Thanksgiving reunion and dinner genre: *What's Cooking*, *Home for the Holidays*, *The Ice Storm*, *The Myth of Fingerprints...* family antagonism, the reunion, the meal, possible reconciliation. *Pieces of April* belongs firmly to this genre. The dramatic action of this brief movie takes place over 12 hours of Thanksgiving Day. It is both a cooking movie and a road movie.

Katie Holmes as April is in charge of the cooking and is plagued by problems (which word sets her black African neighbour into fits of laughter, a nice white girl with problems!). What's cooking here is a New York City racial mix, Chinese included) who can come together happily for the dinner - except for the rather prissy Sean Hayes and his dog, Bernadette, who shows that the holiday does not mean kindness to everyone. Hayes makes an impression and offers a different variation on his role as Jack in *Will and Grace*. Antwone Fisher's Derek Luke is April's boyfriend.

Oliver Platt is in charge of the journey as the alienated family make one more effort to see April before her unaffirming mother dies of cancer. Mother (ironically named Joy) is played by Patricia Clarkson in an Oscar-nominated performance, a woman with a caustic mouth and no appreciation of her daughters. Platt, on the other hand, is the embodiment of kindness.

There is an overall sweetness about the movie despite the problems, the arguments, the recriminations and the frustrations in getting the meal ready. This genial tone comes from Peter Hedges, best known for his novel and screenplay of another fine film about a dysfunctional family, *What's Eating Gilbert Grape*. Hedges has a gift for creating dysfunctional characters as he also wrote the screenplay for *About a Boy*. *Pieces of April* is his directorial debut.

EMMET'S MARK (US, 2003, d. Kevin Snyder)

A small-budget police thriller with some unexpected turns, a star vehicle for television's Scott Wolf (*Party of Five*). He plays Emmet, a depressed detective, who gets news that he has a terminal disease. While he continues his investigations into a serial killer with some vigour, he has met a former police officer in a bar, talked about his impending death and has agreed that a contract killer can take him out suddenly so that he does not have to suffer.

Gabriel Byrne plays the go-between and hires criminal, Tim Roth.

All is not as it seems and the film builds on tension, especially with the relentlessly ruthless Roth. The film is more interested in characters and their response to these limit situations than to the actual police work, so that it gets grimmer and grimmer as it goes on. Much of the action is filmed at night, in dark apartments and on the streets and in parks which makes it an even grimmer matter of life and death.

THE LAST SAMURAI (US, 2003, d. Edward Zwick)

This is both an impressive epic as well as the story of one man's spiritual journey.

In the latter part of the 19th century, Japan, which had held itself closed to the outer world since the era of the Shogun, the Catholic missionaries and the traders in the 16th and 17th centuries, began to open itself. Western representatives hurried to Japan, not least the Americans. This film is set in 1876-1877, a decade after the end of the American Civil War, a decade of battles against the American Indians, symbolised by Custer and Little Big Horn. The Japanese invite military experts to come to train the Imperial Army in American strategies and tactics and to bring the new Winchester rifles, canons and Howitzers. The Americans eagerly embrace their new friends, bring them weapons and train them - and it is only 65 years away from the bombing of Pearl Harbour.

Questions of American trade domination, arming potential enemies and their understanding of their 'manifest destiny' in world leadership aside, the film re-creates the period admirably (shot in Japanese and New Zealand locations) and helps us to understand what was happening in Japan and the effect of these cultural changes on the West.

The Last Samurai is Katsumoto, a Samurai leader who has taken a rebellious stand against the young Emperor and the seeming selling-out of traditional values for wealth, industrial and trade 'progress' and the manners and styles (even in clothing) of the West. He is played with great dignity by Ken Watanabe. The Samurai stand for service and protection of the people, have their Bushido code of compassion, stand for the values of honour, dignity, duty, destiny and fate indicating how they should live their lives, fight and die. The central section of the film is set in the Samurai village where we see how this works in best practice.

Into this world comes a burnt-out case, a veteran of the Indian wars, who is still tormented by the brutality of the massacres. Tom Cruise plays him with some subtlety, an alcoholic performing carnival stunts to sell Winchesters, who becomes a mercenary training the troops. Forced into early battle with the Samurai, he defends himself with courage, gains the admiration of the Samurai who take him prisoner. He begins to learn the ways of the East and discovers a spirituality among them. He begins to see them as the Japanese equivalent of the tribal Indians. The struggle between the exploitative new and the dignified old takes place within him.

This is a long film giving audiences plenty of time to look at this portrait of Japan, to reflect on the nature of cultural change and its pace, on whether the values of the West and its progress are what people really need. There are some very strong battle scenes throughout the film as one would expect, the historical context giving them a meaningful challenge to the audience.

STUCK ON YOU (US, 2003, Peter and Bob Farrelly)

The Farrelly Brothers, Bob and Peter, have built up a reputation over the last ten years of being the comic writers and directors of questionable, if not bad taste. They have made sport of the dumb and dumber, of the uptight (There's Something About Mary), mental illness (Me, Myself and Irene). Their focus now is on conjoined twins. However, while they do walk a thin line at times, their tone is much gentler this time, even sweet at times, but nonetheless humorous and even challenging.

Because Matt Damon and Greg Kinnear are so engaging as the twins, Bob and Walt, audience sympathy is instantly with them. It comes as rather a shock to hear people refer to them as freaks. We have got to know them so well, we don't think of them as freaks. This is part of the Farrelly technique: to involve us emotionally with 'different' people and then show us how they are derided and discarded so that we see and feel the injustice.

Damon and Kinnear work so well together (in a lot of funny scenes, often with slapstick) so that we share their dilemma when Walt wants to go to Hollywood for an acting career while Bob is prone to panic attacks even when unobtrusively on stage behind Walt. Things work out in Hollywood quite differently from what we might expect as Walt stars with Cher in a terrible TV series called Honey and the Beaze (Bob still there and having panic attacks). Cher gets to send herself up unmercifully.

A nice surprise is co-star Meryl Streep as herself, proving, especially in the grand finale, what a good sport she is.

It is enjoyable to speculate on how Bob and Walt with their being so close and connected, sharing their lives, their physical, psychological and emotional dependence, indicate how close the Farrellys themselves are. Actually, this is a very nice film.

OUT OF TIME (US, 2003, d. Carl Franklin)

Carl Franklin directed Denzel Washington in the crime and detection thriller *Devil in a Blue Dress*. They team again for this variation on the Double Indemnity insurance scheme with a good man duped by a femme fatale. This time the setting is a sunny Floriday, where the police chief wears T-shirts and shorts, goes fishing and the living seems to be easy in summertime (and all the year round). However, there is always a devil lurking in paradise.

Denzel Washington plays the police chief of a small town. He has a reputation for securing a substantial drug bust. However, he has been disappointed in his separation from his detective wife (Eva Mendes) and has begun an affair with a colleague's wife. He is a sympathetic man and wants to help the young woman battle a terminal cancer and gives her the cash from the drug case and she makes him the beneficiary of the insurance policy for her death. He is a trusting type, but we have seen *Body Heat* and all kinds of film noir and so we settle back to see how the chief handles being framed when his wife investigates the murder of the woman and her husband. Sometimes, time is tight as the Chief has to sabotage the investigation and cover himself. He is ably helped by his medical examiner, played with ironic ease by Jonathan Billingsley.

Of course, it is nothing new. It is the pleasure of seeing Denzel Washington as less than hero but nevertheless using his ingenuity to save himself.

DICKIE ROBERTS, FORMER CHILD STAR (US, 2003, d. Sam Weisman)

Gossip columns frequently relish the chance to inform readers how former child stars, who had really made it big in television series, have fallen on hard times, addicted, bankrupt, lives ruined. At the end of this uneven but amiable spoof, about 20 former child stars (their names and series listed on screen in

case we never heard of them or have forgotten) join together as a choir to sing an ironic song about fame and celebrity.

Before that, however, we have a thumbnail sketch of Dickie Roberts, the abandoned child of a monstrous mother (Doris Roberts) who found headlines and fans as a child star. Then the series was canned and Dickie, who claimed to be the son of David Soul, boxes, valets cars and other jobs to eke out a living. When he tries to set up a possible show with director Rob Reiner (playing himself) which requires him to be like a child, he stays with a family for a month - and, as you would guess, antagonism on the part of the children turns to admiration and love and Dickie discovers what it is to be nice and human. This part of the film runs the risk of being a bit icky in the American TV way. However, David Spade is an odd screen presence, looking genial part of the time but looking suspicious at other times - but, perhaps, that is the way someone like Dickie Roberts would turn out.

Mary McCormack is very nice as the mother of the family. In the meantime, there are jokes at Hollywood's expense, especially of the TV industry, and guest stars, like Brendan Fraser, popping in and out. For audiences who know their sitcoms and their former child stars, this should be a treat.

TOUCHING THE VOID (UK, 2003, d. Kevin McDonald)

This is a skilfully put together docudrama. It tells a harrowing story of a climb in 1985 of Siula Grande in the Peruvian Andes that should have ended in death but, amazingly, did not. The two climbers involved, Joe Simpson and Simon Yates, and Richard Hawking, a stranger they met and asked to take care of their base camp during what was supposed to be a one day climb to the peak and back, all tell their story in vivid reminiscence straight to camera. They are very frank about their tensions, the decisions made on the mountain, life and death choices, as well as how they reacted to the climbing fraternities' criticisms of Simon for cutting the rope on Joe when he saw no other alternative.

Director, Kevin MacDonald, has based his film on Simpson's 1988 account of his experiences, *Touching the Void* and has elicited strong statements from the three concerned and edited them dramatically. He has also employed actors to reenact the climb, filming in the Andes as well as the Alps. The hardships endured by both Joe and Simon are graphically recaptured as if we were watching the real thing - the unpredictable weather, the dangerous peaks and crevasses, snow and ice. When Simon cuts the rope on Joe, he thinks that Joe is dead and that he will die. He gets down to camp within four days. The latter part of the film is watching Joe, who has broken his leg, demonstrate a will to live and an instinct for survival that beggars belief. When people say the human spirit is indomitable, this is what they must mean. Simpson explains how he lost his Catholic faith and how it did not return during his ideal. He thought there was nothing after death, and he still strove desperately to live.

Those who will never climb a mountain or experience anything like this may find the film hard to watch. For the initiated, they will be watching with a close attention to detail (and memories of their own climbs and dangers).

ANYTHING ELSE (US, 2003, d. Woody Allen)

After his success in the late 90s with *Deconstructing Harry*, Woody Allen's career has been mixed, with the excellent *Sweet and Lowdown* and the less acclaimed *Curse of the Jade Scorpion* and *Hollywood Ending*. *Anything Else* is not one of his major films.

However, there is quite a lot of witty dialogue, Allen style. The story itself is fairly trite: a young man and his infatuation with an erratic young woman (and her even more erratic mother moving into his apartment). Jason Biggs, better known for his central role in the *American Pie* series acquits himself very well as the younger alter ego of the Woody Allen type. He has the same wisecracks but his delivery is a little more plain, more mundane perhaps, than that of Allen himself. Christina Ricci plays the young girl with a combination of passion and detachment and Stockard Channing has a fling as her mother. Danny de Vito has some good scenes as an avaricious agent.

Woody Allen himself is at his best in a most unusual role. He plays a teacher, a mentor for Jason Biggs, a would-be writer. He often meets Biggs in the park, they have long discussions and he gives

advice, not only for his writing but for life. Soon the conversations move to Jewish themes. This is something different for Allen to have such explicit dialogue about serious Jewish issues. Since the film was made after September 11th, 2001, there are also discussions about terrorists, about survival kits (a mixture of the serious with the comic). It is hard to know whether this is Woody Allen's own personal paranoia or whether he is sending it up.

The title for the film comes from a saying when people consider all the hard things in their lives, as a taxi-driver says, it is just like anything else.

THE DREAMERS (France, 2003, d. Bernardo Bertolucci)

Bernardo Bertolucci made a great impression during the 1960s, especially with his film *The Spider's Stratagem*. He confirmed his abilities as a director in the 1970s with *The Conformist*, *Last Tango in Paris*, 1900. While he continued to make films and receive acclaim, it was only in 1987 with *The Last Emperor* that he achieved worldwide prominence and an Academy Award. After *The Last Emperor*, his films were popular but not great – even such films as *Little Buddha* not being particularly good at all. By the late 90s, he was considered in decline. He made a very small chamber piece, *Besieged*, with Thandie Newton and David Thewliss in 1999. With *The Dreamers*, he has returned to form.

The film was written by Gilbert Adair from his novel (and reissued the novel with alterations influenced by his working on the screenplay). It is a memoir of Paris in 1968, twenty-year-olds who were enthusiastic about cinema, learning French, full of idealism and living in Paris with the strike against the Cinematheque and the firing of Henri Langois from the post. What followed were more riots in Paris, especially from the students at the Sorbonne.

The central characters are one American and two French, twins. The American is naïve, an innocent in Europe. However, after being open to the temptations, even the corruption of the French, he sees that their idealism is narcissistic and theoretical and he literally turns his back on them to go home to America – with an attitude of non-violence, especially considering the Vietnam War, and to grow older and wiser and to write novels about the period. The two young French people are very self-centred, erratic, rebelling against their parents and their values, experimenting with sexuality, yet very inward-looking, cutting themselves off, theorising about film, playing sexual games, exercising power – and, when urged to go outside and break through their ideology, they act in an extravagant way, probably leading to their deaths.

Bertolucci recreates the period well, provides us with a chamber piece with three characters very effectively portrayed, especially Michael Pitt as the American. There is a great deal of music from the period. Because of the focus on cinephiles, there are many excerpts from a range of films, where real life according to these characters imitates the films.

There is plenty to think about in this film, for those who experienced it it is a memoir, for those who did not experience it is a re-creation of a period and a challenge to look at history and idealism again.

RUNAWAY JURY (US, 2003, d. G. Gary Gray)

John Grisham usually writes a good yarn, a crime story as well as an attack on aberrations in the American legal system. *Runaway Jury* is no exception - and is an alarming picture of the lengths to which unscrupulous companies and individuals will go to influence, manipulate and, if necessary, buy a jury.

The novel focused on the smoking-related cases but it has been changed here to the gun manufacturers. With *The Insider* in 1999 and, in fact, Grisham's own *The Rainmaker*, there has been strong film coverage of suits against the tobacco industry. With the recent spate of shootings in schools, offices and restaurants, the film is immediately relevant, a critique of interpretations of the Second Amendment which allows citizens to bear arms. One wonders whether there have been cases against companies making guns for damages for those killed in such massacres.

The film keeps quite close to the novel, John Cusack and Rachel Weisz playing the enigmatic juror and his associate being just as the novel presented them. In casting Gene Hackman as the expert brought in by companies to read juries and help them in their selection to win their case, the film-makers have

moved from a clever but obnoxious Danny de Vito style fixer (akin to the role he played in *The Rainmaker*) and gone for elegant and supremely self-confident domination of all around him. Dustin Hoffman, playing the prosecutor, is lower-key but nonetheless persuasive as the ethical lawyer who is tempted by the manipulators. With such a good cast, as well as interesting performers like Cliff Curtis, Jennifer Beals and Luis Guzman as some of the jurors, it is hard to go wrong.

Director Gary Fleder has a flair for crime thrillers having made *Things to Do in Denver When You're Dead*, *Kiss the Girls and Don't Say a Word*.

A MIGHTY WIND (US, 2003, d. Christopher Guest)

In 1984, *This is Spinal Tap* began its journey to being a very popular cult classic. This spoof of rock music and musicians was written by Christopher Guest, Michael McKean and Harry Shearer. They continued their collaboration in such hilarious spoofs as *Waiting for Guffman* (small towns and their patriotic pageants) and their best comedy, *Best in Show* (dog competitions). In comparison, *A Mighty Wind* is slighter and narrower in focus, but enjoyable nonetheless. Christopher Guest is the director and co-writer, collaborating in *Best in Show* and here with actor, Eugene Levy.

The screenplay is very witty with plenty of laughs at and with the characters. The target is the popular country music and clean cut and sentimental groups of the 1960s. Their producer has died and his son thinks that a televised concert starring three of his groups would be a tribute to him. As in previous films, there are lots of interviews with Guest's regular cast enjoying themselves with script and improvising. In fact, Guest, Shearer and McKean portray one of the groups, *The Folksmen*, who are reuniting after more than 30 years with humorously deadpan memories. Eugene Levy himself (almost unrecognisable in grey fright wig) and Catherine O'Hara are Mitch and Mikey, a kind of romantic Peter, Paul and Mary (without Paul), he having had a series of breakdowns and she married to a catheter salesman whose hobby is model trains. The third group is an overenthusiastic ensemble called the *New Main Street Singers*, featuring cleancut husband and wife (John Michael Higgins and Jane Lynch) who give hilarious interviews, she, looking cleaner than clean, about her questionable life, and he and she explaining their New Age beliefs and rituals about colour.

By the time the concert comes on, there is more than a touch of nostalgia for those old days. The lyrics might be over the top or just plain silly, but there is a zest about the singing and the playing which means, that despite the spoof, those old days were sometimes good old days. Well, maybe the makers are getting a little older and appealing to their generation while the younger generation might just scratch their heads. But it is very entertaining.

GIRL WITH A PEARL EARRING (UK, 2003, d. Peter

If ever a film re-created its period in loving and lavish detail, it is *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. It is the story of the Dutch painter, Johannes Vermeer, his work, his family, the patronage for his portraits and his painting of the masterpiece, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*.

While the attention to the life of Vermeer in his particular time and place, Delft 1665, is based on historical fact, this story of his painting his household maid, Griet, is the invention of novelist, Tracy Chevalier. By the time the film is over, one believes that this is what really happened.

The film is a set designer's paradise. It is also beautifully lit. One reviewer remarked that each frame of the film could be taken separately and put in an art gallery the compositions are so elegant, the realism so real, it enhances reality, in fact it is a moving picture version of Vermeer paintings. The same reviewer, however, was not charmed by the film itself and felt that it was like watching paint, no matter how skilfully and beautifully applied, dry. Unfortunately, this might also be the response of an audience which has little patience with measured and slow-moving storytelling that gives the audience ample time to gaze, to appreciate and to reflect on what they are seeing.

While the film is a constant delight to the senses, it also has a great deal to communicate about art, artistic appreciation, the style of painting in the 17th century (with the help of the camera obscura). It is also a telling portrait of Dutch society at the time, a contrast between Calvinist rigor and Catholic colour and chaos, a hierarchical society where even middle-class snobs lorded it over their servants who were taught to know their place. It is especially revealing on how women in service were trapped

by powerful men and treated as sex objects unless they had the strength and shrewdness to escape the continual pressure and snares.

Scarlett Johansson really does look like the girl in the painting and gives an extraordinary performance which is frequently wordless, intensely introverted but communicating by presence, glances and body language. Colin Firth portrays Vermeer as a conscientious craftsman who was a serious, even stolid personality. Tom Wilkinson is his arrogant and lascivious patron. Among the supporting cast, Judy Parfitt stands out as the stern but realistic matriarch of the family as does Essie Davis as Vermeer's continuously pregnant wife, insecure, jealous and irascible.

A fascinating way of communicating the genius and work of a painter in his times as well as bringing the story behind a painting (even if it is fiction) to life.

THE RETURN (Russia, 2003, d. Andrej Zvjagintsev)

The Return is the first film by the director, Andrej Zvjagintsev, and won the Golden Lion and several other awards at the Venice Film Festival, 2003, including the SIGNIS Catholic prize. Comments were made about how the film related to the tradition of Tarkovski. In fact, the film draws on classic cinema traditions from Russian cinema, a great deal of introspection, some mysticism, a focus on the Russian soul. The photography is both beautiful and bleak, a journey in the Russian countryside, side roads, lakes, finally, an island.

The film was also a powerful road movie, tense and symbolic where two boys, one who is devoted to his father, the other stubborn and resentful, travel with their father who has been absent from the family for twelve years. The tensions along the road make demands on the father who disciplines his children. The older boy tries to please. The younger boy is very angry. The film explores the demands of trust, the difficulties in communication, forgiveness and grief. There are overtones of biblical commentary (the photo of the father contained in the Bible, the relationship between fathers and sons, the sacrifice of Isaac). There are also symbolic echoes of the journey of the dead on the River Styx.

Water is used as a symbol throughout the film, opening with an underwater scene which in fact is the end of the film, the boys in the town jumping into the water, there is a lot of rain, voyages on water, storms. Another dimension is height where the young boy is afraid to jump - while his father, trying to rescue him from a tower falls to his death.

The film is a multi-layered look at relationships, set firmly in a Russian context and mood, but with enough universal values to interest world viewers.

PAYCHECK (US, 2004, d. John Woo)

There are probably two potential audience groups for this futuristic thriller, approaching from opposite angles. The first are those who have the writer, Philip K. Dick, on a pedestal and admire some of the film versions made of his stories. The best known are Blade Runner and Minority Report. Imposter is much less well-known. They will be looking forward to what the film has to say about the future, how significant the developments of technology will be and how we will control them or they will control us, or be exploited by the greedy and the powerful (themes obvious in Minority Report). While Dick wrote the story, Paycheck, in 1953 and he died in 1982, his awareness of the manipulation of the human brain and the memory are quite up-to-date. The other group will be those attracted by the director, John Woo. They will have his Hong Kong action shows in mind and be recalling Face/Off and Mission Impossible 2; they will be anticipating stunts, chases and special effects.

What will they find? The answer is, 'both'. And this answer may satisfy neither. The first part of the film is intriguing science fantasy. What if memories could be erased (in order to help national security and the theft of ideas) and the subject of experimentation (or espionage) could be cleaned, ready to return to normal life or be used again. Ben Affleck brings his square jaw and determination to this kind of character. The moral issue is: what if he sees something unethical during his work and knows that this will be erased? How can he ensure that when he remembers nothing, he will be able to combat the evil. This is the science fantasy of induced amnesia and its dangerous consequences.

Once Affleck starts to probe what it is he wanted to destroy, the film takes on a more Woo-oriented actin mode. Once the chases start, the explosions follow and the utter mayhem takes over the film, the Dick aficionados will be feeling let down by an action exploitation of their interests. The Woo fans will be excited that at last the movie is getting going.

Aaron Eckhart and Colm Feore are deceitfully smiling villains. Uma Thurman has learnt an action move or two from Kill Bill and is a vigorous lead. Paul Giamatti gives another of his versatile supporting performances as the hero's friend.

My preference was for the Dick insights rather than the action which seemed too much, too silly at times, for the more interesting and serious themes.

29 PALMS (France, 2003, d. Bruno Dumont)

29 Palms is written and directed by Bruno Dumont, director of *The Life of Jesus* and of the Cannes Golden Palm-winning film *Humanity*. Dumont said that he went into the American desert, was fascinated by its landscapes and its meanings (as so many other Europeans have done, for instance, Antonioni with *Zabriskie Point*). He returned to France and wrote his screenplay in two weeks. He takes two characters, an American photographer and his Russian girlfriend. They journey into the desert via the ordinary towns, motels, supermarkets and go further into the deserts with the landscapes, the Joshua trees, the mountains. He wanted his film to be in some ways mystical and in some ways hallucinogenic.

One of the difficulties for many audiences is that he uses very long, very long takes. Many of the takes are about very mundane realities. Several minutes in a supermarket, people sitting on rocks in the desert, scenes of lovemaking.

His characters are not always clearly delineated. The American is a photographer looking for locations. We know very little about the Russian girlfriend. He speaks some French, she speaks very little English. They communicate, they make love, they clash. She is particularly moody. In the desert they encounter a group of men who violently assault them. The ending is an extraordinary explosion of blood and violence – and very difficult to understand the motivation. Had the man, who had been raped by these men, taken vengeance on them or even on himself rather than on his girlfriend, the ending would have been more comprehensible. Dumont said he started with a road film and ended with American horror.

ALILA (Israel, 2003, d. Amos Gittai)

Alila is a picture of an Israeli city, a particular neighbourhood. People live close to one another, going about their ordinary lives, sometimes honest, sometimes dishonest, furtive relationships, broken relationships. Gittai, with a minimalist style, focuses on a small group of characters in the neighbourhood. We get the sense of the neighbourhood, the buildings, the apartments. We also look at the characters in close-up. One of the major difficulties is that most of the characters are not particularly sympathetic. We are watching, observing, rather than identifying with the characters. They include a taxi driver separated from his wife who is in a relationship with another driver, who also seems to be some kind of pimp for the neighbourhood. Their son goes to military service, is assaulted, runs away, is wanted by the military police. Eventually, his father takes him back to the barracks although the father has learnt something more about the son's non-violent approach. Meanwhile, a young woman is in a relationship with an older man. They have passionate meetings. His wife discovers the affair and comes to visit. Meanwhile the young woman, emotionally moody, talks about the affair with her girlfriend. There are also Filipino servants, illegal Chinese workers on a building site.

The film requires a deal of patience, asks of its audience to observe and try to understand the characters and the mundane aspects of their existence as well as the drama of their lives.

BUON GIORNO, NOTTE (GOOD MORNING, NIGHT) (Italy, 2003, d. Marco Bellocchio)

Good morning Night is a quotation from a poem by Emily Dickinson, indicating the paradoxes of her life, her solitariness, her being a recluse. It is applied here to the fate of the Italian prime minister in 1978, Aldo Moro.

The Moro case was famous around the world. Moro was a fine-living man, a sound politician, interested in finding some kind of rapport between left and right in Italian politics. During the 70s, student groups from the 60s exercised their authority by terrorist activities. One of these groups was the Red Brigade. They abducted Moro in June 1978, keeping him for almost two months in an apartment in Rome. They finally killed him. Instead of the uprising that they had anticipated, people turned against them and Moro was seen as a martyr.

Marco Bellocchio comes from a long Italian tradition of great cinema and of directors from the Left. Making films from the 1960s, he has a great variety of films including, in 2002, *L'ora Della Religione*. It was an interesting look at the church at the beginning of the 21st century and the way that the church was used for their own purposes by aristocratic Roman classes.

Bellocchio has reconstructed the abduction of Moro and his imprisonment. However, he focuses principally on the four Red Brigade members who keep charge of Moro. While there is a great sense of realism, there is also an atmosphere of exploration of symbols and of imagination. The young woman of the group, who speaks against imagination, experiences a change of heart as the days go on and she experiences the reality of Moro's presence, his beliefs, his letters to his wife and to other people, including Paul VI. In her dreams she imagines herself saving him and his walking free. She is also influenced by a book of letters from partisans executed by the fascists (and these scenes are visualised from old Italian films).

The film is very well acted, the figure of Moro emerges as a very decent man, aware of his plight, partly bewildered, a man of great faith, able to explain to the Red Brigade how strict their ideology is, even compared with the history of the Catholic Church.

LA CASA DE LOS BABYS (US, 2003, d. John Sayles)

La Casa del los Babys is a very personal film from John Sayles, director of many striking films with a social concern (*Matewan*, *Eight Men Out*, *City of Hope* as well as personal films like *Limbo*, *Passion Fish*). In 1997 Sayles made a film in Mexico, *Men With Guns*, a focus on a doctor in Mexico who goes to visit his graduates and finds that almost all of them have been killed by the army or by rebels. Sayles has gone back to Mexico and filmed this story about American women wanting to adopt babies in an unnamed Latin American country. The film is partly in English, partly in Spanish.

The film focuses on babies, the question whether they would be better off staying in their own country (and we see a lot of the street kids of the city, stealing, open to prostitution) or to be adopted within their own country (and disappear from their mothers). Or would it be better for them to be adopted by wealthy American women, experience the love of family? What are the risks in each case?

The film shows a group of mothers, a cross-section of six women, coming from the United States and waiting for up to two months to receive a baby. There is a great deal of paperwork, the necessity of pay-offs to move things along. In the meantime, a government official lets his sister know what is happening – and she runs a hotel for these mothers, making money out of their delayed stay.

Rita Moreno plays the manager of the hotel. The other American women form the cross-section of the group, each having a strong personality, Sayles delineating their personalities, and providing edge with all of their characters, making us wonder about the references for their suitability as adoptive mothers. Marcia Gaye Hardin is striking as the dominating woman amongst the group, pretending to be more than she is, stealing petty items from the cleaning carts in the hotel. Daryl Hannah is a woman very much given to physical exercise. Mary Steenburgen is a born-again reformed alcoholic, the nicest of the characters along with Susan Lynch's Eileen, an Irish mother from Boston. Maggie Gyllenhaal is the young naïve, wealthy mother-to-be. Lily Taylor is a New York editor, very sarcastic, soured on relationships, critical of the other women.

The film also shows a range of characters from the country itself: the young woman who minds her children, comes from the mountainside into the wealthy city to work in the hotel, her friends, their

discussions about pregnancy and adoption forming a background to the discussions with the women. There is a young out-of-work man who acts as a tour guide, wants to win the lottery to get to Philadelphia – and who has learnt his English from watching films. There are the young children in the streets, the officials.

The film is certainly one of values, exploring the different cultures of northern and central America in the context of human life, motherhood and adoption.

COLD CREEK MANOR (US, 2003, d, Mike Figgis)

This thriller is an update of the old haunted house genre. A busy couple moves their family from New York and its paranoia to the New York countryside and its particular paranoia of strangers moving in. They buy an old house in need of refurbishing and set about it happily. All should go well. However, the couple have not seen enough movies like this one, so they do not realise that their contentment is to be shortlived. In fact, they could be short-lived.

Enter the owner of the house who had to sell it when it was reclaimed by the banks. He seems nice enough at first but we know that this is only surface charm. We really do not know the half of it - and the rest of the film is his making mischief, then damage and then homicidal attacks.

Dennis Quaid is effective as the father trying to defend his family. Although any actress could have taken the role, the mother is played by Sharon Stone, rather matronly and minus make-up. The deranged owner is played by Stephen Dorff who has done this kind of thing often enough (*Blade*, *feardotcom*). His bed-ridden father is played by an unrecognisable Christopher Plummer. Juliette Lewis is Dorff's girlfriend. The cast is good and play to the conventions of the terror genre.

However, the pace is perhaps too sunny and leisurely for mounting tension. Director Mike Figgis has been doing experimental films with video and split screens, so it is a surprise to find him making a conventional film (also writing the musical score). It is not exactly nothing startling. It's just that it could have been much more startling.

SYLVIA (UK, 2003, d, Christine Jeffs)

Over the decades, Sylvia Plath's reputation as a poet has continued to increase. Her posthumous book of poetry was edited and published by her estranged husband, Ted Hughes and her novel, *The Bell Jar*, became a bestseller and a film in the 1980s. This is her story.

Most audiences will know that Sylvia Plath killed herself with gas from her oven in February 1963. They will also know that her more celebrated poet husband, Ted Hughes, was blamed for her depression and death and kept silence about his relationship until a book of poems in 1998, shortly before he died of cancer. He had been Poet Laureate since 1984.

This film takes us back to Cambridge in the mid-1950s when American student, Sylvia, first met Ted, won over by his poetry and swept off his feet by his manner (after he had reviewed her poems unfavourably). It shows their courtship and marriage (despite the hesitations of Sylvia's mother) and their living in the US for three years while they both taught. Already Sylvia was affected emotionally by the women who flocked around Ted. On their return to England, they started a family but Sylvia's feeling she could not write creatively and Ted's infidelity led to her despair.

It is not so much a film where we want to know what is going to happen next. We know that. Rather, we are continually asking why it happened, trying to understand characters, the tension of personality clashes, situations of love and betrayal.

Director is New Zealander Christine Jeffs (Rain) who brings an un-Hollywood seriousness and plainness to her treatment of John Brownlow's screenplay. She re-creates the period effectively both in England and in the US so that we enter into the drama rather than merely observe it. Gwyneth Paltrow is intense as Sylvia and her interpretation of a difficult woman who makes life even more difficult remains in the memory. Daniel Craig's Ted Hughes is a rough and ready poet who exercises charm and gets entangled by it, loving Sylvia but wearied by her emotional demands and easily succumbing to relationships with other women.

The basic nature of the plot is commonplace but, when it is a look at public figures, it is intriguing and puzzling.

THE THREE MARIAS (Argentina, 2003, d.

Emotion runs high and is not reined in in Hispanic and Portuguese cultures. It is manifested in stories that are highly colourful, melodramatic and passionate. This is definitely the case in this brief Brazilian potboiling comment on society and on vengeance.

A longish contemplation of a man and a woman clashing on a cliff gives way to brutal action as three men are violently murdered. A matriarch (in fact, the woman on the cliff) calls her three daughters and charges them to arrange to take three lives in revenge, especially a corrupt business man (in fact, the man on the cliff). Each of the daughters goes to the man of their mother's choice and commissions the killings. There are killings but not in the way the mother planned and this has repercussions on the daughters. This plot outline does not do justice to the flamboyant and colourful style of the film which, at times, leaves its audience gasping with its stylised manners and its stylised violence.

A glimpse into a culture of an eye for an eye.

THE HUMAN STAIN (US, 2003, d. Robert Benton)

There are many interesting themes in this film but whether it dramatises them all effectively, sometimes yes, sometimes no.

Novelist Philip Roth is best known for such novels as *Goodbye Columbus* and *Portnoy's Complaint*, both filmed with a young Richard Benjamin in 1969 and 1973. *The Human Stain* was written in the late 90s, at the time of the scandal of President Clinton and Monica Lewinsky (to which there are many references and questions about truth, society and government). In fact, the basic theme of the film is truth.

Coleman Silk went to university in the early 1940s, a young man from a black family who not only passed for white but chose to separate himself from his family and pass for Jewish. Wentworth Miller is very good as the young Silk. The older Silk is played by Anthony Hopkins with a mixture of anger, resentment and wistfulness. The film intercuts between the 90s and the 40s.

Silk has become the victim of academic 'political correctness' applied rigidly, but he also becomes the victim of his emotions as he begins an affair with a strange young woman, a janitor at the university who has a history of family abuse. They begin to depend on each other, with fatal consequences. The woman is not an immediately recognisable Nicole Kidman (except for her height). Criticised as too glamorous for *Cold Mountain*, she is not criticised as not being credible as a janitor. However, she does give an interesting performance.

In the background is Ed Harris as Kidman's insane husband and Gary Sinise as the sympathetic novelist whom Hopkins befriends. It is he who tells the story. The story is one of hopes and disappointments, masks and lies, of a chance at a last love.

Christians may think of original sin as the human stain. Roth, whose background is Jewish, is quoted as agreeing with this. Everyone puts their mark on the world, each in their own way, adds a human stain.

SCARY MOVIE 3 (US, 2003, d. David Zucker)

The poster slogan sets the tongue-in-cheek comic tone: 'Great trilogies come in threes'. The first two films were not so great, send ups of the *Scream* movies and then *The House on Haunted Hill*. They were also full of bodily function jokes, some of which were extremely crass. This time round, there are bodily function jokes, but the crassness is more PG style. Perhaps it is the influence of director, David Zucker, who co-directed the *Airplane* parodies which were so funny years ago.

This time Scary Movie takes on half a dozen films and does some lengthier parodies, connecting the plots sometimes quite ingeniously. It begins with a detailed take on The Ring and while it continues it, the film becomes Signs where the younger brother steps into an Eight Mile spoof. There are stops at The Others, The Matrix and The Sixth Sense along the way. The pleasure is for movie buffs to note all the references and decide how clever and how funny are the connections.

Acting is not required in a film like this but Anna Farris who has been in all three is ideal sending up The Ring. Charlie Sheen does a take on Mel Gibson in Signs (with a guest spot from Sheen's wife, Denise Richards) and Queen Latifah turns up as The Oracle from we all know what.

Instantly forgettable, but a smile and some laughs while you are watching.

BU-SAN (GOODBYE, DRAGON INN) (Taiwan, 2003, d. Ming-Liang Tsai)

Ming-Liang Tsai is a director with a minimalist style. His trademark is long takes with no camera movement. If there is any movement, it is within the frame. Some of the takes are at least a minute long, sometimes more. This makes enormous demands on the audience? Audiences who like contemplation of what they see have acclaimed him as a master. Those who become impatient when a take is long, find him very difficult to watch. This film certainly employs that long, tripod-based take style.

The theme is interesting, Saturday night at a local cinema, people watching a historical Chinese epic. The earlier session has many people. The later session has very few. Some of them watch, some of them move around. One character says, in fact, the cinema is haunted. Perhaps some of the people are ghosts. The other focus is on a limping cleaning lady whose work at the cinema we see in minute detail. Finally, the cinema closes altogether, the weather is raining, people staying inside – and the characters and director wondering about the future of cinema in China, of people coming to the cinema. To that extent, it is a nostalgic look at the cinema past with seemingly hopeless anticipation of the future. The film is beautiful to look at, excellently photographed, intriguing in many ways in its theme and its portrait of the characters who wander around the cinema. On the other hand, it is very demanding for an action-oriented audience.

THE KITE (Lebanon, 2003, d.

The Kite is set on the Lebanese-Israeli border, a village which has been annexed by the Israelis and which is cut off from relatives in the neighbouring village. There are watchtowers, Druze soldiers guarding, barbed wire, mines. Families grow up on each side of this division, having to talk to each other by megaphones, shouting across the border.

The film focuses on a sixteen-year-old girl who has been promised in marriage to her cousin on the Israeli side of the border. She is still a girl at school, plays with kites, even risking going into the no-man's land where mines are set to recover a kite. She goes across the border but does not love her intended husband, not eating or drinking for twenty days, pining for home. Eventually, it is arranged that she return home. She is attracted by the young Druze guard on the tower who is continually criticised by authorities but continually uses his binoculars to watch the young girl.

The film has a fantasy ending where she goes into the neutral zone and is killed by a mine – only to appear to the young soldier. The film is very moving in its presentation of ordinary people divided by a war not of their own devising. It is a strong claim for peace.

A TALKING FILM (Portugal, 2003, d. Manole de Oliveira)

A Talking Film is one of the many directed by veteran Manoel de Oliveira. He was 93 when he made this film. However, it shows the perspective of a man much younger in vision, looking back over the culture of Europe, trying to understand something of Portuguese culture, yet very much in the aftermath of 11 September 2001 and terrorism.

The film is set in the summer of 2001. A professor of history at the Lisbon University (Leonore Selveira) takes her daughter on a cruise of the Mediterranean, eventually to go to Bombay to meet her airline pilot husband. The film gives the opportunity of having a journey and a quest, to see the places

of European culture in the Mediterranean and experience them. There are explanations of Portuguese discovery as the ship leaves Lisbon, a glimpse at French culture in Marseilles, a look at Italian culture, especially the destruction of Pompeii by Vesuvius, a visit to Greece and the Parthenon and the Acropolis, a visit to Turkey, Istanbul and Sancta Sofia, a visit to Egypt, looking at the Suez Canal, the pyramids and the sphinx, eventually a glimpse of Aden and then disaster strikes.

The film is a talking film but the talk is very interesting: the mother explaining history to her child, the child asking innocent questions, guides, an Orthodox priest, an actor all giving explanations of the culture. There is a transition then to conversation on board the ship with John Malkovich as the captain (at first unctuous flattering the three women) giving a strong performance and enabling Catherine Deneuve, Irene Papas and Stefania Sandrelli each to speak in their own language but each of them understanding the other so that they could talk about Europe, culture, the role of men and women, politics and civilisation and each reflect on language and their own heritages. The film is very strong in content – although there is no mention of Asia (where, in fact, the boat was going). There are side mentions of Africa and the Pacific with some condemnations of America.

The film is timely, a film of a 20th century film-maker at the beginning of the 21st century reflecting on the past and some of the seeming hopelessness for the future.

MONSIEUR IBRAHIM AND THE FLOWERS OF THE KORAN

(France, 2003, d. Francois Dupeyron)

Ibrahim and the Flowers of the Koran was co-adapted by the director and the novelist Emmanuel Schmidt from his own novel. The film is a memoir of a boy growing up in the mid-50s in Paris. He has an unfortunate family but finds a surrogate father in the Arab who owns the grocery store across the street.

Omar Sharif, who received a Lifetime Award at Venice Film Festival in 2003 with the screening of this film, shows what an extraordinary impact he has had on the screen from the time that he rode in on the camel in Lawrence of Arabia, became Dr Zhivago and appeared in so many films over a period spanning more than forty years. In this film he is full of life, charm as well as great dignity.

Ibrahim explains that he is from the Golden Crescent rather than from an Arab country, although this is how French people of the time saw him. He has a great love for the boy, eventually adopting him and taking him on a journey back to his own past. The film is very strong (even voicing it at some stages) that love, culture and faith are caught rather than taught. This Jewish boy, who knows very little about his own religion, is so influenced by the humanity of the Muslim that he makes his nickname Momo, not an abbreviation of Moses, which it is, but of Mohammed. Pierre Boullanger is excellent as the boy who is coming of age, is preoccupied with sex, eyes the prostitutes on the street in which he lives in Paris, yet learns from Ibrahim greater maturity in knowing himself, relationships, finding his identity and finding a future. It is a humane film which respects all peoples, all cultures, all religions. The director Francois Dupeyron made the very effective film about the war wounded in 1914-18, The Officers' Chamber.

PORNOGRAFIA (Poland, 2003, d,

This Polish film is based on a famous novel written by Witold Gombrowicz. The title is misleading when people expect a film called Pornography to be about sexual behaviour. Instead, this is a very meditative film, using the styles of eastern European directors, especially Tarkovski and Kieslowski. The film is very stylish in its photography, editing and pace?

The film focuses on Poland in 1943, the same time as Roman Polanski's The Pianist. However, this film is a world away from the Warsaw ghetto. Two middle-aged intellectuals go to the countryside and stay during 1943 on a country estate. The family on the estate is wealthy, have servants, plenty of food. The war seems a long way away. However, there is a local partisan chief to protect the people.

The pornography consists in the two men forming a plan to bring two young people together, even though that is not the intention of the young people. The lad works as a servant. The girl is the daughter of the house and engaged to a lawyer. The two men are quite sinister, especially Fryderyk who is mysterious, enigmatic, prone to abstraction. However, he emerges as particularly cruel as the

events go by. The violence of the war seems at a distance but orders come from Warsaw to kill the head of the partisans who is now overcome by fear. There is a bloodstained ending which is not expected.

The film gives an explanation of the mentality of Fryderyk, his having been married to a Jewish woman, abandoned her, and lost his daughter. He himself had letters from a concentration camp but at one stage uses a machine to get rid of them. While this is the explanation on paper, the actor portraying him is so sinister that it is hard to understand what is actually going on.

The film would have great impact in eastern Europe, with people familiar with the events and with the styles of film-making.

SECRET FILE (SEGRETI DI STATO) (Italy, 2003, d.

A construction of the investigations into a massacre in Sicily in 1947. On 1 May 1947 in Portella della Ginestra the crowd was fired on with eleven dead and twenty-seven (officially) wounded. The investigators laid the blame at the Sicilian bandit Salvatore Giuliano (the subject of a film during the 60s as well as Michael Cimino's *The Sicilian*).

The film takes place from 1951 to 1954 when there was serious investigation into the massacre. What emerges is a conspiracy, an anti-communist move by Sicilian politicians and noblemen, the government in Rome (with the alleged complicity of church people). There are also links made with the CIA and American influences. What also emerges is that there was a concerted plan, decoys, Giuliano ordered to fire above the people, other people (with the help of the Mafia) who were to fire into the crowd. It was geared for elections and also as a piece of anti-communist propaganda.

The film is meticulous in its presentation of the investigation, not so much action on-screen as reconstruction by drawing, by a model of the location, by discussion. The evidence is put before the audience.

The film comes from a more leftist perspective. It is very critical of the government of the time, of church members (including Pius XII and the later Paul VI) as well as the Americans, including President Truman. There is a scene where photo cards linking all these people are presented on a table – but then the wind blows a window open and they are scattered. The difficulty with this kind of conspiracy theory is that it goes too far and implicates people in authority who have very little connection, no direct connection with the events that happened. When it is on safer ground, looking at the Italian situation, the film is of great interest for Italians – and a model for how a film might be made for any nation trying to investigate secret files, cover-ups, conspiracies.

CHEAPER BY THE DOZEN US, 2003, d, Shawn Levy)

Way back when, in 1950, there was an entertaining comedy about a time and efficiency expert and his author wife and their twelve children. It was called *Cheaper by the Dozen*. Clifton Webb was the somewhat stern father, Myrna Loy the mother and, while the children did get up to some mischief, it seemed quiet enough by today's standards. This remake says that it is based on the original novel but it is very much a product of today's standards - or lack of them.

Steve Martin is a football coach who is offered a job at his alma mater. Bonnie Hunt is publishing her book. The children, some of the most obnoxious to hit the screen for some time, are a whingeing lot, thinking only of themselves and with more than a mean streak in dealing with those they don't like (including at times their parents). They do not want to move and have not a skerrick of feeling for their parents' hopes. How such parents could have let this lot of children develop into a rampaging horde is the film's greatest mystery.

Non-Americans may well be aghast at the presumptions of American children that they can assert themselves, do what they like and ride roughshod over those they don't agree with.

Well, it was only a holiday movie for the family. But...

THE HAUNTED MANSION (US, 2003, d. Rob Minkoff)

This is a movie equivalent of going through the Haunted Mansion ride at Disneyworld. It has recreated the mansion with extraordinary attention to detail so that we share the scares that the Evers family experience as they get caught up in the goings on.

Eddie Murphy and Marsha Thomason are real estate agents with a flair for their job. They get an offer they should have refused and find themselves and their two children in a decaying mansion inhabited by ghosts. Chief ghost is a very British butler played with tongue rolling relish by Terence Stamp. It is his plot to substitute Mrs Evers for the bride of the master of the house both of whom, disappointed in love, killed themselves. Also in the house are some helpful servants and the head of a woman in a crystal bowl who has all sorts of advice like going into the mausoleum and opening a coffin to find a mysterious key.

The film is brief so most of it is taken up with scary happenings in the house, rather like a ghost train ride on a multi-million dollar scale. A mixture of laughs and scares with Eddie Murphy becoming a Disneyesque screen father.

THE STATEMENT (UK/Canada, 2003, d. Norman Jewison)

The Statement is based on a 1990s novel by Irish born Catholic author who became a Canadian citizen and an agnostic. His novels are compared with those of Graham Greene and are filled with Catholic issues.

This novel is based on actual stories of collaborators with the Nazis in the Vichy regime who executed Jews or sent thousands of them to the concentration camps. After the war, some of these men found their place in the French government, many were sheltered by the Catholic Church, especially in monasteries and by elitist groups who, especially after the Second Vatican Council, disapproved of changes and moved to extreme traditionalist positions or followed Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre into schism.

The film opens with a sequence where a young Pierre Broussard is instrumental in the killing of seven Jews. Filmed in black and white (and recurring in the memories and dreams of the older Broussard), the young actor is dubbed by Michael Caine who portrays Broussard in the 1990s, hiding his identity, finding support in several religious houses, especially by abbots and clergy who were members of a group called the Chevaliers de Marie. The basic outline of the plot (screenplay by Ronald Harwood many of whose films focus on Nazi issues like *Taking Sides* and his Oscar-winning, *The Pianist*) is a detective thriller as a Paris judge and an army officer are assigned to find Broussard and he continually moves hiding place. Tilda Swinton is strong as the wilful judge (Catholic mother, Jewish father, now agnostic) as is Jeremy Northam as the soldier. While Broussard had received a pardon from the president, he is now sought by the authorities according to the recent law on crimes against humanity.

Michael Caine is an interesting and effective choice for Broussard, sometimes genial, sometimes cold-blooded, sometimes cringing in his dependence on confession and devotions and his image of himself as a loyal Catholic. From this vantage point, it is alarming to look at the role of many churchmen, especially from contemplative religious orders who took the side of the Nazis to combat Communism during the war and ignored the fate of the Jews.

There is a memorable supporting cast which includes Alan Bates as a French official, John Neville as the evil behind the scenes with his ruthless assistant Ciaran Hinds, Charlotte Rampling as Broussard's wife and Malcolm Sinclair as the Cardinal of Lyons who is trying to be more open about what has taken place in his diocese and in Provence.

Fine performances, interesting issues and an examination of conscience by the Church for the sins of commission and omission by some of its leaders.

IT'S ALL ABOUT LOVE (Denmark, 2003, d. Thomas Vinterberg)

Thomas Vinterberg directed one of the most effective films under the 'Dogme 95' banner, *Festen*. It probed under the surface of Danish family respectability. It is not quite clear what he is doing with *It's all about Love*.

The film looks very good (no Dogme minimalism here). The setting is the 2020s in a world where temperatures have become colder rather than global warming, a world where people are self-preoccupied and don't notice the dead bodies lying around the city streets, that kind of world.

The focus is on a young Polish man, Joaquin Phoenix, who visits an American city to sign divorce papers. His wife, Claire Danes, is a champion figure skater. She wants to retire. It seems a company are making clones of her to continue her career. This does not work out, the couple flee and end up in the snow and... who knows? (and one is tempted to ask: who cares?)

To give the plot some solemnity (not that it needs it), Sean Penn appears as a man afraid of flight who has overcome his fears, telephones his brother and keeps flying because there is too much ice and snow on tarmacs to land.

I'm afraid I thought it all a bit silly.

SON FRERE (France, 2002, d. Patrice Chereau)

This is a grim film indeed but one which brings home the reality of illness, bodily weakness and collapse and death. Patrice Chereau has made some grim films in the past, *The Wounded Man* dealing with sexual weakness, *Queen Margot* dealing with the corruption of the Medici court in 16th century France and the massacres of St Bartholomew's Day.

Son Frere is much smaller in scale. Thomas, the older brother (Bruno Todeschini), arrives to seek the help of his brother, Luc (Eric Caravaca). Luc, a teacher, has his own life to live but takes him in and cares for him, the menial and dirty tasks and the sharing of memories. The brothers become more interdependent through the experience. We see the effect also on the brothers' parents and Thomas' girlfriend as well as Luc's partner. This raises the complexity of relationships, straight and gay, and the demands made on family through illness.

The setting is the seaside and the film uses images of water throughout to symbolise cleanliness and healing, the vast majesty of the sea transcending ordinary experience and, finally, water and the sea as a place to drown and die. A strong film with challenging compassion.

PEOPLE I KNOW

Not a US box-office success, this film came and went from theatres very rapidly. A pity. It is a portrait of a truly burnt-out case, a public relations man who has lost the zest for life and who spends his hours covering up scandals for celebrities, pushing plays that he has no interest in and, indeed, loathes, trying to rally guests to go to functions and persuade personalities to attend and speak. He has reduced himself to a workaholic, pill-popping rat in a New York rat-race. He is played by Al Pacino which means that it is worth a look. Pacino (with a fluctuating Georgia accent) communicates the desperation of the man who leaps at a chance to get out and who is just too late.

There is an impressive supporting cast. Ryan O'Neal plays a Hollywood star who has seen better days but who is still a drawcard despite his less than edifying private life - and his late-in-life conviction that he should stand for politics. Tea Leoni plays against type as a starlet who had talent but has become the equivalent of a callgirl. Kim Basinger has some scenes as Pacino's sister-in-law who is not deceived by the glitter and who persuades Pacino to think twice. *The West Wing's* Richard Schiff is a tycoon pulling political strings and Bill Nunn an ambitious black preacher who can't resist seeking media exposure.

This is not a nice film. It is not about nice people. It is literally a 'de profundis' film, a film where its central character is lost and cries out from the depths.

ALONG CAME POLLY

A Saturday night out romantic comedy - with some ironic touches and eccentric characters.

Director John Hamburg wrote screenplays for *Meet the Parents* and *Zoolander* so we know that the comedy will have its black moments and its physical moments and, with Ben Stiller as its star, he will have to undergo some ugly moments with nausea and humiliation. And it is extraordinary how after these films (and *There's Something About Mary*) how he keeps his balance and keeps coming back for more, though he had time off to be an action hero in *Mystery Men* and as Starsky in *Starsky and Hutch*.

Stiller plays a cautious risk assessor for an insurance company, run with bombastic authority by Alec Baldwin. He marries estate agent, Debra Messing, and, for a moment or a day, his happy ever after life seems to be on track. He is quickly derailed. He meets free spirited Polly (Jennifer Aniston), whom he knew at school, and she begins to change his life. In the meantime he has to do an assessment on an Australian millionaire businessman, Bryan Brown who is into death-defying jumps, killer racquet ball and storm challenging sailing (parodying the stunts and activities of Richard Branson).

The film co-stars the ever-changing and brilliant Philip Seymour Hoffman. Hoffman will soon be losing roles because he is able to steal every film he is in. His performance as a former child star with crass behaviour and huge ego (he is playing Judas in an amateur production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* and wants to sing the part of Jesus as well) is well worth seeing, culminating in his impersonating an insurance executive.

Amusing in a slight way while it is on the screen, it is simply intended as an entertaining night out.

HOUSE OF SAND AND FOG (US, 2003, d. Vadim Perelman)

Ben Kingsley received an Oscar and Golden Globe nomination as Best Actor for his turn as an exiled Iranian colonel, earning his living by manual labour in San Francisco in the early 1980s and who hits on a scheme to make money for his family so that they can build a house like the one on the shores of the Caspian Sea which lingers still in their memories. He buys, very cheaply, a house which is auctioned by the county, reclaimed after its previous owner (Jennifer Connolly) defaulted on a tax payment. However, she is the victim of a bureaucratic error and should not have lost the house.

This is a story where so many wrongs (some of them office errors, some of them unintentional, some of them malicious) have absolutely no chance of making any rights.

It is further complicated by the kindness of the colonel's wife (Iranian actress, Shohreh Aghdashloo) and by the marital status of the young officer (Ron Eldard) sent to evict the owner, not only falling in love with her but using (abusing) his police authority to put pressure on the colonel. As the misunderstandings increase, the build up to tragedy increases.

The film is interesting but not always gripping. In one sense, it seems too small a matter for such drama, especially as it could be resolved reasonably. But the major characters do not act reasonably and it all builds tension which is melodramatic. One reviewer remarked that it might have worked better as an opera. That is probably right.

There are a number of interesting issues underlying the dispute about the house: the role of bureaucracy, the law and errors, personal insecurities of addictions or marriage breakdown so colouring perspectives that they become unwittingly destructive, the bigotry against migrants for middle eastern countries.

The director, Vadim Perelman is of Ukrainian origin, and brings a heavy, emotional sensibility to his first feature.

INFERNAL AFFAIRS (Hong Kong, 2003, d.

A huge success in its native Hong Kong, *Infernal Affairs* has so impressed audiences around the world that the Hollywood version went immediately into pre-production. It also led to two sequels.

Over the years, the Hong Kong film industry has shown great flair in making police thrillers. They have usually involved sinister dealings with the triads and drug smuggling, police going undercover, gang warfare on the streets, unmaskings and violent confrontations. Quentin Tarantino acknowledges

his debt to films like *City on Fire* for his take on *Reservoir Dogs*. *Infernal Affairs* will bolster Hong Kong's reputation for developing this genre.

It is very stylishly photographed creating an impressive difference between the shadowy world of the gangs and the bright, crisp world of the police precincts. It is a much less violent film than its predecessors, concentrating, often in powerful close-ups, on its character portraits. The structure is interestingly symmetrical creating its own contrasting parallels leading to a sense of audience anticipation as to how the plot can resolve itself.

Two young men are asked by their bosses to infiltrate organisations. One is a police cadet who is publicly dismissed but who goes undercover for ten years. He is weary of such a life and wants to get out. The other is a triad member who infiltrates the police force, is continually in contact with his boss and is commissioned to find out who the mole is amongst the gang members. Cat and mouse is the phrase usually trotted out to describe the interactions - and it is as good as any other to describe the action and the tension leading to what was, for me, a surprising ending.

Andy Lau as the mole in the police force is suavely believable, but it is Tony Leung who has the better part and performance as the earnest but weary cop trapped in the hell of ten years of undercover life.

THE MISSING (US, 2003, d, Ron Howard)

Over the decades Ron Howard has shown himself to be a director eclectic tastes in genres but a director who knows how to make well-crafted films and entertainments. His films range from *Parenthood* to *Apollo 13* to *EdTV* to *The Grinch* and his Oscar-winning *A Beautiful Mind*. Now he has made a western. Most reviewers will compare it to John Ford's *The Searchers* and complain that it is a less effective remake or complain that it does not treat the themes of Indians and whites in the way that Ford did. This comparison is of academic interest, perhaps, but it does not do justice to *The Missing*.

It needs to be said at the beginning that this is often an extraordinarily beautiful film to look at, the landscapes of New Mexico, snowy ranges, bright deserts, majestic canyons and mesa tops. We are conscious of these landscapes as the context for what goes on, the West in 1885. Howard has also drawn excellent performances from his cast. Tommy Lee Jones has become something of a visual icon over the years, a craggy and worn face, an embodiment of hard years of experience. This suits him perfectly as Jones, an artist from New York who abandoned his family and went to live with the Indians, adopted their way of life and religious beliefs and rituals and who eventually returns to be reconciled with his daughter.

Cate Blanchett proves once again that she can enter any role and make it completely her own. She has an enormous versatility. This time she is a strong woman of the west, a survivor, a practitioner of medicine, bringing up two daughters in near-isolation. When one of her daughters is abducted by a group of renegade military led by a mysterious Indian with a reputation of being a witch, she sets off with her younger daughter in pursuit, finally accepting the help of her estranged father.

This means that the film works on several levels: a western chase and rescue mission, an exploration of relationships and prejudices between whites and Indians, a story of family alienation and reconciliation. It works well at all these levels.

VALENTIN (Argentina, 2003, d. Alejandro Agresti)

Alejandro Agresti is one of Argentina's foremost filmmakers. This brief film is a piece of autobiography. Agresti has reminisced about one year of his life (1969) and shown us Buenos Aires in those days, well before the Generals and the dictatorship. A young priest gives a sermon on the death of Che Guevara and challenges his congregation in a liberation theology way and the wealthy walk out.

The character who stands in for him is called Valentin, a cross-eyed eight year old boy, whose mother has abandoned him, whose father is too busy with work and finding a new partner to attend to him, who lives with his widowed grandmother who has reached the age of aches and complaining.

Valentin wants to be an astronaut but Neil Armstrong beats him to the moon.

Valentin is very observant and gives us quite a literate and perceptive voiceover commentary on what is going on in his life, in his care for his grandmother, especially cajoling a doctor into paying a house call, in his puzzle about his absent mother (because his grandmother and father toss off the line that she was Jewish). Two people whom he does befriend are one of his father's girlfriends, a beautiful and friendly young woman called Leticia, and his neighbour Rufo, who teaches him the piano and with whom he can talk about all the issues of the world.

Agresti lived the details of Valentin's life. He also plays the father in a scene of brutal anger that Agresti said was most difficult to play because of memories that it brought back. Most audiences will like Valentin's story and not simply because he seems a 'cute' child but because of its emotion and truth.

MAN DANCIN' (UK, 2003, d, Norman Stone)

What begins like a British gangster film of the late 1990s, early 2000s moves into a piece of Christian film-making, an effort to spread the Gospel message by means of popular entertainment, an effort in entertainment-proseletysing in a good way. The film has the courage of its convictions.

The original story came from the director, Norman Stone, and was written for the screen by Sergio Casci who wrote the screenplay for another offbeat Scottish gangster comedy-drama, *American Cousins*. What Stone and Casci have attempted is what might be called a variation on Denys Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal*, a kind of *Jesus of Glasgow*.

Eastenders' star, Alex Fearn, does a good job as Jimmy Kerrigan, released from a Northern Ireland jail after nine years for gun-running. He is older and wiser and has a mind to move away from the criminal gang of his youth. We get an inkling of his heroism to come when he offers to take a beating from some young thugs instead of his addicted brother. He shows how to turn the other cheek.

He does not remain long free from his past. He is called by The Chief (James Cosmo) who runs protection, prostitution and other rackets in the city as well as by the corrupt police officer (Kenneth Cranham) who works in cahoots with The Chief. He stands his ground, tries to get his brother away from the drugs, visits his ailing mother in hospital, befriends Maria, a prostitute who wants to get out of the game and assorted other criminals, club managers and dealers.

But he also gets caught up in the activities of the parish priest, Fr Flynn, to save his parole and having to go to anger management sessions. The parish is putting on a passion play and soon Jimmy is running it, re-writing it and Maria and her friends, his brother and an old blind singer (Tam White who wrote the songs for the film) are all involved. It is clear that there are analogies with the passion of Jesus. Jimmy is brutalised. His brother betrays him... and the audience is left to get the Gospel message, especially as the troupe take to the streets for performances after The Chief has the parish hall burned down. Norman Stone has been able to mix streetwise conventions and a tough world with Gospel basics.

Norman Stone has been responsible for quality Christian television and movies for twenty years. Years before Anthony Hopkins' screen portrayal of C.S. Lewis, Norman Stone had made a film of the life of the great writer and theologian, *Shadowlands*. Over the years, he has produced many documentaries for the BBC. For the Millennium, he produced a series for Holy Week called, evocatively, *Tales from the Madhouse*. Eight fourteen minute films offered monologues by men and women who were confined to an institution after their experience of Jesus. They included the Widow of Naim, Barabbas, Pilate's Wife, the Rich Young Man and Judas. They starred some of the best of British stars, Claire Bloom, Eileen Atkins, Jonathan Pryce, Joss Ackland and *Blackadder's* Tony Robinson as Judas.

It is risky ground, making a tough gangster film with a Christian message. It is not the kind of film the 'converted' usually go to see. If *Man Dancin'* can bring some Gospel meaning and credibility to the multiplex audience, it will have achieved its aim.

SOMETHINGS GOTTA GIVE (US, 2003, d, Nancy Myers)

Magazine articles and newspaper pieces frequently quote actresses who say that there are no good roles for women over forty. They are often relegated to mother roles or cameos in horror films. Diane

Keaton has played her mother roles (the Father of the Bride series) but she also moved into directing. In *Some Things Gotta Give*, she plays her own age (born 1949) and the screenplay tackles the issues of the divorced wife who has carved out a successful career, prefers a kind of hermit's existence, worries about her daughter. At least that's what she says she prefers. Accidentally, into her life comes her daughter's latest 'boyfriend', a 63 year old tycoon with a heart condition, played as only he can play it with cheekiness and charm and the suggestions of more depth, by Jack Nicholson.

Hollywood and critics were so impressed by an actress of Keaton's stature playing and looking her age that she won a Golden Globe and received an Oscar nomination. And, despite a faultless comic performance by Nicholson and some scene-stealing by Frances McDormand as Keaton's sister, the film is Diane Keaton's. She has to run the gamut of a great deal of emotion dealing with her daughter (Amanda Peet), her former husband and his remarrying (Paul Michael Glaser) and the attention and love of the younger doctor who treats Nicholson for his heart condition (Keanu Reeves). Some scenes where Keaton and Nicholson walk along the beach bring the best out of the performers who bring life to writer-director, Nancy Myers' dialogue about age and emotions.

For most audiences, the context of this reflection on age and the capacity for love is unreal. The characters inhabit an affluent world of beach houses, ocean fronts, careers and wealth and time to worry only about their own problems. This puts the film into the realm of fairy story for those who have gone to the multiplexes to see it. It is sometimes hard to be sorry for those who have enough creature comforts to comfort entire populations. That said, *Some Things Gotta Give* is entertaining, especially in its classic performances, and in its Hollywood Studio acknowledgement that life and love do not end at forty and, even, that there is life after fifty - and sixty.

WONDERLAND (US, 2003, d. James Cox)

There is fame and there is notoriety. John Holmes worked as a nursing assistant, married his nurse wife, was all set to live an ordinary life. However, he was 'discovered' by the Los Angeles X-rated film industry and

became a star of the 1970s, making over a thousand films. He was a porn legend. Then what happened?

That is what *Wonderland* is about. Holmes may have lived in a permissive Alice in Wonderland kind of world. It may have seemed to him, with its drugs, sex and freedom and lack of responsibility, a wonderland. However, the film's title takes itself from one of the LA drives, Wonderland Ave.

What happened there was that four people were massacred (reminding Los Angeles of the Sharon Tate, Manson group killings of thirteen years earlier). John Holmes was linked to the victims and speculation was that he participated in the killings.

The screenplay, filmed in bleached tones, with symbolic colours assigned to different versions of the events, with MTV pace, camera styles and editing, takes us into its sordid world via the different stories of Holmes and of addict, David Lind, who was away from Wonderland at the time of the murders. Each is the hero of his own story, always blaming the other. They are interviewed by the police and these stories are told in flashbacks, although we move from one person's memory into another's (especially the memories of Holmes girlfriend and of his wife).

Val Kilmer swaggers through his role as Holmes, caught up in the excess and the notoriety, always blaming others but seeing himself as a nice person. Dylan McDermot is Lind, the kind of person who would be condemned as a sleazebag (along with Josh Lucas, Tim Blake Nelson, Christina Applegate and Janeane Garofalo as the associates in Wonderland). Eric Bogosian is a self-made club-manager and self-indulgent gangster. There are strong performances from Kate Bosworth as the girl that Holmes seems to love and

Lisa Kudrow as his wife who gives some kind of moral compass to these sordid lives.

Many will find the characters and their behaviour distasteful. However, the film is interesting in dramatising them from different points of view so that we can make our own emotional and moral assessments.

VAN HELSING (US, 2004, d. Stephen Sommers)

Screenwriter and director, Stephen Sommers, has proven with the success of *The Mummy* as well as *The Mummy Returns* that he can spin a good yarn, create the atmosphere of ye olde days, keep the action in constant overwhelming pitch, incorporate extraordinary special effects and communicate his enjoyment to his audience while not taking it all too seriously. He has outdone *The Mummy* movies with this one. It is almost non-stop action-adventure, with more extraordinary effects - treating it seriously

but humorously at the same time. For fans of the horror genre it is a must see. Sommers has taken the *Dracula* story and introduced some fresh angles, especially since the Count has been in league with *Dr. Frankenstein* and wants his life-creating process as well as his monster to give new life to his vast collection of vampire pods so that the vampires can claim the world. This provides an entertaining look again at *Frankenstein* (Sam West) with recreations of laboratory scenes from the *Karloff* version of *Frankenstein* along with the villagers storming the windmill to destroy the monster. And as if that was not enough, the scene shifts to Paris with *Mr. Hyde* (Robbie Coltrane), like a giant Hulk, hiding where the *Hunchback* used to live in *Notre Dame*. He is confronted by the monster hunter, *Van Helsing*, - and smashes through the rose window!

That is just the beginning. The Vatican society for confronting evil has been sending *Van Helsing* on missions and he is now to go to Transylvania to destroy *Dracula*. In a spoof of *Q* in the *James Bond* movies, *Van Helsing* is supplied with the newest 1888 inventions by the timid friar, *Carl*. Off they go to do battle with *Dracula*, the brides of *Dracula*, *Igor* (who has defected to *Dracula*), but with the help of the gentle *Frankenstein* monster. *Werewolves* too. It all works.

There are spectacular castles, harpy like vampires attacking a village, coach chases, a sumptuous Halloween masked ball along with plenty of acrobatics and fights.

Hugh Jackman, after the *X Men* films, is a very agreeable and able *Van Helsing*. *Kate Beckinsale* (who got used to this kind of activity in *Underworld*) is the last of a family dedicated to destroying the vampires.

David Wenham is an amusing kind of *Sancho Panza* as *Carl*. *Richard Roxburgh* combines *Bela Lugosi* with *Christopher Lee* (and his *Count* in *Moulin Rouge*) to present a striking *Dracula*.

Purists might wring their hands but it is an audience-pleaser.

THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT (US, 2004, d. J. Mackeye Gruber and Eric Bress)

That's the effect that when a butterfly flutters its wings half way around the world and causes mayhem in the other half.

This is a film about parallel worlds, about four of them, which gives us the opportunity to see how characters might have been quite different, have acted quite differently, in those other worlds. The problem, of course, is which is the principal world or are they all equal?

The film opens in a laboratory with a desperate *Ashton Kutcher* leaving a message indicating what has happened to him. Then, back we go to one of those worlds. *Evan Treborn* (is that a clue: three born?) (*Kutcher*) is a boy with memory lapses that cannot be explained. His doctor suggests he write a journal of his experiences. Later, when those pages flutter, they cause a butterfly effect. *Evan's* life is partly happy with his mother and friends, especially *Kayleigh*. But, her father (*Eric Stoltz*) seems to be a molester and her brother, *Tommy*, a mean-minded monster of a boy, especially towards their friend, *Lenny*, whom they later dare to put dynamite in a letterbox, killing a mother and baby.

When *Evan* is in college and starts re-reading his journal, he is transported into other worlds while aware of the worlds he has come from. At times, *Kayleigh* is resentful of *Evan's* disappearance to college; in others she is a prostitute; in others she is the model student. *Tommy* is evil in one world, in another born again. *Lenny* is in a catatonic state or *Kayleigh's* boyfriend.

So, if you like these plot complications and like to speculate on moral choices and possibilities while watching this kind of melodrama, you will be fascinated.

GAZ BAR BLUES (Canada, 2003, d. Louis Belanger)

The first local film to win the main awards at the 2003 Montreal Film Festival and winner also of the Ecumenical Award.

I am not sure what the French would say about the title of the film. Their purist attitude towards Quebecois French has the touch of the censorious. So, a Gaz Bar is a place where you would fill up with gas in the US, a Service Station for petrol in other parts of the world.

It is 1989 in Montreal. Times are changing and Gaz Bars with garage work are slowly dying, lost to Self-Service stations and streamlined repair and service auto centres. It is also the time that the Berlin Wall is coming down - and the eldest son of the owner of the gaz bar goes off to photograph this historic event but finds himself in sympathy with the East Germans, bewildered by what is happening and the changes they will have to face up to.

This is a moving and humane film, chronicling the end of an era in Montreal but highlighting the changes that globalisation have forced on small business people, highlighting how, to survive, everyone has to go with the flow. The father of the household is kind, gives credit to customers, allows the locals to sit round, drink coffee and yarn. He is stricter on his sons: the angry Rejean who tries to do the right thing and then disgraces himself in Berlin, Guy the middle son who takes his responsibilities too lightly and prefers to play his harmonica in a group and Alain, the youngest, who looks up to his brothers, tries to emulate them, but is still in school.

It is a film which gradually draws its audience into the life of its characters, has a fine emotional impact and invites us to reflect on the crises of day-to-day life.

BASQUE BALL (Spain, 2003, d. Julio Medem)

Julio Medem comes from the Basque country but has established himself as a major Spanish director (Lovers of the Arctic Circle, Sex and Lucia). Disturbed at attitudes towards the Basques, towards the activity of ETA and by the stances of the conservative government which lost power immediately after the March 2004 bombings in Madrid, he decided to interview as many people as possible, from the widest range of opinions as possible and collate them into a documentary which would enable audiences to hear all sides of the question. Some ETA representatives declined as did some government spokespersons (in fact, the government denounced the film, sight unseen, and wanted it banned). Despite the limitations, Medem has constructed a documentary that provides plenty of material for thought - and an attempt to listen and talk rather than denounce and resort to violence.

The result is a film that runs almost two hours. Available also are three 90 minute episodes for television, a five hour DVD version (incorporating interviews that could not be used in the film or for TV) and a website.

For those not familiar with the detail of Spanish history and politics, there is a great deal of information as well as some time for reflection. Medem believes listening leading to reflection is the best catalyst for reconciliation.

CATCH THAT KID (US, 2004, d. Bart Freundlich)

I don't want to seem puritanical, but... The IMDb website indicates that the tagline for the film is "They're on a mission without permission" and that the plot summary says that it is an Ocean's 11 or Mission Impossible for kids.

When Dad, who runs a go-kart derby ground, has an accident that will mean he will not be able to mountain climb anymore, his tomboy daughter and friends decide to rob the bank where her mother is the security adviser. So we watch the unlikely gang outwit everyone to get away with \$250,000. But it's a good cause, so it's OK!! Well, not quite, there is a moral tacked on at the end but it looks like a manifestation of the 'greed is good' philosophy rather ruthlessly applied by the children. Kristen Stewart (Jodie Foster's daughter in Panic Room) is the ringleader, Jennifer Beals her mother.

The US MPAAA rates it PG but is concerned about 'language' and 'rude humour'. It also mentions 'thematic elements' but does not elaborate.

I know it's supposed to be good fun, but...

EVELYN (Ireland, 2003, d. Bruce Beresford)

Evelyn is a very personal project for Pierce Brosnan, reminding him of his own childhood before he moved to England. But it is not just a project about the past, it is testimony, based on a true story, of how a determined individual can change the law. The end of the film tells us that it was only in the 1970s that legislation about rights of parents and the Irish Constitution concerning children in care was modified to help the parents. It also marked a breaking of the strong ties between Church and state seen in such films as *The Magdalene Sisters* and *Song for a Raggy Boy*.

Brosnan plays a happy go lucky Dublin painter and decorator whose wife walks on the family. His boys go to board with Brothers and his daughter, Evelyn, with the sisters (some of whom - but not all - are as severe as we might have anticipated).

The action of the film moves from a father's love for his daughter and trying to get her back and his dealing with the law. The legal aspects of the film are handled by the strong cast of Aidan Quinn, Stephen Rea and Alan Bates.

The director is Australian, Bruce Beresford, a director who has tackled a wide range of films over thirty years. His style is rather self-effacing so that the film sometimes comes across as bland with high sentiment at the end. But, these issues of children, the law and care which are not easy to handle with an objective stiff upper lip.

This is a film which presents serious issues with a style geared towards a popular audience.

THE COOLER (US, 2003, d. Wayne Kramer)

The Cooler is one of those small films that are described as 'sleepers'. The distributors don't have such great faith in their box-office potential - and then the public finds that they like the film and it then receives wider release. The Cooler eventually gained an Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actor for Alec Baldwin.

Actually, the one who deserves Oscar nominations is William H. Macy, whose versatile talents have enhanced a great number of films, most memorably, *Fargo*, as well as his turn as the radio commentator in *Seabiscuit*.

Here, he is cast as a cooler, someone employed by a casino to put off gamblers at the tables who might be on winning streaks. He is supposed to be a loser who can influence others to be losers. This part suits Macy's screen persona very well. He can do lugubrious very easily. The trouble is that in his life in Las Vegas, he is also a loser. When one of the employees, Maria Bello, comes on to him, he is transformed and his life and his work are in crisis. The Cooler offers a detailed look at the complex life of a simple man.

It also offers a detailed look at life behind the Las Vegas glitter, the world of Shelley (Alec Baldwin) who is completely absorbed in running his casino and who will take no opposition to what he wants, a violent and wilful man. Baldwin has proven in recent years that he can do excellent cameo roles and create striking characters (like his boss in *Along Came Polly*).

The glitzy world of gambling is a bizarre world that so many people allow themselves to get lost in.

SHAUN OF THE DEAD (UK, 2004, d. Edgar Wright)

What's worse than having to face up to comedians' doing parodies of horror genres suspecting that the jokes will be lame or forced and that the satire will be inane or flat, or both? Plenty of things, of course. However, one approaches a parody of *Dawn of the Dead* (recently re-made itself) with caution.

Gradually, the caution disappears. This parody is not badly written. In fact, some of it is quite funny. Some of it is quite clever. Really, it is witty in some of its parody of horror movie conventions and behaviour. Yes, it is much better than anticipated. It is quite enjoyable.

Star, Simon Pegg, and director, Edgar Wright, have collaborated on the British TV comedy series, *Spaced*, in which they played with this living dead theme, how two dim-wits don't notice what is going on around them and, when they do, make something of a mess of trying to escape. Filmed in London suburbs, it does give the impression that if everybody in the street and beyond had turned into the living dead, it all might look something like this as the survivors attempted to drive, cross streets, take refuge in the local pub... An agreeable surprise even for those who think that zombie films are sacred and not to be joked about.

PAS SUR LA BOUCHE (France, 2003. d. Alain Resnais)

Alain Resnais is always remembered for his powerful documentary, *Night and Fog*, almost 50 years old now, as well as his contributions to *Hiroshima*, *Mon Amour* and *Last Year at Marienbad*. He has, in recent decades, had a soft spot for music and song and now he has brought to the screen a forgotten 1925 operetta, *Pas Sur La Bouche* (Not on the mouth) by Andre Bard and Maurice Yvain.

Does it work? You would need a French reviewer to give the answer to that question. The French public received it well in cinemas. It is highly stylised, has a cast of actors (including Sabine Azema, Lambert Wilson, Audrey Tautou), who do their own singing, and uses the devices of French farce with marital mix-ups, ill-timed rendezvous and a landlady who is played by a man.

Sometimes the English channel is like a gulf when it comes to differences in taste. This one is probably (more than probably) not an Anglophone taste.

CHASING LIBERTY (US, 2004, d. Andy Cadiff)

In the US Mandy Moore is a popular singer. She has been branching out into acting in recent years and has been presenting a wholesome image in such films as the clean-cut *A Walk to Remember*. Her agent must have suggested that she try to be a little more bold. So, here is *Chasing Liberty*.

The screenwriters seem to have had more than half an eye on Chelsea Clinton's history, especially her studying in Oxford and experiencing her own freedom. Here, the president's daughter (Moore) spends most of the film avoiding the secret service (in the form of Annabella Sciorra and Jeremy Piven) and getting a taste of liberty. Fortunately for us, she does not get confined to the White House and Washington (where her poor beau is overwhelmed by autograph and photo opportunity hunters and squads of secret service agents). The President (Mark Harmon of all people) has to go to Prague, so we have postcards (visualised on the screen) of Prague, then of Venice, of Austria, of London, all very attractive. And there is that old chestnut of a plot: the man who rescues her (Matthew Goode, British, of course) who is, in fact, an agent who has to keep her out of trouble (he fails, singularly) and who disillusioned her when she finds out the truth.

Plenty of froth and bubble and secret service agents.

I'LL SLEEP WHEN I'M DEAD (UK, 2003, d. Mike Hodges)

British director Mike Hodges made a name for himself in the 1970s with the tough gangster thriller, *Get Carter*. In the late 90s he revived that reputation with his gangster thriller, *Croupier*. *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead* will please his fans though ordinary moviegoers might find it too serious and ponderous.

It is film noir for the 21st century. Clive Owen (who played the *Croupier*) is tall, dark, solid, handsome and extremely taciturn. (Owen does not usually smile in his films and gives the impression that he would have to make an effort to do so (managing to do a little in *King Arthur*.) This works well for his character, Will Graham, a gangster who has turned his back on London and gone out to work in the Welsh forests. He has left his reckless brother (Jonathan Rhys Myers) and lover (Charlotte Rampling) who are devoted to him. When he learns that his brother has killed himself, he very determinedly sets out to find out why. This leads him into some strange psychosexual behaviour,

especially on the part of a businessman (Malcolm McDowell) who is hostilely obsessed with the young man. The film then moves into revenge noir.

It is interesting in its characters, has some stern performances, except for the passionate Jamie Foreman as the young brother's best friend who is grief-stricken, angry and violent with what has happened. The screenplay often has its characters gazing pensively, which gives us time to check how much we are identifying with them, as well as some characters stalking others, which gives us time to observe as they observe.

While the plotline might generally be familiar, except for the male rape and the psychological implications, it is treated in a serious and often stylised way which makes it a better drama.

LAWS OF ATTRACTION (US, 2004, d. Peter Howitt)

So, they still do make them as they used to. This romantic comedy is like the old days of Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn, the kind of film they might have made today if they were still with us but had looked more handsome and glamorous. It's the battle of the sexes - in the courts.

Julianne Moore is a very adept actress. She can do very serious (The Hours, Far from Heaven) and she do daffy comedy (Evolution). This time she needs to do a bit of both. She is a very successful divorce lawyer who is pitted against a scruffy looking attorney (Pierce Brosnan being un-James Bondish) who turns out never to have lost a case. No, need to go further. You know exactly what is going to happen, except that some of it takes place in beautiful Irish settings (because Pierce Brosnan's company produced it and he is doing more than his bit for Ireland).

Parkey Posey and Michael Sheen co-star as a feuding couple, but the scene-stealer is Frances Fisher, very glamorous, very face-lifted but self-conscious of the use of the word 'Mother' in public. You will enjoy her retort when asked whether she is 56, "parts of me are". Entertainingly glossy fluff.

TAKING LIVES (US, 2004, d. D.J. Caruso)

Most people enjoy a police thriller, the kind of story you find in the American best-sellers, especially if it contains an eccentric detective on the track of a serial killer. Taking Lives is like that. It has a play-on-words title, not only the murderer taking lives or the police taking criminals' lives, but the serial killer assuming the lives of his victims, moving from one character to another, escaping detection and flaunting his cleverness to the police.

One reviewer remarked that Taking Lives was a historical film in the sense that it is an American production filmed in Canada but actually using Canada as its setting. It takes place in Montreal and uses a variety of locations to great advantage as well as introducing some French stars as Montreal detectives, Tcheky Karyo as the sympathetic supervisor, Jean-Hugues Anglade as the diligent worker and Olivier Martinez as the tense and hyper-sensitive officer who resents a woman's presence on the case. This is especially so because she is FBI brought in to assist and do a psychological profile of the killer - which she does by eccentric behaviour (like getting into a victim's grave to empathise), loner attitudes and investigation and habits of intuition. She is played by Angelina Jolie (who played the on-the-spot investigator to Denzel Washington's eyes and intuitions in The Bone Collector). Jolie is much more in control in this film.

The male lead is Ethan Hawke as a sympathetic gallery owner who has seen the killer and is trying to assist the police. Kiefer Sutherland again looks sinister (A Time to Kill, Eye for an Eye, Phone Booth). Gena Rowlands has a cameo as the killer's mother.

It is easy to dismiss this kind of film as just another bit of pulp fiction and analyse it and its clues and red herrings as if it had literary aspirations. Rather, it follows the accepted format of murders, suspects, investigators, twists and melodramatic final confrontations (and this one is unexpected just when you thought it was obvious).

WONDROUS OBLIVION (UK, 2003, d. Paul Morrison)

Films about goodness often have a difficult time drawing in an audience - which is a great pity. When they use sport as a symbol of relationships and achievement, it depends on whether the audience knows and likes the sport, like running in *Chariots of Fire*, American football in *Remember the Titans*, soccer in *Bend it Like Beckham*. *Wondrous Oblivion's* sport is cricket.

This is a film that audiences will like - the cricket will be a bonus for fans. It is set in a south London street in 1960. A Jewish family, the Wisemans, live there, just tolerated by the old-fashioned English neighbours. David (Sam Smith in an engaging performance) goes to an upper class school where he is hopeless at cricket though he loves the game, collects cricket cards (which come to life and give him advice in a very pleasing way) and can do a fair commentary. Then his life changes.

West Indian neighbours move in next door. Neighbours gossip and criticise. Hate notes are pushed under the door. The skinhead equivalent louts of those days glare and menace the Wiseman's and the black Underground attendants - and this leads to some drastic racial prejudice.

However, the family next door love cricket. Dennis (Delroy Lindo who, in fact, grew up in London before going to the US) coaches his daughter Judy (a likeably lively performance from Leonie Elliot) and invites David in. He blossoms but can still get caught up, unguardedly, in the bigotry. This is his personal and moral challenge.

Director Paul Morrison (Solomon and Gaenor) evokes the atmosphere of a time that is gone but raises issues that are still with us. The anti-Semitism focuses on Mr and Mrs Wiseman (Stanley Townsend and Emily Woof), the stressed and busy husband and the naive wife. The criticism of increasing migration centres on the West Indians - whose cricketers like Sobers and Worral are characters in the plot and are feted - but who are the object of apprehension and harassment.

By the way, David is something of a dreamer. A teacher says that he is lost in wondrous oblivion.

OUR HOUSE (DUPLEX) (US, 2003, d. Danny de Vito)

For regular comedy fans, we have become used to Ben Stiller being put upon - extremely - both physically and psychologically. He survived *There's Something About Mary*, confronted Robert de Niro in *Meet the Parents*, was one of the Royal Tennenbaums, experienced mayhem in *Along Came Polly*. Now he is persecuted and harassed by the little old Irish lady, the neighbour from hell from upstairs. (Just as well he got to do some comedy and heroics in *Starsky and Hutch*.)

It's a pity the film is not better. It could have been a little sharper. The premise and premises are familiar: a New York apartment that looks as if it has everything, especially as boosted by estate agent, Harvey Feinstein. When the eager but unwitting Stiller and Drew Barrymore move in, full of compassion for Mrs Connolly who lives upstairs (Eileen Essel), they discover too late that she is full of complaints, jobs to be done and acts in such a murderable way that that is the temptation they fall back on. But, this is a comedy directed by Danny de Vito (who was in a similar vein way back with *Throw Mama from the Train*), so there are no murders, just a whole lot of near misses.

It's an easy night out. Drew Barrymore throws on the charm, so does Ben Stiller but he comes across better as suffering. It's the kind of film they might have enjoyed watching in their house except for the noise that Mrs Connolly's set was making upstairs.

KILL BILL 2 (US, 2004, d. Quentin Tarantino)

Just as well I read an interview with Quentin Tarantino as I went into the cinema to see whether Uma (after roaring and rampaging, as she puts it in the trailer and the opening of the film - though her wink at the end of the trailer appears only during the final credits) does actually kill Bill. Tarantino gives the necessary information - especially to those who are anticipating a second serve of Eastern chop chop, cut cut - that his models for part 2 are spaghetti westerns. While there are some flashbacks to the martial arts days of part I, especially with Uma learning secret moves and Daryl Hannah's vicious killer disposing of the master's eye (which those who are repelled need to remember that Shakespeare did the same in *King Lear*), this is the West.

Tarantino would probably be highly alarmed if anyone considered him in the same sentence as Shakespeare. He is strictly pulp fiction in comic book form. He has more speeches in this movie than in part 1 but we are told that the interesting discourse by Bill on superheroes of the comics who are ordinary citizens who put on bat or spider or daredevil masks whereas for Superman, he is always a hero and Clark Kent is his mask - it all comes from a 60s book by writer and artist, Jules Pfeiffer. Great speech, no footnote reference.

Another literary comparison comes to mind in a sequence which is powerfully horrifying (even though you know The Bride is going to get out), the Poe-like premature burial of The Bride in a coffin with the soil piling and thudding on top. This sequence shows how dramatic and emotionally effective Tarantino can be.

With lots of Ennio Morricone music and homages, the backblocks and trailer parks of Texas, the confrontations are Western. (Kill Bill Volume I was his Eastern.) And, with that pacing and less confrontative massacres, it is less unsettling to watch Kill Bill 2. There are some interesting cameos, especially by Michael Parks and Michael Madsen. But the focus is well and truly on Uma Thurman plus attention-grabbing evil from Daryl Hannah and, at last, a sardonically effective performance from David Carradine (before he is finally killed) as Bill.

STARSKY AND HUTCH (US, 2004, d. Todd Phillips)

Expecting another boom boom police thriller homage to the 1970s and the icons of TV land, I was surprised that the action takes a back seat (well, not entirely) to the more comic aspects of the characters and partnership of Starsky and Hutch. Some TV channels screened the original 1975 pilot at the time the new film was released and it is surprising (at least after the pilot; the stars were able to go on and develop their characters and style over four seasons) how comparatively straightforward Paul Michael Glaser and David Soul were. It is pleasing to see them turn up in a good cameo in the new film.

What we have is an Odd Couple buddy movie, Starsky obsessive, Hutch anything but. The uptightness that Ben Stiller has shown when under siege in recent comedies contrasts with the easygoing nonchalance of Owen Wilson that we have seen in Shanghai Noon, Shanghai Knights and I Spy. They make an entertaining comic couple and are given plenty of lines and situations to highlight these qualities (best of all the drop the dead pony sequence).

Vince Vaughan is the mastermind villain who is not nearly so smart as he thinks and Juliette Lewis is his girlfriend.

It's all a concoction and another example of the trend of TV series remakes, but it works well and entertainingly in its own right.

SECRET WINDOW (US, 2004, d. David Koepp)

Top ingredients: a Stephen King novella, Johnny Depp, an intriguing title. It's not bad but it is not the outstanding thriller that one might have expected. Adapted for the screen by director, David Koepp (Stir of Echoes, which was a fascinating story of hauntings and madness), it takes on favourite themes for King, including an author with writer's block, mad fans, violence and madness.

Johnny Depp yet gives another different performance as Mort Rainey, a popular novelist living alone near a lake in upstate New York, looking and sounding dishevelled, with writer's block and prone to napping all the time. He is confronted by a stranger, with an old-fashioned black hat and a thick southern accent who claims that Rainey has stolen one of his stories. His name is Shooter and he continues to stalk, haunt and do violence to Mort. Houses are burnt, friends are killed...

If you feel you are familiar with this kind of story and with Stephen King's predilections, you may well work out what is going on - and then the suspense becomes waiting to find out if you were right.

Maria Bello is his wife, Timothy Hutton the man she is with and Charles S. Dutton is an exclusive security guard. John Turturro does a wonderfully sinister turn as Shooter. But it is Johnny Depp's film. He is in almost every sequence and he creates a character you can believe in rather than believe.

THE CALCIUM KID (UK, 2002, d. Alex de Rakoff)

Released in the aftermath of *The Lord of the Rings* and *Pirates of the Caribbean* and just before *Troy*, *The Calcium Kid*'s distributors want to capitalise on the popularity of Orlando Bloom although the film was made before *Lord of the Rings* had been released.

It is a modestly immodest small film, a David and Goliath story set in south London. It also borrows from the work of Christopher Guest (*Spinal Tap*, *Best in Show*, *A Mighty Wind*) in purporting to be a documentary following the progress towards a world middle-weight boxing challenge.

We are introduced to Herbie Bush a shyster promoter (a wonderfully lathsome but believable performance by Omid Djalili), a large and ignorant slob who sees this as his one chance of success. When his champion breaks his hand, the completely unknown Lambeth milkman, Jimmy Connolly (Orlando Bloom), is brought in. His bones are rock solid through drinking two pints of milk a day all his life (though the final credits have a disclaimer from the milk company that Jimmy's two pint habit is not endorsed). (This story, by the way, is a staple of musicals, from *42nd Street* to *The Boy Friend*, where the lead breaks a leg and the understudy has to go on - and become a star.)

Jimmy is a straightforward young chap despite his mother's massaging profession and his father being in gaol. He gets an eccentric Irish coach (David Kelley, always a delight to see), has his best friend as a motivator (doing rap rhymes), is supported by everyone but then becomes the victim of a seemingly racist gaffe and everyone turns against him. His opponent is a Hispanic American.

The final confrontation is actually not what we are being led to expect and is all the better for that. But there is certainly a happy ending - if only life were like that.

HIDALGO (US, 2003, d. Joe Johnston)

Horses and more horses - but the course is the most dangerous in the world, a race through the desert from Arabia to Damascus which many do not survive. At least, that is the build up to this adventure, set in Arabia in 1893.

However, before we get to Arabia, we are introduced to Frank T. Hopkins, a Pony Express rider, sometime cowboy and racer, relying on his faithful mustang, Hidalgo. He is also part Indian but conceals this, especially after he has brought the message to the army at Wounded Knee and has witnessed the massacre. Down and out and a drunk, he joins Buffalo Bill's touring show, where Annie Oakley gets her gun and audiences hiss at Sitting Bull and the Indians. Just like Tom Cruise as the Last Samurai, Frank gets his chance to travel to another culture and discover his true self.

Hopkins is played by Viggo Mortensen who made such an impression as Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings*. Here he does not have to be so noble until he is challenged by hostile tribal leaders and princes as well as deceiving aristocratic British ladies and pledges to rescue the sheikh's daughter - where he turns into an 1890s Indiana Jones. The story is allegedly true, based on Hopkins' memoirs. But some suspect that he created his own legend - and it is all the more enjoyable for that.

Omar Sharif is a benign presence as the sheikh who challenges the American (and who loves to read pulp magazine western stories) to prove that his little mustang is better than the superbly sleek Arab horses. The race is called *The Ocean of Fire* and moves through treacherous terrain, sandstorms, quicksand and few oases (with Moroccan locations standing in for Arabia).

It sounds good but it lacks some oomph. Hidalgo is not as strong an equine presence as he might be. Hopkins is not really a heroic Indiana Jones. The film is rather long, making it sometimes seem slow.

[Released in the US in 2003, it was a shaky box-office prospect with Americans helping Arabs, hostile Arabs, and a race which brings Arabs and Americans together.]

MIRANDA (UK, 2002, d. Mark Munden)

Miranda was produced under the auspices of Channel Four which, soon after, dissolved its film projects. The film took a long time to be released, gives evidence that there was a lot of post-production work, perhaps the addition of a voice-over by the central character, Frank. This means that the film is not entirely watchable – a strange mixture of con-trick drama with some fantasy comedy. Christina Ritchie is the femme fatale, involved in conning rich industrialists (embodied by Kyle MacLachlan) with the aid of mastermind John Hurt. John Simm is the love-besotted librarian, Frank.

The film's plot interweaves between Frank and his erotic obsession with Miranda, her moving in with him, her returning to her confidence tricks and emotional blackmail and leaving Frank high and dry. Unexpectedly at the end, Frank actually helps her and they settle down happily ever after. The director, Marc Munden, was a television director.

THE HONEYMOONERS (Ireland, 2003, d. Karl Golden)

While the situation might not be particularly new: jilted groom meets girl disappointed in love; they clash, they fall in love; this brief film, however, has a number of things going for it to make it interesting and entertaining.

It was shot digitally with hand-held camera (for budget reasons or for aesthetic reasons or both). This gives it a rough and grainy look, like a film made up of home movies.

But it is the performances which count. Jonathan Byrne (David) makes you feel sorry for him at having been left standing at the altar - but he can also be exasperatingly morose and ungratefully insensitive to Alex Reid (Claire), moods going up and down all the time. Not that Claire is really any better. She starts morose, continues insensitive but eventually makes you feel sorry for her too.

The title is ironic. Claire drives David to the holiday house in Donegal which is a wedding present from his parents. She finds herself glad to be away from Dublin and wants to stay. David wants her to go. Over a couple of days we see them clash, apologise, have some happy moments before they clash again. Meantime they do not realise that they are falling in love. But they have to face their showdowns with their former partners. Besides that there are some eccentric locals who may not do all that much for Donegal tourism.

By the end, you feel you have got to know David and Claire.

AGAINST THE ROPES (US, 2003, d. Charles S. Dutton)

Boxing movies are an acquired taste. This one could be something of a test case for fans. In a completely male dominated sport and management, we see Jackie Kallan, a woman, become a manager and promotor. The boys do not like this at all.

Jackie Kallan was actually a journalist and media personality turned boxing manager. Her main success was in the 1980s. The screenplay uses the principal elements of her career to create a fictional biography, highlighting the struggles Jackie experienced as well as succumbing to the hype and glamour of the boxing world.

This means that the film is operating at two levels. On one level, it is the story of a young man with potential to become a champion (Omar Epps) who is managed well by Jackie, trained by old-timer Felix (Charles S. Dutton) where all goes well until Jackie gets too ambitious and big for her boots. On the other level, it is a story of a woman in a man's world, being looked down on, humiliated, but, despite almost becoming as bad as the men who attack her, she stands her ground and makes a success of her career.

Meg Ryan mixes the brazen glamorous wardrobe of Erin Brockovich with that champion's kind of relentless push for success. She sounds and acts tough, hard-voiced, hard-boiled, ultimately challenged to be decent. Omar Epps enjoys himself both outside and in the ring. In the supporting cast, Charles S. Dutton (who fought in his past) plays the trainer as a gentle giant - as well as directing the film. It is Tony Shalhoub who excels as the hiss-the-villain ruthless promotor.

This is a boxing film with issues and drama for the sports' fans. It is an issues drama with some boxing for the non-fans.

SPRING SUMMER AUTUMN WINTER ... AND SPRING (Korea, 2003, d. Kim Ki-Duk)

For anyone following the growth of recent Korean cinema, the name of Kim Ki-Duk will mean tough stuff, worlds of sadism (*The Isle*) or sleazy underworlds of pimps, prostitutes and prisons (*Bad Guy*). This is a different kind of film altogether, although there are some plot details that remind us the urban jungle of Seoul and other cities is within reach of the peaceful countryside.

This is a Buddhist film, a film that can communicate some of the key Buddhist beliefs to non-Buddhists through images and story: meditation and prayer, harmony with nature, reincarnation, passion and detachment, repentance and retribution, redemption and peace.

The setting is an isolated lake surrounded by mountains. At the edge of the lake are painted doors which open for us at the beginning of each season. They reveal a floating hermitage where a wise Old Monk lives, instructing disciples or receiving visitors who want prayer and healing.

With each season and its beautiful environmental changes, the second character in the hermitage grows, develops and fails. In Spring, he is a young boy who has to learn not to be cruel to and destructive of nature. In Summer, a teenager, he learns sexual arousal and love but has to learn what lust is and detachment. In Autumn, an adult of thirty, he has to repent of his violent mistakes. In Winter, in middle age, he has to return to his origins to learn wisdom and be redeemed.

If the audience surrenders to the lake, the mountains and the hermitage, there is a great deal of wise entertainment and glimpses of a spirituality that has sustained Asian cultures for centuries.

OTHER SIDE OF THE BED (Spain, 2003, D. Emilio Martinez-Lazaro)

A Spanish musical about two couples, their uncoupling, their cross-coupling and deceptions, their re-coupling - along with a few more eccentric characters caught up in this emotional merry-go-round.

It comes with the backing of the Sundance Festival, awards in Spain, rave reviews from Spain as well.

This highlights just how vastly different sensibilities can be. I found myself wishing the film would end and then agreeing with the British critics who used such words as 'gruelling' and 'avoid'.

SHATTERED GLASS (US, 2004, d. Billy Ray)

There is a play on words in this title. The subject is Stephen Glass, ace young journalist in the 1990s with the prestigious *The New Republic* magazine in Washington DC. Over several years, he came up with dazzling suggestions for articles, carried out top interviews and produced over forty featured articles.

In recent times, there have been several scandals in the world of the press, of people plagiarising stories, of journalists inventing stories and creating their alleged sources. This was what Stephen Glass did.

The film is fascinating as it takes us inside a popular and respected magazine office, to see the working journalists, the editorial conferences and decisions, the particular roles of staff to ensure that a quality magazine appears with every issue. Hayden Christiansen (abandoning the surliness he does so expertly as Annikin in the *Star Wars* prequels and in such films as *Life as a House*) is all smiles, boyish charm, bespectacled intelligence and inventive vitality as Stephen Glass. We are as fascinated by him as the staff are, believe the convincing stories he proposes and see, through his imagination, what he eventually writes. We are also fascinated as it all begins to unravel and we see him pathetically pleading to be liked while astutely covering his tracks.

The rest of the cast blend well into the world of the magazine. Hank Azariah is the editor, Mike Kelly, who employed Glass as well as advising him (and who, before his untimely death in Iraq in 2002, acted as technical adviser for the film). Peter Saarsgard is the new editor, less charismatic, but faced

to deal with the scandal. Chloe Sevigny is the assistant. Steve Zahn has a very good role as an investigator with a media watch website.

The war in Iraq raised all kinds of media questions in challenges, what was actual reporting, what was censored, what was 'reconstructed'. This film offers intriguing background into the media reporting world.

50 FIRST DATES (US, 2003, d. Peter Segal)

Uh-oh, Groundhog Day territory. However, this slapstick romance uses the time repetition quite nicely even if strains credibility. In Groundhog Day, Bill Murray wakes to the same day, day after day, and learns more about people and what went on in the town. Here, Drew Barrymore has lost her long-term memory and wakes up, day after day, remembering nothing of the day before.

That helps explain the title - with even more than 50 first dates.

Adam Sandler is presented as the Lothario of Hawaii in the opening credits. That is soon forgotten and we see him as a nice man with a walrus and a penguin as friends as he works at the zoo and dreams of building his boat and sailing to Alaska. He also has a local friend, Rob Schneider acting up and liable to Hawaiian authorities extraditing him for over-caricature of the islanders.

Then he notices Lucy and falls in love with her. The challenge is to get her to fall in love with him afresh every day. Can he do it? Of course - with the help of her father and her body-building, naive steroid-taking brother (Sean Astin post-Rings), doctor Dan Aykroyd and a video.

Adam Sandler is back to his nice gawky type. Drew Barrymore is quite charming. The romance is nice - but a critic friend said he preferred the initial slapstick with walruses and vomit etc rather than the romantic mush. You can take your pick.

BLIND FLIGHT (UK, 2004, d. John Furse)

This is one of those films that are described as 'worthy' but which audiences generally choose not to see because they are based on true stories and people find them gruelling to watch. That is a pity, since Blind Flight is based on the account written by teacher, Brian Keenan, about his four years of being held hostage in Lebanon and the screenplay's adviser is British journalist, John McCarthy, who shared his cell for most of those years.

The film is particularly relevant in recent years with the world's fear of terrorism and the number of people abducted.

Ian Hart plays Brian Keenan, snatched in a Beirut street, hustled into the boot of a car, imprisoned, tortured and kept in the dark, both literally and figuratively for a great deal of the time, as to why he had been taken. Linus Roache plays John McCarthy, whose mother made a video message pleading with his captors to free him. There is no mention of government efforts to have the hostages freed except for Mrs Thatcher's declaration that governments did not deal with terrorist.

It is difficult to watch scenes of imprisonment, especially when so much of the time was spent in very confined and dark spaces. At times the captors are friendly and make concessions, for example about washing. At other times, they are cruel. Like the hostages, we, the audience, do not know where the hostages are, why they are there and what might happen to them.

The attitudes and behaviour of both men, sorely tried and sometimes prepared to give up, show what the human spirit is capable of.

WIN A DATE WITH TAD HAMILTON (US, 2004, d. Robert Luketic)

Some American towns have unusual, seemingly funny names. This comedy is set in Frasier's Bottom. Not much happens there, especially for girls who work at supermarket checkouts. There is sometimes a possibility of moving away but that can seem remote. But they do go to the movies and cry at some of the movies starring their heartthrob, Tad Hamilton. Needless to say, Tad is not so nice in real life -

so his agents (funny turns from Nathan Lane and Sean Hughes who brighten up the film considerably) decide to stage a charity fund-raising competition. The prize - a date with Tad Hamilton.

Australian director, Robert Luketic previously directed Legally Blonde. Kate Bosworth (John Holmes' girlfriend in Wonderland) and Ginnifer Goodwin (a standout from Mona Lisa Smile) are friends, Rosalee and Cathy, along with supervisor Pete (Topher Grace) who wants to leave to study but cannot bring himself to propose to Rosalee. You know it. Rosalee wins and with shrieking and hyperventilating smiles goes to LA and enjoys the date immensely (also delivering some homespun truths to Tad (Josh Duhamel) who falls for her and follows her back to West Virginia. Everyone is glad to have a celebrity in town - except, of course, Pete.

Will Tad propose to Rosalee and sweep her off her feet? Will Pete fight back? Will Cathy help? What does Rosalee's father think of Tad as a son-in-law and what will the agents do to get their star back to Hollywood? You'll find out if you have this light and fluffy date with Tad Hamilton.

THE GIRL NEXT DOOR (US, 2004, d. Luke Greenfield)

They do make movies like they used to - except that a lot has changed in the behaviour of high school kids, a lot of it puzzling, some of it reprehensible, so that these teenage movies are not like they used to be. The Girl Next Door is like that. On one level, it is suburban sweetness and light. The wholesome family with the son, Matthew, raising money to bring a student from Africa, preparing his speech for the scholarship awards, quietly doing his study. On the other level, the girl who moves in next door, housesitting, appears in pornographic movies (which our hero's friends discover because they are sex-obsessed and watch these movies) and gets Matthew into all kinds of trouble, even taking her to a motel and getting tangled with unscrupulous producers and gangsters and, finally, into a scheme of making more 'realistic' (read 'sexy' or 'sexually explicit') sex education films. It's the American story of Puritanism on the one hand and Permissiveness on the other. It's the off-hand, casual taking the permissive for granted that rings alarm bells.

Emile Hirsch (the cheating boy in The Emperor's Club) and Timothy Olyphant as a sleazy producer give good performances. Elisha Cuthbert is the girl next door. But...

THE COMPANY (US, 2003, d. Robert Altman)

Robert Altman has an over 30 year reputation of making films that weave together many characters and stories so that by the end of his films, the audience has felt that it has entered into a particular world and got to know it very well, the environment, the situations, the crises. With that in mind, one can say that The Company is 'pure Altman'.

Popular star Neve Campbell trained as a ballet dancer and took the outline of a ballet company story to producers who asked Barbara Turner (Georgia, Pollack) to collaborate and write a screenplay. Eventually Altman was intrigued - about the unfamiliar world of a ballet ensemble and its behind the scenes story and of how to put performance on screen using high digital photography. The Company is the result. It was made with the collaboration of the world-renowned Joffrey Ballet Company of Chicago, with the dancers, choreographers and the collaboration of co-founder in 1956, Gerald Arpino (on whom the character of the director in the film is based). Malcolm McDowell snarls and 'baby's' everyone as the director.

Altman takes us into this world. We participate in training and rehearsal. We watch performances. We are taken into manager's offices and listen in to discussions, disputes, emotional tantrums, dictatorial and non-consulting decisions. We listen to the dancers speak, comment on their lives. We see the conditions in which some of them have to live (on a not so top salary).

The Joffrey does classical ballet but is interested in contemporary work and innovation. Neve Campbell herself dances a modern pas-de-deux, there are some glimpses of classical but the finale is a highly colourful, flamboyant take on Eastern religion and customs, The Blue Snake.

Even if ballet or contemporary dance are not your art forms, this is an interesting tour of the world of a dance company.

THE TRIPLETTES FROM BELLEVILLE (France, 2002, d. Sylvain Chomet)

What a pity Finding Nemo was so good! If not, The Triplettes from Belleville would have won the 2003 Oscar for Best Animated Feature. (It was also nominated in the Best Song category.) It is a hoot of a film - and intriguing as well.

The animation is broad and vivid, recreating France and somewhere in North America in bold drawings and colours. Champion is a little boy who lives with his mother - and loves bicycles. When he grows up, she encourages him to enter the Tour de France. But danger lurks and Champion is abducted and shipped to Belleville where the Mafiosi have set up a theatre to run their own cycling races so that they can bet on them. His mother and pet dog follow in a pedal-boat.

It's the triplets themselves who are intriguing. Old women, drawn with great panache and detail, who used to be vaudeville singers, they befriend Champion's mother and set about a rescue mission. We realise just how much we care about poor Champion.

That's the plot. But it is the design, the drawing, the colour that are fascinating. And it is the music, a vigorous and rhythmic beating score, that keeps pumping with energy.

SINCE OTAR LEFT (France, 2003, d. Julie Bertucelli)

Writer and first-time director, Julie Bertucelli, must love Georgia and its people. We discover she is French but had worked as an assistant to Kieslowski, Bertolucci and to Iosselliani with whom she spent six months filming in Tbilisi. She got to know it well.

The setting is the early 1990s. Independence is new and the bureaucracies are not used to it at all. Three generations of women share a house, especially since Otar (the son who had started out as a medical student but who is in Paris illegally seeking work on building sites) left for France. We see Otar only in photographs and hear his voice on the phone.

The film is the portrait of the three women, each of whom is excellent in her own way. The focal performance is that of Esther Gorontin as the grandmother, a strong and determined woman if ever there was one, often contemptuous of her widowed daughter, relying on her seemingly mousey granddaughter. The performance does not seem like acting but is totally real and credible. She was 90 when she made the film!

Nina Khomassouridze is the extraverted daughter, in perpetual exasperation with her mother. Dinara Droukarova is the granddaughter. As a portrait of a family, it is quite absorbing. However, the two younger women are faced with a dilemma of whether to give news of Otar to the old lady. The mother opts to conceal the truth and her daughter has to go along with it. The consequences are completely unexpected, leading to a visit to Paris to find Otar.

Audiences will find the visit to these three women, the opening up of the world of Georgia which has lived through Stalinism (he was from Georgia) and the communist era and has learned to live with lies and deception, fascinating and entertaining.

[Winner of the first SIGNIS award at the Hong Kong International Film Festival, April 2004.]

THE SADDEST MUSIC IN THE WORLD (Canada, 2003, d. Guy Maddin)

Canadian Guy Maddin is a maverick film-maker with a cv of shorts, commercials, videos and some feature films. His cast of mind is experimental - which means that critics will laud his films because they appreciate their originality and flair but may not indicate that audiences who are looking for entertainment are likely to be driven, uncomprehendingly, out of the cinema.

Firstly, it's his options for visual style. He favours digital camerawork. Sharp focus is not a major concern which means that the audience, appreciative or not, spends a lot of the running time peering at the images. Since he is emulating some of the styles of the early silent films, the images look as if they were photographed decades ago. It is an aesthetic choice, as a painter might do, to present

somewhat familiar subjects in a stylised and challenging way. With a paining, one can glance and move on. With a feature film, the unwary and the unwilling are trapped.

That can serve as warning as well as some aspects of review.

Smooth plot continuity is not a major concern either. We are in Depression-hit Winnipeg in 1933, we are in flashbacks (from different characters), we are sometimes in colour (that might have made the early Technicolour consultants wince). A failed producer returns to Winnipeg from the US, accompanied by his brother's amnesiac wife. They have no money but hear on the radio of a beer baroness's challenge for a contest in Winnipeg to hear the saddest music in the world. Contestants come from Mexico, Spain, the US and other countries. There are performances (presented in a somewhat haphazard way), including the producer's old soldier father and his hyper-sensitive brother. It should be said that Lady Port-Huntley, played by Isabella Rossellini, has lost both legs in the bizarre aftermath of a car crash but has received two transparent artificial limbs filled with beer. And so on... A film for those who like to be intrigued rather than entertained.

ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND (US, 2004, d. Michael Gondry)

The screenplay tells us that this is a quotation from Alexander Pope.

Here, the spotless mind is one that has had disagreeable memories scientifically removed so that remembering unwanted relationships becomes impossible. That premiss will begin to make sense when one hears that the screenplay is the work of the talentedly eccentric Charlie Kauffman (Being John Malkovich, Human Nature, Confessions of a Dangerous Mind, Adaptation). This one can stand right up there with all the others. It is directed by Michael Gondry, director of music videos and of the little seen, Human Nature (with Tim Robbins, Patricia Arquette, Miranda Otto).

Taking it for granted that this process could happen - and there are some sequences with a touch of the scientific that offer some plausibility about 'mapping' the brain and eliminating memories - then this story shows the consequences of the procedure (which, like all exotic and/or illicit operations, has disastrous emotional side-effects).

It is to the credit of Jim Carrey that he stays within the strict confines of a character who is bewildered by his ex-girlfriend's seeming indifference to him, discovers what has happened, agrees to the same procedure but, during the process, fights against it. There is no mugging or slapstick here. Carrey is an actor as well as a comic. Kate Winslett does well as the girlfriend, especially since the elimination of the memories starts with the present and moves backwards in time - we are witnesses to the break up, to the time together, to the first meeting. Tom Wilkinson is the scientist, Mark Ruffalo his technician, Kirstin Dunst his receptionist and Elijah Wood the assistant technician.

This film requires constant attention as well as reflection.

TWIST

Twist is an adaptation of Dickens' novel, Oliver Twist, to Toronto at the beginning of the 21st century. It relocates the action of the novel to a warehouse with a group of male hustlers under the director of Fagin. It is interesting to note that the character of Bill Sykes looms very large in the film but he is never seen on-screen. People have conversations with him on the phone, he is an extraordinary presence of evil - but never seen. The focus of the film is more on the Artful Dodger character, Dodge, played by Nick Stahl (The Man Without a Face, Bully, In the Bedroom, Terminator 3). The film is basically his story, a runaway from home, a heroin addict, a hustler, who befriends Oliver but introduces him into the life of hustling. There is also a Nancy who works at a takeaway food bar, Charlie and Betsy, another hustler and another waitress who fall in love. Gary Farmer (Dead Man) appears as Fagin, a mixture of ruthlessness and sentimentality as he controls the young men. The film doesn't follow through with all the details of the novel. There is no happy reconciliation for Oliver with his family. Rather, he is seen as an orphan, a runaway who enters into the life and encounters a senator. The senator gives some impression that he may be the grandfather of Oliver but this is merely suggested and not followed through.

The film is a small-budget one, is filmed with faded blue and grey colours, a dreary aspect of the city of Toronto in a poor and brutal area. The life of the hustlers is a combination of misery, being forced to be busy, being exhausted back at the centre. The film is more complicated when Dodge's brother comes from Quebec to try to bring him home – with unexpected and violent results.

This is in many ways an ugly film, or at least a film about an ugly world. However, it is also quite ingenious at times in its using of Dickens' plot and characters – and the suggestion that this world of Toronto at the beginning of the 21st century is an equally Dickensian world.

FLOATING LANDSCAPE

Floating Landscape is a mournful and romantic film from Hong Kong with a Chinese setting. At first rather complex with the focus on several characters and time shifts, the film then evens out into the journey of a

young woman whose boyfriend, an artist, has died. The film shows the artist at first, his diary and his indication that he has a fatal illness, his first seeing the young woman and his attraction towards her, especially showing her a sketch of a place that was important to him in his past. Once he has died, the young woman goes to the town where her boyfriend lived when he was young and sets herself in search for the place in order to bury his ashes. On arrival, she encounters a genial young man who gives

her directions. He is very good with children, helping them to play, wants to be an illustrator of children's books though he works as a postman. In helping her to find the special place, he falls in love with her, she with him. However, she cannot admit it and this is very painful for the young man. She keeps away from him and then, when she eventually discovers where the place is, wants to go back to Hong Kong. In the meantime, he has received word from Beijing that publishers want to see him about his illustrations. However, the film has a happy ending as a young boy who has been a follower of the postman leads the young woman to find the postman – with the possibilities of a deeper future.

The film is slow moving, showing details of life in the village, showing the sadness and how difficult it is for the young woman to let go of her love for the young man and her memories, even though she discovers she knew so little about him. The film was also painful as the young man, falling in love with the young woman, trying his best to do the right thing by her and finding rejection. However, everything comes together at the end in a satisfying romantic drama.

LES SENTIMENTS

Les Sentiments (Feelings) is yet another film about the French middle class, anxiety about relationships, mid-life crisis, understanding of commitment. The song sung during the final credits is "She's Too Good To Be True", which seems to relate to the opening of the film with the character of Edith and her impending marriage to Francois. They marry, move into a house which gives them a base for Francois' work as a doctor. They live next to the previous doctor, Jean-Pierre Bacri, and his wife, Natalie Baye. At first everything seems wonderful. There are far too many smiles.

At one stage, the older man makes an approach to the younger woman and she succumbs. How psychologically credible this is is open to discussion. In his retirement, he has been continually making parallels and comparisons with the younger man, physically and psychologically. Now he has seduced

his wife. Needless to say, when the reality is discovered, there is disaster all round.

ROSENSTRASSE

Rosenstrasse is a film about the Holocaust. However, instead of giving a broad scope about events in Germany during the 1940s, it focuses attention on a few characters and a special event: the rounding up of Jewish men and women and keeping them for a week in a former social office in Rosenstrasse, with the vigil outside of the wives and relatives of those interned.

The film also works well with an opening in New York at the beginning of the 21st century, a woman mourning her husband and becoming very strict Orthodox in her practice, her children not

understanding. When the daughter is given an indication by an unknown cousin, she goes to Berlin to seek out a woman he knew her mother. The film then focuses on this woman, an aristocrat married to a Jewish man, her being disowned by her family, her husband being interned, her work to get him free. She also encounters a young Jewish orphan whose mother is inside but who does not come out, taking the girl into her own home and caring for her.

The film recreates the period well, especially the events on Rosentrasse. However, it gives glimpses of life in the ordinary offices, in the high command, with the aristocrats and their comf

THE GIRL FROM RIO (UK, 2001, d. Chris Mongers)

Chris Mongers has made some offbeat films including The Englishman Who Went up a Hill and Came Down a Mountain.

This is a pleasantly light comedy of the contrast between dull London and bright Brazil, a land of exotic dreams and exotic women for a respectable British banker.

Hugh Laurie, doing a variation on his gawky, lanky would-be hero, discovers that all is not well in his life: a superior boss, a wife who could discard him, miserable weather. But, due to an incompetent bank robbery, he has at hand the loot... and it is the Christmas break... and off he goes to Rio.

All, of course, will not be as fantastic as he dreamed, but he has the time of his life, especially when he gets mixed up with crooks and is fleeing for his life.

Slight and undemanding.

GOODBYE LENIN (Germany, 2003, d.

Goodbye Lenin proved to be a popular hit, not only in its native Germany, but also worldwide. It received a substantial release in the US.

German comedies, some think, may be hard to come by. The German sense of humour in this case, is a somewhat nostalgic and pleasingly ironic revisiting of the final year of the Democratic Republic of Germany, East Germany.

What if...?

If a mother, a staunch supporter of Eric Honneker's socialist government, disappointed since her husband left her for the West, trying to bring up two children and do a job for the party, were to have a heart attack seeing her son arrested at a protest and go into coma for eight months? What if these were the months of the fall of the Berlin wall, the opening up to the West, the beginnings of the Americanisation of East Berlin and the vote in 1990 for a unified Germany? What should her son do when she wakes? Tell her about how everything she cherished has changed and give her another heart attack? Pretend that nothing has changed and go to all kinds of extraordinary lengths, even to making propaganda television news that lauds the east and condemns the west? The son chooses the latter and that is where so much of the comedy, with its touches of parody lies.

But, there is more to the film than this. It deals with family and family breakup in the context of the repressive East German state. It also deals with understanding, forgiveness and reconciliation, symbols of what had to happen in the newly united Germany. This means that the film is something of a crowd-pleaser with its humour and its humane sentiment.

IMAGINING ARGENTINA (UK, 2003, d. Christopher Hampton)

Imagining Argentina is a very disappointing film. It has a very serious theme: the disappearance of so many people during the regime of the generals in Argentina in the mid to late 70s, early 80s. The period was also treated in the Argentinian film The Official Story as well as a number of films from

Argentina shown more locally. It was also the subject of an international film, *Prisoner*, with Roy Scheider and Liv Ullman.

The film begins promisingly with overtones of the myth of Orpheus and his looking back and losing his wife. The setting is a children's theatre. When his wife is taken in the night, the director of the theatre starts to search for her. He discovers that he has a psychic gift, in contact with some of the relatives of those who have lost their dear ones, he is able to see what has happened. He uses this gift to help others and then it increasingly helps him to know what has happened to his wife. He visits General Guzman, one of the generals in charge, an implacable man with his anti-communist stances and his patriotic vision. He also discovers a young man who is an officer who tortures people and is sent to spy on the psychic sessions.

While this may seem excellent on paper, somehow or other it does not work well on the screen. While Antonio Banderas does well in the central role, the supporting performances are not very persuasive at all. Emma Thompson, with a strange accent, has the very difficult role of the tortured wife but is not entirely convincing either, except in her strength. John Wood and Claire Bloom appear briefly as Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany who have a farm, with many birds, called *La Esperanza*, Hope, who encourage Antonio Banderas in his search.

Much of the dialogue, written by playwright and screenwriter Christopher Hampton (*Dangerous Liaisons*), does not always work or ring true. The cumulative effect of the film is that this is a most worthy subject, but not handled particularly well, leading many audiences to laugh at episodes of the film rather than take them seriously. Altogether, a disappointment.

ZATOICHI (2003, d. Takeshi Kitano)

Zatoichi is a popular legendary figure in Japan. He was the focus of a television series in the 70s and 80s. Takeshi Kitano is one of Japan's best known directors, celebrated right around the world. His is especially noted for his violent films about crime (although he can also do comedy). His best known and acclaimed work is *Hana-Bi*, which won the Golden Lion at Venice in 1997. Kitano is also a strong actor and an illustrator as well as a television personality.

Some of this is evident in his choices of how to portray Zatoichi. He has platinum blond hair, he is blind, he has a red-lacquered cane. He is a remote kind of character, a masseur who wanders the countryside and yet who is a master swordsman. He finds a village which is terrorised by gangs and, staying in the house of a simple woman, he emerges to confront the members of the gang (with computer-generated blood effects which are more than a touch gory) and to save the day by freeing the village of the tyranny of the gangs. In some ways, the plot is reminiscent of Kurosawa's *The Seven Samurai* (and the American version, *The Magnificent Seven*). Zatoichi, although he has some help, is the magnificent One.

The film takes up familiar themes from the Samurai days, especially the victimisation of poor people in the countryside and their need for some kind of hero to save them. There is a subplot with two sisters wandering the countryside trying to avenge the leader of the gangs who killed their parents. These combine with Zatoichi for a grand finale.

Kitano is very interested in music and with a scene of farmers working in the field, he choreographs their movements to the sound of the background music, giving a humorous but striking effect. He does it again at the end when we see the builders at work on a new house. This then makes a transition into an extraordinary finale, like a Japanese Riverdance, with a whole troupe of people in festival clothes tapdancing on a stage. It rounds off a very interesting and spectacular Samurai action adventure film.

TORQUE (US, 2003, d.

More Fast and Furious shenanigans, this time on revved-up motor bikes. The plot involves speed, macho attitudes, corrupt police, grunge heroes, murder, shootouts and explosions. Who could ask for anything more...!

There is a whole lot of posing and posturing going on with dialogue like, 'Get out of my face', 'Wha chew think ya doin?', a great deal of 'attitude'. New Zealander Martin Henderson (*The Ring*) is the

tough hero, Ice Cube his foe until he realises that the murder rap is a set up by a hostile bkie leader who wants his drug stash back. Plenty of action, though it's all torque.

OSAMA (Afghanistan, 2003, d.

Winner of the Golden Globe for Best Foreign Language film, Osama repays viewing on several levels, especially a glimpse into a world that was once foreign to western audiences but, with the bombing of Afghanistan and the war in Iraq and subsequent disquiet, it is a world which is becoming more and more familiar on western television screens.

This Afghan film is set in Taliban days, before the overthrow and the American bombs.

Osama is a young girl whose mother is a doctor and frowned upon by the Taliban authorities whose regime is severely oppressive of women's rights. The film opens with an impressive women's protest (all covered in blue burkhas) which is brutally dispersed by gun-toting soldiers and water canon. In order to survive, the girl's mother cuts her hair to disguise her has a boy so that she can work and earn.

The film is very sensitive in showing the girl's plight, her fear of being discovered, her nervousness because of her inexperience and the constant dangers. When she is forced into a Taliban training program for boys, we share her dread, her attempts to cope with possible exposure, punishment and the very masculine activities. She has been befriended by a genial young beggar who saves her from a great deal of trouble. But, the Taliban regime meant trouble for women and the film, harrowingly, does not avoid this reality.

Which means that the audience leaves the cinema having had a powerful experience of another culture, of oppression and of the sufferings of an innocent girl.

CAPTURING THE FRIEDMANS (US, 2003, d. Andrew Jarusick)

This challenging documentary lost out in the Academy Awards to Errol Morris' interviews with Robert S McNamara about US foreign policy, The Fog of War. However, it did win the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Festival and many other awards. It is a very careful documentary about a difficult subject.

The Friedmans seemed to be a typical American family, especially with their love of capturing all their memories on film and then on video. The film builds up a portrait of Arnold the musician and teacher father, Elaine his strong-minded wife and their three sons. Suddenly, their word was overturned as Arnold and his youngest son, Jesse, were arrested for child molestation, charged with both of them eventually going to jail.

Andrew Jarusick became interested in their story, doing investigative research about the case. The eldest son, David, told him about the hours of footage he had. A documentary using this footage, using television news material from the time of the trial and contemporary interviews emerged. The material has been edited together so that the audience sees the chronology of Arnold's life, marriage and family, hears the testimony of the principal people involved (especially Elaine, David and Jesse as well as detectives, the judge, lawyers, victims and their parents), sees the footage of how the family behaved at the time of the trial (bizarre, frantic and hostile). The director also makes it hard to know what the actual truth is. One piece of the film, one interview, points in a particular direction of guilt, then another piece throws doubt on what has been said. The evidence for the accusation was testimony rather than physical evidence and this raises difficulties concerning police leading witnesses, false memories, lies and self-defensiveness.

This means that the audience has a great deal to absorb, is continually challenged to try to understand the characters, while being horrified at the charges and the implications about paedophilia. It is both gruelling and challenging.

MONA LISA SMILE (US, 2003, d. Mike Newell)

Whenever a film appears that shows an affluent American school, generally in the past, and a teacher who appears to be challenging the conservative system, everyone refers to Dead Poets Society. It was

the same with Kevin Kline and *The Emperor's Club*. And it is the same with *Mona Lisa Smile*. It means that there is an education sub-genre to which these films belong and, instead of saying that *Dead Poets* did it once and for all (which seems to be what a lot of critics say), we can say that here is another addition. *Mona Lisa Smile* definitely adds to it because it is set in a girl's academy.

The setting is 1953-1954. Everything seems settled. The girls are given an intellectual education as well as training in more domestic arts so that they will be able to fulfil their expected role of wife, mother and society hostess. The school has a board of governors including powerful and wealthy parents. Lesson plans are supervised in detail. On the other hand, the girls themselves, while expecting a wife and mother future, are already foreshadowing some of the changes in values that would characterise the 60s.

Into this privileged world comes a teacher who lacks this background but who wants to make a difference. She is played by Julia Roberts whose famous laugh is far heartier than a *Mona Lisa* smile. What happens goes according to the conventions of the genre: she challenges the girls who are hidebound by their textbooks; she opens up new worlds of art; she urges them to be themselves; some resist, some welcome her; the authorities are not happy...

To be expecting surprises in this genre is to miss the point. We know the point and we watch how it is played out.

Julia Roberts acquits herself with some aplomb using art history (as Robin Williams once used poetry) to widen the girls' horizons. The difficulty always is that the 'progressive' teacher really wants students to be themselves according to their expectations. This is a lesson that Julia has to learn, to let the girls make decisions even if they are not the decisions she would like them to make.

The core group of girls includes Kirsten Dunst as the bitterly critical opponent, Julia Styles as the poised but vulnerable student, Maggie Gyllenhaal as the permissive rebel, Ginifer as the put-upon girl at the margin who blossoms. Dominic West provides some ambiguous romantic connections.

At the time of the film's release in 2003, these girls would be 70 year olds and the Julia Robert's character 80. Watching this film and its portrait of school, families, America itself, we realise just how much these women have seen by way of change in 50 years.

THE CAT IN A HAT (US, 2003, d. Bo Welch)

Dr Seuss's stories have been popular in book form since the 1930s. When challenged to provide a story that children would read (with a vocabulary of only 200+words), he produced *The Cat in a Hat* in the late 50s and sold millions of copies.

In 2001, Ron Howard directed Jim Carrey in a version of Dr Seuss's *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. Now we have Mike Myers as an ordinary 6 foot cat who takes Conrad and Sally on a whirlwind day of fun that makes Conrad (Spencer Breslin) realise how awful he is in being cantankerous and Sally (Dakota Fanning) realise how obsessive she is. (When her mother (Kelly Preston) lays down some rules for Conrad, she eagerly cries, "give me some".) The complication is that the next door neighbour Laurence (Alec Baldwin) wants to marry the children's mother. He is charming on the surface but underneath is a slob who wants to send Conrad to military school.

So, in fact, the Cat has a lot to contend with. Set designer turned director, Bo Welch, makes sure that the film looks good, plenty of bright pastel shades in a cardboard cutout town, bright costumes, everything colourful.

The Cat in a Hat is critic-proof. Young children will probably give it 10 out of 10. Parents might (probably will) find Mike Myers rather irritating as the Cat, enjoying Alec Baldwin's villainy and comeuppance instead.

SCOOBY DOO 2: MONSTERS UNLEASHED (US, 2003, d.

Scooby Doo will probably do no wrong for the fans, may win converts from the younger audiences and attract audiences who remember it from TV days. For this non-fan who missed the series in its

television days, this episode was more enjoyable than the first. The old gang are back again, but Freddie Prinze Jr is not forceful as the leader of Mystery Inc, nor does he generate chemistry with his real-life wife, Sarah Michelle Geller. By contrast, Linda Cardellini as Velma is more lively and Matthew Lillard as Shaggy is irrepressible. (Scooby Doo's charms elude me!!).

There is a stronger supporting cast this time round with Seth Green good as the museum manager who finds all his Mystery Inc exhibits going berserk and Alicia Silverstone as an intrusive TV reporter.

What is enjoyable are the special effects as monsters swirl around the place and give rise to lots of chases. And there you have it.

GOTHIKA (US, 2003, d. Matthieu Kassovitz)

The press notes remind us that 'Gothic' is an adjective that means 'relating to a style of fiction characterised by the use of desolate or remote settings and macabre, mysterious or violence incidents. Yes, that describes Gothika.

At one stage two guards are watching television and refer to B movies. In a way, the trouble with Gothika is that it is a B movie plot given A movie production budget and style. This means that, because it looks good, it should be judged as high drama instead of the mixture of horror, slasher, nightmare, ghost story thriller that it is. Because it is set in an institution for the criminally insane and the staff sound as if they know what they are doing, the expectation is that it should be psychologically sound. But, that is not the concern of the screenplay. The producers, Dark Castle Company, want to make old-fashioned horror stories (they have already made The House on Haunted Hill, Thirteen Ghosts and Ghost Ship), not worrying too much about realism or plausibility.

The first half of Gothika sets up a frightening scenario for Halle Berry as Dr Miranda Grey, top psychiatrist who is married to the boss (Charles S. Dutton) and has an admirer in her co-worker (Robert Downey Jr). After a car accident on the way home (on a rainy night at a small and lonely bridge), she finds herself as a patient-prisoner in her own institution accused of brutally murdering her husband. Has she repressed memories? Halle Berry spends a lot of time in anguish because she has seen a ghost, is put into the common room and the shower area with her former patients, escapes and goes on the run. The second half of the film gives us the rational explanation of what went on and whodunnit.

If mistaken for an attempt at high art, Gothika will seem ridiculous. If taken as a pop art thriller that looks good with a strong cast, it delivers an entertaining strong-woman-in-distress-who-wins-out melodrama.

HEAD OF STATE (US, 2002, d. Chris Rock)

Chris Rock comedies are a matter of taste. If you like him (as I do), then you enjoy his stand-up comic style, his satiric jibes and, generally, his feel good comedy. He has been in Down to Earth, Bad Company and Dogma in recent years.

Head of State is a movie about sinister Washington politicians manipulating the 2004 presidential elections because both candidates have been killed in a head on plane collision. With an eye to success in 2008, Congressman James Rebhorn decides that he needs a candidate who will lose. And he picks the local alderman who is doing his best for the poor African Americans of DC. This gives Rock the opportunity to do a bit of hip-hop campaigning, a Mr Smith Goes to Washington for the 21st century. And it is amusing to watch a good-natured candidate upstaging the politicians, preaching social justice and proving that we all like a bit of the unconventional.

Rock has co-written the film as well as directed it and goes full steam ahead with jokes, routines and the possibility of a black American president. He also gets to make a Mr Smith speech at the end of the TV debate with his opponent, the Vice President (Nick Searcy) whose catchphrase is "God Bless America - and no place else".

A pleasing fantasy but, really, 'what if...?'

BELOW (US, 2003, d. David Twohey)

Another movie in the submarine genre. In more recent years we have had *Crimson Tide* and *U 571*. Below is also set in World War II, in the North Atlantic. A submarine picks up three survivors from their attack on a German ship. All is not as it might seem. The captain has died during the attack, one of the prisoners is German while the other two are English - and then the crew start to hear voices and mysterious things go bang in the night.

The authentic war situation gives the film some edge, but it does not generate the tension that audiences would be expecting. Writer-director, David Twohey took on a similar kind of story with his journey to Mars tale, *Pitch Black*, in which the vehicle travelling through space becomes haunted and the crew gradually diminishes. That film was literally dark and mysterious. So is the world below. Maybe the blend of realism and horror does not quite gell.

The cast looks earnest, Bruce Greenwood as the man in charge, Matt Davis as the hero who, we know, will save the day or, at least, try to, Olivia Williams as Miss Page, a nurse rescued from a hospital ship.

The achievement with this one is not as successful as the intentions.

MONSTER (US, 2003, d. Patty Jenkins)

Perhaps Americans are familiar with Aileen Wournos who spent 11 years on death row in Florida and was finally executed in 2002. Film buffs will know her from two fine documentaries by British director, Nick Broomfield, which had theatrical release after being screened at many film festivals. Now, many more people will know of her because of this film, 'based on a true story'.

Aileen Wournos grew up a victim of contemporary society, abused during her childhood, a prostitute at thirteen despite her fantasies of being a star, no education despite being shrewd, surviving but feeling that no one loved her.

This background is given in the screenplay by first time director, Patty Jenkins, but it is brought to life in a superb performance by Charlize Theron. We can see and appreciate how the actress has entered into her character and lives it, no longer Charlize Theron but Aileen Wournos. Winner of the Oscar for Best Actress in 2003, it is a tour-de-force performance. A very glamorous woman in real life, Theron has gained weight, been made up to lose all her glamour and lit to create a rounded character who does some monstrous things but still elicits some compassion and a desire for understanding.

The film traces the relationship between Lee Wournos and a seemingly prim young woman, Selby, from the north who has been sent by her father to stay with her aunt to cure her of her lesbianism. When she approaches Lee, Lee finds that here is someone who accepts her and loves her. She becomes dependent on her emotionally while she supports her from her work as a prostitute - and then from the money she takes from the customers she kills. An attempt to find an ordinary job is met with disdain by employers and by social care workers. She sees herself as a good person, at right with the Lord, even though she kills some of her victims most callously.

Christina Ricci is very good as the sometimes simpering Selby, who is also a passive aggressive who consciously or unconsciously manipulates Lee, fascinated by her work and lifestyle. Ricci gives a strong performance which never intrudes on Theron's work but, rather, enhances it.

Not an appealing story, some violence, continued coarse language but, nevertheless, a humane portrait of a person who was both victim and aggressor at the margins of modern society.

THE FOG OF WAR (US, 2003, d. Errol Morris)

Winner of the 2003 Oscar for Best Feature Documentary (and beating off the excellent *Capturing the Friedmans*), this is a film well worth seeing and thinking about. Its director, Errol Morris, has been making arresting documentaries for a quarter of a century, on topics ranging from eccentric pet cemeteries to a portrait of Stephen Hawking and his *Brief History of Time*.

Morris has developed a technology which allows him to put a screen of himself as interviewer at the top of the camera filming the interviewee, enabling people to interact with him while looking directly

at the camera. He has had several series of interviews like this for television. Here, he has a long documentary which, at core, is an interview with former Secretary of Defence under John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, Robert S. McNamara. At the time of the interview, McNamara was a vigorous and intellectually alert 85.

Morris has gone through many archives to find footage that brings McNamara's always interesting observations and memories to life so that the potential for monotony in a single interview is overcome. There is plenty for the eye, especially concerning the Vietnam War where McNamara was seen as hawkish, although less so in the film. In the context of the conflict in Iraq, the film offers a great deal to help audiences learn from history.

The structure of the film is clever. Morris offers eleven lessons to be learnt from McNamara. They are generally concerned with having empathy with the enemy, appreciating how they are thinking and what their terms of reference are. He says that seeing and believing are always suspect, especially when we are conditioned to see what we want to see. He advocates a wariness of rationality, an objectivity that is too cerebral and ignores more personalised factors. While he steers clear of questions about blame and guilt concerning the Vietnam War, he acknowledges that to achieve ends which are seen as good, good people have to do things which are evil.

The film fills in McNamara's background, making him a real personality in a way that he may not have been seen in his heyday. Close attention is given to the Kennedy's and the Cuban crisis, to the advice he gave JFK in 1963 to withdraw the military advisers, the shock of the assassination in Dallas, the reasoning that Johnson used to escalate the American presence in Vietnam and the consequent huge loss of American lives. His comments on the perspective of an arch-hawk, General Curtis Lemay, who advocated destroying Cuba and a very aggressive approach to Vietnam (couched in the language of the security of the American people very similar to the aggressive rhetoric of 2003) are worth pondering.

A satisfying and provocative documentary.

THE PERFECT SCORE (US, 2003, d.

The CAT exams in the US determine whether a student will go to college. A group of students who, because of not studying or through personal problems, agree to steal the questions from the computer and prepare the right answers. One of them, played by Scarlett Johansson giving no evidence that she could do *Lost in Translation* or *The Girl with the Pearl Earring*, is angry with her womanising education executive father.

The group spend time bonding, then getting into the computer - which means that we are watching a not particularly interesting or sympathetic group doing something which is cavalierly immoral as if this was the normal thing to do.

Spoiling the ending of a film that most will not want to see - they each in their own way have a change of heart and do not cheat, so it all ends up morally every after.

AGENT CODY BANKS: DESTINATION LONDON (US, 2003, d. Kevin Allen)

After the success of the first Cody Banks, as well as the popularity of the *Spy Kids* series, a sequel was quickly planned for the now 16 year old CIA agent from Seattle. No one knows he is an agent, especially his parents and obnoxious younger brother. At a CIA summer training camp (which can easily be disguised when parents arrive), he gets a commission to go to London to uncover a villain whose laboratories have developed a machine (used to drill teeth) that can program anyone to do what the criminal mastermind wants. His target is to control the US President who will be on a visit to London.

So, off to London to see the sights (which look attractive), to join a children's music school and to team up with an MI6 operative who is also in the orchestra. He is to be chaperoned by agent Anthony Anderson.

Frankie Muniz has proven popular on television in *Malcolm in the Middle* and is quite engaging on the big screen. There are a lot of adventures, action sequences and people under mind control. The finale

takes place during a concert in the Palace where the Queen and Tony Blair are quite prominent - and seem to enjoy the rock song that is inserted into the program to give Cody time to unmask the villain. Pleasing, innocuous entertainment for the younger brigade.

FEAR X (Denmark, 2003, d. Nicholas Winding Rein)

A far too horror-movie title for this psychological drama. A familiar enough plotline is designed as a case study of a security guard whose wife has been shot in a mall parking lot and who is obsessed with finding out who did it and why. The writer and the director have opted for what might be called a Harold Pinter style of dialogue and interaction. There is not haste, no hurry. People speak slowly and enigmatically with lots of pauses between sentences or before replying. Audiences with a compulsion to get on with it may not be able to stand the sombrely measured and slow tone.

And the setting is a snow-falling season in Wisconsin.

John Turturro is good as the tormented man. Minutely examining surveillance videos, he gets some clues as to who might be responsible and travels to a town to find a woman with information. Things are not what they seem and he becomes victim of a conspiracy which is interesting in itself but which is portrayed in the long and deliberate conversations of the rest of the film.

Critical comment on the posters referred to its 'blistering intensity'. That is certainly misleading. At best it is mesmerising. At worst it is tedious. Which means, as always, that it is a matter of taste. The director, Nicholas Winding Rejn, is Danish and interiors were shot in Copenhagen.

DAWN OF THE DEAD (US, 2003, d. Zack Snyder)

With the remake of The Texas Chainsaw Massacre and other films of the 70s, writers and directors are claiming that they are re-interpreting the films rather than remaking them. This is also the claim for this re-working of George A Romero's classic, Dawn of the Dead (1979), "the greatest zombie fantasy of all time".

Writer James Gunn (who also wrote the screenplay for Scooby Doo 2!) has updated Romero's film though kept the action in an affluent city mall. No explanation is given for the plague that has turned the population into living dead cannibals who prey on one another and seek to destroy those who are still human. Romero is praised as making an allegory of 20th century consumerism (at its extreme as humans consume one another). While this is still valid for the present film, the action tends to concentrate on a group of survivors using every means to preserve their lives. In this cross-section of people, there are the selfless and the selfish, the duty-bound and the exploiters, the ingenious and the helpless.

Using the techniques of traditional horror movies, effective make-up for the zombies and a screenplay that has more sense and wit in it than many other horror films, it also has a strong cast who give more humanity and intensity to the plot. Sarah Polley, Ving Rhames and Steven Weber lead the survivors, having to make life and death judgments in entirely new and alien circumstances. This means that the film is not merely one of shocks and shuddering (though that is there as well), but that it is both provocative and thoughtful.

OPEN RANGE (US, 2003, d. Kevin Costner)

After his Oscar-winning success and worldwide approval with Dances With Wolves and a number of star turns in the early 1980s, like JFK and The Bodyguard, Kevin Costner fell on hard times with his futuristic epic, Waterworld, and then his apocalyptic actioner, The Postman. He has struggled to regain his popularity. Whether Open Range will do this is uncertain. However, it is certain that this film is an achievement and restores confidence in Costner's ability as a director and in his power as a screen presence.

Open Range is a classic western (and can be compared with Ron Howard's The Missing which was released at the same time). It is the 1880s, the end of the era of the open range where cowboys can roam freely and tend their herds. Landowners are now taking possession, building barbed wire fences and protecting their interests by using gunmen to get rid of enemies and dominate the towns.

Into this setting comes *The Boss*, with Robert Duvall in a role that suits him perfectly. With him is a veteran cowboy who has seen grim days, Charley, played by Costner himself (who ensures that Duvall is the star and is centre film). When their hands are attacked by the gunmen of the Irishman who is the local landowner (Michael Gambon), the stage is set for a showdown. Costner evokes memories of all the OK Corral films as well as *High Noon* where the townspeople flee the coming danger.

The plot is more complex and has several strands including the young Mexican hand (Diego Luna), the manager of the stables who is on their side (Michael Jeter), some of the business people in the town, the sheriff who is in the pay of the landowner (James Russo), and the hired killer (Kim Coates).

The other central character is the local doctor's wife, a middle-aged woman who has given up on marriage. She is played effectively and without by Annette Bening.

Costner has re-created his town on location in Alberta, Canada. It is both stark and beautiful. Weather is important and there is a powerful storm and deluge. But it is the scenes with the cattle, the life in the bar and the stores, the shootout at the corral that are reminiscent of the past but have a strong life of their own indicating that Costner can be a fine film-maker.

UNDER TUSCAN SKIES (US, 2003, d.

Based on a bestseller by Frances Mayes, this is a story of a woman (Diane Lane) who is shocked by her husband suddenly leaving her and, despite the support of friends, who goes into Depression. Taking a temporary apartment in a block where everybody is depressed, she realises she needs to get away and takes up an offer by her pregnant lesbian friend (Sandra Oh) to give her a ticket for a holiday in Tuscany.

What used to happen when Americans went to Tuscany or to romantic locations in Europe happens to her. Impulsively she buys an old villa in Cortona and proceeds to renovate (with the help of a group of Polish workers) and to settle into Italian life, even falling for a handsome younger Italian - which cannot last.

This is a very feeling film which may not (in fact, probably won't) appeal to audiences who prefer their entertainment more intellectually rigorous and who prefer making objective judgments on matters. This film is very subjective, everything seen from Frances' point of view, a mixture of sadness, exhilaration, happiness and the discovery that she can live a completely different and more fulfilling life under Tuscan skies.

ASH WEDNESDAY (US, 2002, d. Edward Burns)

The prologue of this film takes place on Ash Wednesday evening, 1980, in Hell's Kitchen, New York. A young man overhears thugs planning to kill his brother. Instead, to save his brother, he kills them and has to flee the city, his brother and friends making out that he is dead and his body washed up from the river.

The main action takes place on Ash Wednesday, 1983, when the brother returns home and is sighted. His brother and his local boss want to keep it quiet. Feuding family members want vengeance. His wife does not know that he is alive and has been in a relationship with his brother. It's a very busy day.

Nevertheless, most of the characters seem to be able to get to Mass. The ashes are displayed on their foreheads quite conspicuously. They are all part of the Irish Mafia of this part of New York City, with codes, loyalties and vengeance as strong as in the Italian Mafia not all that many blocks away.

The film was written and directed by its star, Ed Burns, who made an impact with his feature debut, *The Brothers McMullen*. He has stayed with the New York he knows best in his subsequent films, *She's the One*, *No Looking Back* and *Sideways* of New York. Perhaps the trouble is that he knows them so well and re-creates them in such detail that his absorption in his city and his characters does not excite wide audiences so much, unless they are in the know or have a personal investment in the place or, as here, in the spirituality behind the celebration of Ash Wednesday. Burns relies on audiences recognising the ashes (and has a Church sequence) and knowing that we are dealing with sin,

repentance and salvation and that this underlies the behaviour and decisions of the central characters, one of whom is the local priest (James Handy).

Elijah Wood plays the younger brother and Rosario Dawson his wife. Writer Malachy McCourt plays the Irish boss. An insider's view of New York.

21 GRAMS (US, 2003, d. Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu)

Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu impressed critics and the public with his grim and earthy picture of men and dogs in Amores Perros. He then contributed a segment to the portmanteau film, 9/11/01 (which was mainly darkness with sounds except for a man falling from one of the twin towers). Sean Penn also contributed a short story to this film.

Here he combines with Sean Penn (Best Actor at the Venice Film Festival for this role) to make his English-language feature debut. And it is an impressive film.

There were three stories in Amores Perros which intercut with each other. This time Inarritu has three central characters whose stories intersect in tragic ways. He plays with time by introducing the characters with scenes from the present, quickly moving to the past or to the future. At first, one wonders whether the three stars are playing more than one character each, so different do they seem. Gradually, we are able to put the very varied jigsaw pieces together and to work out the linear story. Some critics have remarked that if you put this linear plotline down, it seems a basic and rather ordinary story. Maybe. But the fact is that Inarritu and his writer, Guillermo Arriaga who also wrote Amores Perros have decided to challenge the audience to work at understanding the characters, the complexity of their motivations, the decisions they make and the consequences of their actions.

The three stars give powerful performances. Penn is an ailing maths professor in a loveless marriage waiting for a heart transplant. His wife, Charlotte Gainsbourg, has returned to him to help during the convalescence and wants to have a child. Naomi Watts (Oscar-nominated) is a happily married woman with two daughters. Benicio Del Toro is equally impressive as a petty criminal with drinking and drug problems who has found Jesus and is fervent and evangelical in his conversion. Their paths cross - but this has to be seen as the film unfolds.

Many of the conversations turn on the meaning of life and of the world. The maths professor loves and lives by numbers which give a sense of order and interconnectedness. The wife's decisions are almost all emotional. The criminal has found the Lord but is challenged to see whether he deeply believes that all is dependent on God. The 21 grams sounds like a bit of urban legend. Allegedly everyone loses 21 grams when they die - the weight of the soul?

Grainy, gritty, grim - but compelling.

HONEY (US, 2003, d.

Honey is a 21st century incarnation of the old story of 'putting on a show to raise money for...'. Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney did it in the 1940s with Babes on Broadway. The 80s and 90s were especially fond of it with such films as Fame and the Breakdance movies.

This is an African Americans in the South Bronx story. The streets are tough. Jobs are scarce. And hip hop is all the rage. Honey (Jessica Biehl) teaches a class - but can learn some moves from potential criminal (and potential choreographer) Benny - and encourages her neighbours to channel their energy into dance.

Then the impossible happens. She is invited to fulfil her dreams by dancing for a music video director (who is white and later comes on to her appallingly). She gets the chance to shine, to have her children and dancers audition only to be sacked. And that is where she put on a show to raise money to buy a warehouse destined to pulling down that can be a dance school. Which is what happens with help from a sympathetic banker and singer Missy Elliot. And there is room also for a romance with a nice basketball player, Mekhi Phifer. Predictable but actually quite genial.

CHARLIE (UK, 2003, d. Malcolm Needs)

Another London gangster movie after so many of them from the late 90s. This is the story of real life East end gangster, Charlie Richardson - who has since allegedly reformed and has a guest appearance in the film.

The framework is an Old Bailey court case where Charlie and a number of his associates are on trial. As they give testimony, there are flashbacks to their days as petty criminals, setting up smuggling and dealing cons, paying off the police, widening their network while keeping a control on it by brutality and the use of torture more familiar from right wing Latin American regimes. It certainly reinforces the impression that many of these crooks, even though their mothers might love them, are sadistic thugs.

Richardson also ventured further afield and became involved in mining schemes for diamonds in South Africa. He has an affair with a journalist's wife, but she is the niece of a government official and he does some spying on the ANC in London for them.

Charlie (and the film) suggest that the 25 year sentence he received was too harsh and the judge was biased against him - and that the charges, if they were entered today, would be dismissed. After serving 13 years, Charlie escapes to Spain but his father, in the form of Steven Berkoff, persuades him to complete his sentence. Hence the respectable businessman and the film.

Whatever the truth about Charlie Richardson himself, the film gives an alarming view of the London gangs, the Krays included, and the vicious amoral lives they led.

GRAND THEFT PARSONS (US, 2003, d.

This is an unexpectedly entertaining show, based on actual events. When rock singer Gram Parsons died of a drug overdose in 1973, a number of people were interested in having his body. His respectable father (Robert Forster) comes from New Orleans to California to take it back home for burial. One of his girlfriends (Christina Applegate), a relentlessly greedy and unscrupulous woman wants his death certificate because she has a note which says she is to inherit all his property. His best friend, Phil Kaufman (Johnny Knoxville) who was technical adviser for the film, wants to honour a pledge that he will take the body into the desert beyond Joshua Tree and burn it in a memorial ritual, to free his spirit.

While the bodysnatching is serious, much of the film is played for laughs. This is especially true of a funny, comic performance by Michael Shannon as a perpetually high hippy who owns a hearse that Phil Kaufmann needs. They steal the body from under the nose of Mr Parsons at the airport and proceed through a road movie pursued by the father, by the girlfriend (who links up with Kaufmans' girlfriend) and various police.

On reflection, the whole thing seems a bit silly. Those who remember Gram Parsons and his music will enjoy it
- and probably a number of those who have never heard of him.

NORTHFORK (US, 2003, d. Michael and Mark Polish)

According to the opening of this mysterious film (a blend of realism and fantasy), Northfork was a town that went underwater when a Montana dam was built. We see footage from the 1950s showing the engineering feat, the civic pride and the hopes of the time. The film, however, is about a group of suited bureaucrats who have to tour the area, persuading the last remaining residents that they must leave.

So far, so good. This is a film made by the Polish brothers, Michael and Mark. With Twin Falls Idaho and Jackpot, they have completed a trilogy of films about towns in the American northwest states. They are not content to show the mere realities of these towns, they want to find the spirit of the towns and the people who lived there. With Northfork, they have opted for a central fantasy where a sickly boy who is being looked after by a reverend (Nick Nolte) creates a world where a really odd group of characters fly in and rescue him. Audiences who are not paying attention may be wondering where

reality ends and fantasy begins. And audiences may not be paying attention since the film is demanding and proceeds with a very measured pace.

Besides being a fable, the film is also visually poetic in its use of the Montana valleys and hills and some beautiful shots of landscapes and skies.

The Polish Brothers have a fine cast to work with led by James Woods as a bureaucrat who has to face the issue of transferring his wife's grave from Northfork. The fantasy group includes Darryl Hannah and Anthony Edwards.

The best summing up is probably to say that this is 'specialist viewing.

ZAMAN, THE MAN WHO LIVES IN THE REEDS (Iraq, 2003, d. Amer Alwan)

An Iraqi/French co-production, filmed in January, 2003, as America and the Coalition prepared to invade Iraq and topple Saddam Hussein. The director has stated that he wants his film to be a message of love to all people and he avoids blaming Americans or the former dictatorship. He wants to show images of Iraq and its people, other than those so often seen in the media. Of course, his film takes on an added significance in the hindsight of the war and its aftermath..

The film is simplicity itself, a film about goodness. Zaman is a man of the marshes, a long-believed location of the garden of Eden, the marshes at the junction of the Tigris and the Euphrates. It is a striking land and waterscape, all the sadder for its drying up and the people being relocated. It was a favourite place of the director who offers a prologue to the film, introducing us to the marshes, their wildlife and their beauty.

Zaman wakes, goes about his river ablutions, greets his ailing wife, the boy he has adopted after his parents were killed in a bombing raid, goes about his work with thatching the reeds and takes his wife to the doctor and learns that he needs to travel to Baghdad for medicine. His journey takes him into the bustle of the city, to pharmacies that do not stock what he wants and to the Catholic hospital where Allah and providence and a kind assistant get him the medicine rather than the cavalier director. Then back again.

Sami Kaftan's Zaman is a man of bearing and dignity, of faith and prayer, of a tradition of workers who do not deserve to be caught up in the oppression of Saddam (whose pictures appear frequently but which soon will be torn down). We hear snippets of news from the radio, about Congress and its budget allotments for the war. We hear the jets flying overhead. But life must go on and it is to the credit of this film that it offers a picture of a traditional and simple way of life, of basic values and humanity in a land that was headlines at the time of filming and continues to be.

TROY (US, 2004, d. Wolfgang Petersen)

Had Gladiator not been such a critical and box-office success, I wonder would backers have financed Troy. It is not fair to make too much of comparisons, but it does throw light on how Troy works (or does not work) and in trying to gauge its strengths and weaknesses. Russell Crowe brought a serious demeanour and physical strength to his role as general and gladiator, voicing his lines with sonorous voice and diction. Richard Harris brought wisdom and dignity to his Marcus Aurelius. The plot of military battles, betrayal and the struggles of the gladiator slaves symbolizing the fall of the Roman Empire contained great substance. There was a gravitas about the whole film.

Troy does not have quite the same gravitas despite its origins in Homer's Iliad. In fact, the plot is rather simple: the wife of a warlord flees with a lover which leads to an invasion and siege which ends in catastrophe for the Trojans and empire for the ambitious Greeks - and all compressed into a far shorter period than the long siege of Troy.

The special effects are, of course, very impressive: the thousand ships, the military might, the battles, the destruction of Troy.

The plot, however, centres on Achilles, a maverick warrior, who irritates king Agamemnon no end but who is drawn into the war when Hector kills his cousin in battle thinking that it was Achilles himself. Achilles, despite being portrayed by Brad Pitt, seems too sullen and surly to be a classical hero, without classical diction - to engage audience sympathies. In terms of sympathy, the Trojans win it all. Eric Bana is a decently heroic Hector. Peter O'Toole's Priam is a magnificent presence, the actor who does bring some gravitas to the film. Orlando Bloom who looks too young and slight as the wilful Paris eventually finds some courage. The Trojan women, Rose Byrne and Saffron Burrows (even Diane Kruger's Helen) elicit our concern.

The Greeks, on the other hand, come across as a vicious and power hungry lot, especially the bluff Brendan Gleeson as Menelaus who wants to avenge his humiliation by the absconding Helen and his cruel brother and leader of the invasion, Agamemnon, effectively played by Brian Cox. It is only Sean Bean's wily Odysseus (whose idea it was to build the wooden horse) who makes the Greeks interesting to watch. (And, despite the screenplay's frequent reference to Achilles' wanting to be remembered in history, it is Odysseus/Ulysses who is the best remembered of those who fought the Trojan War.)

There has been a long tradition of mighty, expensive historical spectacles. Troy takes its place - but does not stand out.

HARRY POTTER AND THE PRISONER OF AZKABAN (UK, 2004, d. Alfonso Cuaron)

Part 3. The first two films in the series were directed by Chris Columbus, efficiently effective versions (so readers of J.K. Rowling's books acknowledge). They were straightforward stories with the flair coming from the plots and the exciting special effects. Columbus has stepped back to a producer's role and the Mexican, Alfonso Cuaron, has now achieved the seemingly impossible of pleasing audiences (the most important role) and pleasing the critics (no mean feat!) Cuaron made a version of *A Little Princess* during the 90s as well as an odd updated version of *Great Expectations*. He also made *Y Tu Mama Tambien* (And Your Mother Too), a rather energetic road movie of Mexican youth and sex, which would not suggest him as a director for Harry Potter! However, he has done it - and well.

Talk shows have shown how the three young stars have grown since the first film. They are growing in age with their development in the films. Daniel Radcliffe's voice has broken so Harry is now a teenager. He does very well this time and is more effectively centrescreen. Rupert Grint is still humorously down-to-earth support as Ron. Hermione is called a know-it-all by Professor Snape. She is, but has become a little more attractive.

While the old staff are still around (with Michael Gambon making a very smooth transition from Richard Harris as Professor Dumbledore and Hagrid becoming a teacher), there is the welcome addition of David Thewlis as Professor Lupin and a hilarious cameo by Emma Thompson as the short-sighted professor teaching discerning the future. Gary Oldman is good as Sirius Black, the actual prisoner of Azkaban.

The plot is not simply a confrontation between good and evil. Rather, there are more sinister aspects: Harry's life is under threat from Sirius Black; he is well tutored by Professor Lupin; the powers of evil are not those we might expect, so there is a certain suspense, especially in the final part where there is a play on time travel and rectifying situations. There are also some sinister creatures (especially werewolves) and a very agreeable Griffin (or Hippogriff, half horse, half eagle), called Breakbeak.

EMILE (Canada, 2003, d. Carl Bessai)

Emile is an elderly academic returning from Britain to his home country, Canada, to receive an honorary degree. It provides the occasion for him to meet his niece (whom he left in an orphanage when her parents died in an accident) and her daughter. She dislikes him and resents his abandoning her. Her daughter is resentful of her mother. In fact, there is a great deal of resentment in the family which is revealed through stylized flashbacks where Emile's long-dead brothers interact with him. He moves in and out of the past. Gradually, he comes to some peace, especially through the friendship of his grandniece.

This is a modest small-budget film with Carl Bessai acting as writer, director and director of photography. Its strength is in the quiet, almost reticent performance by Ian McKellan as Emile - a far cry from Gandalf. Debora Kara Unger is intense as his niece. A small, personal drama.

THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW (US, 2004. D. Roland Emmerich)

Roland Emmerich is a German director who has made his name with Hollywood blockbusters, Stargate, Independence Day, Godzilla and The Patriot. In looking at that list, we realise that he has destroyed Washington by alien attack, New York with Godzilla trampling it, but took the side of the American Revolutionaries against Briton in The Patriot. Now he has the opportunity to create giant fissures in the Antarctic, ice storm Tokyo, have tornados uproot LA, have a tidal wave sweep through New York and, in general, destroy most of the upper half of the northern hemisphere.

It should be added that the special effects to achieve all of the above are some of the best to be seen.

While the disaster formula is as expected, the characters are rather one dimensional and there is the usual dialogue about threats and heroism. There is no time to think about this because something dramatic and exciting happens every 15 minute or so.

One of the differences is that it is nature which is destroying the world (aided, of course, by selfish and greedy humans) but that there is no hero this time to rectify everything. All that anyone can do is to die with dignity or try to help people to survive. This happens in Britain with Ian Holm and Adrian Lester as stoic scientists. The heroism is in scientist Dennis Quaid (whom the US government took too long to listen to) trying to get to New York to save his son (Jake Gyllenhaal, who actually manages pretty well without him).

The premise is rather interesting and challenging: global warming and the melting of the polar ice-caps mean changes in temperature in such warming currents as the gulf stream lead to freezing and a new ice age.

In 2004, Michael Moore's Fahrenheit 9/11 attacked the Bush administration. The Day After Tomorrow is also highly critical. Kenneth Welsh's obdurate Vice President, advocating economics over environment and looking and sounding very like Dick Cheney (against the Kyoto requirements) is the villain of the piece but, as refugees from the freezing US cross the Rio Grande illegally to find a new life in Mexico (!), he apologises. But, of course, this is disaster entertainment and fantasy.

LUTHER (Germany, 2003, d. Eric Till)

Luther is a film made by dedicated people, especially from German church organizations. It fits into the genre of historical costume drama while its themes are those of reformation in the Church. It is geared towards a more popular audience rather than a more theologically sophisticated audience.

Joseph Fiennes may seem an unexpected choice to play Luther but he does well. He seems to grow into the role so that by the end he is quite convincing.

The film opens with Luther's anguish and depression, a fearful attitude towards God, especially in his first Mass. However, he is sent to Rome on pilgrimage by his benevolent superior (Bruno Ganz). Overwhelmed at first, he is then scandalized by its worldliness, especially of the Church itself. When is sent for theological studies at Wittenburg, he questions many dogmatic stances (with a great knowledge of official Church teaching) which ultimately leads him to the posting of his 'theses' on the cathedral door. The film shows in some detail the Roman reaction, especially from Leo X and Cardinal Cajetan (Matthieu Carriere) and his wily protégé (Julian Firth). Eventually, he is protected by Frederick of Saxony (Peter Ustinov) and the emerging German nationalism clashes with the Church authorities.

The Diet of Worms and the gathering at Augsburg are shown in some detail as are the aftermath of the princes' putting down of the peasants, Luther's being dispensed from his vows, his further studies, marriage to Catherine Von Bora.

There was a film version of Luther's life in the early 1950s with Niall McGuinness. In pre-ecumenical days when Luther was seen as a religious enemy by Catholics, the film was advised against. Twenty years later, there was a film version of John Osborne's play with Stacey Keach in the role. As Osborne looked on Church issues from the outside, his play explored issues of authority and power and religious hypocrisy. In Looking at Luther at the beginning of the 21st century and with the success of decades of dialogue between Lutherans and Catholics, much of Luther's critique of Tetzl and the selling of indulgences, of the politics and corruption amongst Church officials, seems justified. Had the Council of Trent (1545-1563) been called by the Pope during Luther's lifetime, the history of the Reformation and dialogue with reformers could have been so different.

THE CAT'S MEOW (US, 2001. D. Peter Bogdanovich)

A film which has had a strange history of release and non-release. Seen on television in some countries before cinema release, it found a UK distributor, for instance, only in mid-2004. A pity, because it is more interesting and better written and acted than many a quick release.

Based on a play by Steven Peros, it is of great interest to movie buffs. We are taken back to a weekend in November, 1924, a cruise from San Pedro, California, to San Diego, with high-powered guests, a trip which one character refers to as The Cat's Meow. Despite the disclaimer at the end of the film that it does not portray real characters, it does. It also dramatises a speculation about the weekend and the death of one of the guests, Thomas Ince, a celebrated producer, a force in the establishing of Hollywood (Cary Elwes).

The ship is owned by media magnate (the basis for Citizen Kane), William Randolph Hearst. He is accompanied by his mistress, actress Marion Davies. Edward Herrmann gives a powerful performance as Hearst and Kirsten Dunst reminds us once again of what an excellent actress she is. Other guests include a somewhat lecherous Charlie Chaplin (Eddie Izzard), the young and ambitious gossip columnist Louella Parsons (Jennifer Tilly, very effective) who was to be Hearst's champion, especially in the denunciation of Citizen Kane and British writer, Elinor Glyn ('It' referring to sex appeal was attributed to her) (Joanna Lumley).

The film shows the glitter and surface glamour covering the Jazz Age combination of emptiness, ambition, deals and the wielding of power along with sexual liaisons - and letting everything out with the Charleston.

Peter Bogdanovich has had a very mixed career over thirty years, reaching his peak with The Last Picture Show and What's Up Doc in the early 70s. This, however, is one of his better films and an interesting, if reasonably speculative, look behind the Hollywood facades.

BON VOYAGE (France, 2003, d. Jean-Paul Rappenu)

This is an unexpected film, both entertaining and challenging.

We are taken back to France, 1939-1940, and the outbreak of the war. This is a French film being highly critical of France and its citizens as they face (or refuse to face) the reality of the German invasion, the occupation of Paris and the establishing of the Vichy government as General De Gaulle goes into exile in Britain.

On the serious side, the film shows the dilemmas facing the authorities, the people of privilege escaping from Paris, desperate to get the best suites in the top hotels in Bordeaux, the activities of Nazi agents and their ruthlessness, the need for scientists involved in the preparing of heavy water to cross the channel to safety. Politically, this is very interesting with a French director inviting the French to think again about this era (and the subsequent complacency and collaboration as well as the Resistance). Gerard Depardieu plays an influential minister who is both patriotic as well as pragmatic and continually distracted by his affair with a prima donna film star. There is also a sub-plot with Virginie Ledoyen as a young scientist trying to spirit her professor out of France.

On the comic side, the film is always in a rush, characters continually moving, running, the camera tracking them, chasing them - often in the mode of French farce. Several of the characters act as if they are in a farce or a movie because this is the focus of their life rather than face the reality of war and its

consequences. Isabelle Adjani pouts and poses convincingly as the self-centred film star. Gregori Derangere is a would-be novelist, infatuated with a puppy love for the star and even going to gaol for her, looking ingenuous most of the time. Yvan Attal is a petty criminal who sees how he might profit by the war (stealing stocks of expensive wine). Obviously, he is going to be the patriot rather than the effete upper class. Peter Coyote is the journalist who is a Nazi agent.

There are a number of supporting characters who fill out the complexity of what happened in those days. The film looks very good - we feel that we have been in the middle of all the crises, farcical episodes and heroism.

NOBODY KNOWS (Japan, 2004, d. Kore-Eda Hirokazu)

Based on real events but fictionalized. Writer-director, Kore-Eda Hirokazu (*Afterlife, Distance*) has clearly been entranced by the story of four youngsters left by their mother in a flat in Tokyo and having to fend for themselves. So entranced is he that his film runs for just over two and a half hours, which seems a long time, a very long time, to tell their story which, on the whole and despite the harsh consequences of their mother's abandoning them, is comparatively uneventful.

It is the children themselves who make a vivid impression. Yagira Yuuya as the 12 year old Akira, the oldest of the four, gives a completely convincing performance and was given the Best Actor award in Cannes, 2004. The audience is totally focused on him, his accepting his difficult task with equanimity, although it finally begins to take its toll, his strong character, his love for his brother and sisters and his ingenuity in helping them survive for so long. The other children, a sister just younger than Akira (who also has a sense of responsibility), a raucous little brother and a five year old sister. On the whole, the children are very stoic, especially when their mother has concealed them from the landlord and they have been forbidden to leave the apartment.

The long running time does enable us to get to know the children extremely well and to care for them, wondering how they will cope (especially since their mother is a contradiction of love for them and care-less about them). It is all presented in a very naturalistic way, attention to small detail of day-to-day living and relying on the cumulative effect of this detail. It is also a tribute to human nature and the innate capacity of children like Akira to be selfless.

CONSEQUENCES OF LOVE (Italy, 2004, d. Paolo Sorrentino)

Soon into watching this drama of a solitary man, I was tempted to think that it could be described as an existential portrait of ennui and scarcely repressed angst – but whether that would be helpful in a review, maybe not. But that is what it is. Toni Servillo plays a 50 year old man, ageing before his time, who has lived in a quiet Swiss hotel for eight years. He confesses to a lack of imagination, that he is bored, that he suffers from insomnia, obsessed by the desire to sleep. Gradually, we learn his secret – not so surprising, the surprise being what he ultimately does to break out of his confinement, what he calls his 'stolen life'.

The film captures his moodiness, his seeming aimlessness, his unimaginative introspection. Because of the silent, lone presence of Servillo and a certain dignity he communicates, we are captured as well.

The ending, with some possible redemption, is photographed in an iconic way that gives the anti-hero great dignity, with an unexpected final sequence that offers him some memory and immortality.

LIFE IS A MIRACLE (Bosnia, 2004, d. Emir Kusturica)

Any Kusturica film is something of a wild experience. His is a flamboyant aesthetic, capturing the verve, even madness, of Balkan emotions. It was seen in *Underground* and *Black Cat, White Cat*. *Life is a Miracle* is very much in the same vein. It is set in Bosnia, near the border with Serbia in 1992-1993, peace then war and the violence and madness that followed. While his themes of life, war, resilience of the human spirit are significant, many audiences will find his films too much, even far too much.

When there were so many sequences that brought to mind the words 'crash' and 'bash', a lot of other words ending in 'ash' came to mind to help the review of this film: brash, clash, dash, flash, gash, hash,

lash, mash, gnash, rash, smash, slash, splash, thrash, trash - all of them bear on the impact of this over-exuberant and overwhelming film. Before the war breaks out, there are some mad goings on in this part of Bosnia even as authorities try to finish a rail tunnel. Three drunken young men shoot bottles from each other's heads, one of their mother's is a demented former opera singer, they are all football mad and the aftermath of a soccer match would get everyone's passport confiscated for hooliganism - but this is all presented as good, raucous fun. The men are also prone to bash women without a by your leave. This violence-prone storytelling tends to undermine the impact of the film.

Once the war starts, the violence steps up and, even though there is an unlikely romance, a dream of a happy future in Australia (once again a visa problem for violence) and a reiteration of the title, this is a bellow of a film.

THE LADYKILLERS (US, 2004, d. Joel and Ethan Coen)

It was rumoured that the 1955 Ealing classic with Alec Guinness, Peter Sellers and Cecil Parker was to be remade with Robin Williams. British alarm bells went up. In fact, it is Tom Hanks who steps into the Alec Guinness role and the Coen Brothers who have updated and Americanised it. (Including several words that would not have occurred to original writer William Rose to include, the Coen's stock swearing which will deter some of the oldies who might want to see how the two films compare.)

It has certainly been Americanised – but with a lot of reference, even homage, to the original. While little old lady, Katie Johnson, has been turned into big old lady, Irma P. Hall, the five thieves parallel the past characters. Tom Hanks does a very clever turn as the sinister professor, with his own kind of crooked laugh and a vocabulary and turn of phrase that would put a literary gent to shame. Marlon Wayans, on the other hand, keeps his expressions and turns of phrases from the first two Scary Movies.

The setting is Natchez, a suburb of African Americans with several visits to Church where lots of hymns are sung with exuberance. In the meantime, the Mississippi and a bridge with a garbage barge passing underneath do very well for the former London trainline.

It is the Coens in very relaxed mood, doing a caper movie, getting some amusing performances, especially from J.K. Simmons and his troublesome stomach, and raising some laughs. The main reason for seeing it, however, is the to and fro between Hanks and the excellent Irma P. Hall.

FAHRENHEIT 9/11 (US, 2004, d. Michael Moore)

Everybody knows Michael Moore. After the success and Oscar of Bowling for Columbine and the media hype for him and the film, he looms large as a documentary film-maker. Even George Bush and Congress members recognize him immediately. Not that Mr Bush will want to see much of him, because this is a highly (highly) critical portrait of the president, his initially care-less administration and the aftermath of 9/11 leading to the terrifying of the American people about terrorist threats and the decision to invade Iraq. A very large agenda for a two hour film.

It is engrossing. While many might criticize Moore's stances and his particular bias, there is a great deal of information in the film which needs to be considered, not ignored or dismissed. The images of the election results of 2000, Congress protests without any Senator signing speeches as required, the long vacations of the president up to August 2001, his initial inactivity on hearing the news of the September 11th crashes, the business links with the Saudi royal family, the evacuation of the Bin Laden relatives on Sept 13th, 2001, raise all kinds of questions about the president. When the film moves to the creation of a terror atmosphere during 2001-2002, Moore gives evidence, quotes media programs, interviews people on the street.

Finally, Iraq. Familiar material by now but telling nonetheless. Had the news about the torture come out while Moore was making his film, there would have been some more fairly devastating material. As it is, he moves towards the more personal, the loss of American life. He visits his home town of Flint and talks with some of the bereaved.

One caveat. Moore lets himself down concerning the coalition against Iraq. He offers some visual jokes mentioned countries like Palau and Morocco who joined but there is nothing about the UK except one send-up image of Tony Blair. There is nothing about Spain, the opposition of France, Germany or

Russia or the situation with United Nations resolutions. This would have given much more depth to his treatment of the war – or does Moore confine himself to Americans only?

When released, this film could have a powerful influence on people making up their minds in the US for the November 2004 elections.

EXILS (France, 2004, d. Tony Gatlif)

Algerian-born director, Tony Gatlif, has made many films about gypsies and about music. This time he has two wanderers, ultimately, two pilgrims, who represent his own attitudes towards his homeland and its history over the last half century.

Romain Duris and Lubna Azabal play exiles in Paris, he from a rich family who has experienced imprisonment, punishment and exile since the 60s, she a poor and mysterious woman who has little feel for her land of origin. She initially laughs heartily at the idea of traveling to Algeria.

But they do, and we journey with them – by foot, by train, by car and truck, by boat. We pass through the prosperous French countryside, the plains and deserts of Spain. We meet migrant workers who squat in ruined buildings, gypsies, dancers in Seville. And, once across the Mediterranean, the empty landscapes of Morocco and Algeria until the city of Algiers. They get rides, they do casual fruitpicking work, their sexual relationship is tested. We spend a great deal of time with them.

However, the important part of the film is the time in Algiers itself, the young man coming to terms with his homeland and his heritage, the girl unwilling to bow to local traditions of dress and head cover but finally caught up in a long trancelike dance which brings her some – at least – temporary exorcism and catharsis.

Beautifully photographed with plenty of Gatlif music and songs, the impact will depend on how strongly audiences will identify with the themes of exiles and finding home and how patient they can be with the two, often querulous, leads.

NOTRE MUSIQUE (France, 2004, d. Jean-Luc Godard)

80 minutes of Jean-Luc Godard, 21st century style. The champion of French cinema of the 1960s, the ideologue of cinema as art as well as teacher, the experimentalist of more recent decades, now seems to have some peace despite his heartfelt detestation of war. While music is key to the experience of this film, it is the images which have most impact.

Godard borrows from Dante in the structure of his film: the three kingdoms of Hell, Purgatory and Heaven. However, his 'comedy' is less than divine in the sense that he decries the inhumanity of the human race. God, however, or, at least, the transcendent is not absent.

Godard has done a lot of work on compilation films, collages of seemingly disparate images which combine to form a visually poetic study of a serious issue. His Hell is a collage of images of war, some from news, some from archives, some from the movies about war, including old cowboys and Indians, the American Civil War (and some modern American images). His Purgatory is situated in Sarajevo, evoking memories of the Serb troops in the surrounding hills a decade earlier, but showing a city coming to life again. Visitors come for conferences on literature, for lectures on text, cinema and image, Godard himself included. This provides opportunity for interesting and stimulating discussion on war, especially on the Israel-Palestine conflict. It also raises issues of how cinema works on the sensibilities and psyche of the viewers. The Heaven sequence is briefer, more some images of beauty and of hope.

Godard includes many arresting quotations like death is 'the possible of the impossible' or 'the impossible of the possible' and, from a Catholic woman executed in 1943, 'the individual seeks two, the State seeks one'. Challenging but also more accessible Godard.

TROPICAL MALADY (Thailand, 2004, d. Apichatpong Weerasethakul)

An unusual blend of the modern, naturalistic cinema with Thai mythmaking, the film suddenly breaking off from a modern story and moving into captions and voiceover for the myth. The two parts are related (with the same two actors in each part) and one needs to be thinking of both to appreciate the meanings – which will be demanding on many audiences, especially as the second part is so much slower and contemplative.

As a group of soldiers patrol a forest and take time off in the nearby town which has a multi-lane highway passing through and has its mall and aerobic classes, one soldier spends a day with a local man with whom he is falling in love. They eat, they go to the movies, they visit a Buddhist cave shrine, they go to a Karaoke bar... Suddenly we are transported into the dark of the forest where a shaman, a beast in human form is ravaging the countryside. The soldier stalks the beast, intent on destroying it, especially as it feeds on others. But, can he kill the beast or will he surrender himself to it?

An opportunity to go into another culture and learn rather than enjoy.

WOMAN IS THE FUTURE OF MAN (Korea, 2004, d. Hong Sangsoo)

One is tempted to think after seeing this film that 'no one is the future of anybody'. Although the film has a brief running time, it spends a great deal of it looking at and listening to its three protagonists. It also avoids a simple linear exposition of its plot, preferring to make quick transitions into flashbacks. It is also one of those films which does not tie everything up, let alone tie it up neatly

One young man is a film director returned from the US who meets up with his old friend, now an art lecturer. They eat, they drink, they visit the girl who had had a relationship with each of them. What has happened to them? What have they achieved? How do they relate? Can relationships be better? The screenplay leads us to be somewhat pessimistic about the answers.

THE HOLY GIRL (Argentina, 2004, d. Lucrecia Martel)

As the film opens, we hear sacred music, girls talk about their vocation in life but the more explicit aspects of Argentinian Catholicism make few further appearances, except for the central teenage girl memorizing the Litany of Loreto and deciding what her mission is at that moment. The first part of the film suggests that it will dramatise and explore themes of religion and emerging sexuality but that is not the case. It is the emerging sexuality that is central.

However, the setting for this drama has a Robert-Altman feel about it. It is a rundown hotel in the provinces which still offers facilities for conferences. We wander about with the camera, meeting characters, often briefly, moving on, overhearing bits of conversation, listening in to discussions, watching the different ways in which people criss-cross. In many ways, the central girl, Amalia, sometimes gets lost in all of this. Her mother, Helena, is a far more imposing presence. The other important character is a doctor attending the conference, a married man yet he makes a sexual move on the girl which would be treated as harassment if not some molestation. While she is intrigued as well as upset, she then makes it her mission to save the doctor.

There is quite a lot going on in people's lives, in the running of the hotel, in the progress of the conference, in the emotional dramas. And then the film just stops. The director clearly thinks that she has offered us the data. Now, we have to provide whatever ending we choose or want.

SHREK 2 (US, 2004, d. Al Adamson, Kelly Asbury, Conrad Vernon)

A pleasure to say how enjoyable this sequel is. Shrek had the element of surprise as well as delight which made it such a success. Now we have the element of pleasant familiarity as well as delight.

The animation is as good as ever, the details of the characters, the backgrounds, the city of Far Far Away. The range of characters, the welcome return of the old as well as some exciting new, is large. The songs, however, are not particularly memorable and are usually subdued by the action.

As before, the fairytale element is the opposite of what we might expect: the romance of the ogre and the large, green princess, the ever-chattering donkey, a completely narcissistic Prince Charming and a scheming fairy godmother. That, of course, is part of the entertainment and charm.

The actors have made the characters their own and voice them perfectly. Mike Myers can be forgiven The Cat in the Hat for his Shrek voice. Eddie Murphy reminds us of how funny he can be. Cameron Diaz is charming (and tough) as Fiona. This time round, Julie Andrews and John Cleese are the king and queen. Jennifer Saunders tries some absolutely fabulous querulousness as the vampish and scheming Fairy Godmother while Rupert Everett is excellently self-absorbed. However, they are often upstaged by the brilliant creation of Puss in Boots, both visually as a latterday Zorro and as playfully voiced by Antonio Banderas.

[It was a pleasure and a surprise to hear a theatre full of critics actually enjoying themselves!]

THE MOTORCYCLE DIARIES (Brazil, 2004, d. Walter Salles)

Since his death in 1967, Che Guevara has become a symbol of revolution, an icon for all types of protest. There have been a number of documentaries on him, especially his role in the Cuban uprising (with some comments from Castro himself in Oliver Stone's *Commandante*) and a late 60s Hollywood biopic with Omar Sharif. Walter Salles' film is based on his diaries, written during a trip in 1952 which took him through his native Argentina, Chile, Peru, Colombia and ended in Venezuela. It is also based on the book by his friend, Alberto Granado, who shared the journey and who also went to Cuba and still lives there (his old and gnarled face being the final image of the film).

The journey was life-changing for the 24 year old medical student. The film shows nothing of his later life and battles. Rather, it portrays a personal Latin American journey of the early 1950s. What started as an adventure was gradually transformed into the beginnings of social consciousness and a fight for justice. This is the journey that the audience shares.

Using the conventions of the road movie, the film, at first, seems just another buddy experience in beautiful, rugged and remote areas, the usual spills from their old motor bike, bluffing their way into people's homes, flirting along the way. But, by the time we reach the mines of Chile, the Indians in Cuzco and the lepers in San Pablo, Peru, we share the awareness of social inequality and the need for action that is both compassionate and just.

As Guevara, Gael Garcia Bernal gives yet another fine, generally understated performance. He is matched by the exuberance of Rodrigo de la Serna as Alberto. The film notes that this is not a tale of mighty deeds but rather smaller and more ordinary action. It is still only too relevant to today and to the countries of South and Central America, a plea for action. The Ecumenical award winner in Cannes, 2004.

CLEAN (France, 2004, d. Olivier Assayas)

Olivier Assayas has made very different kinds of films in recent years, his nostalgic 19th century costume drama, *Sentimental Destinies*, and his mod, hi-tech social thriller, *Demonlover*. This time he has made an interesting and thoughtful contemporary drama, though not as emotionally intense as might have been expected.

The opening shots of Hamilton, Canada, with its vast smoking industrial complexes, evokes an overwhelming mood of polluted air and difficulty in breathing – which is what most of the characters experience, whether they be in Hamilton, Vancouver, Paris or London.

Maggie Cheung (Assayas' Irma Vep) is Emily, a faded rock singer, an addict, fighting with her singer husband who dies of an overdose. She spends six months in gaol for possession. Can she clean up her life, especially since she has a young son who is being cared for by his grandparents? The film focuses principally on Emily, her methodone treatment, her making an act of the will to be ready for her son, her attempts to get work (especially from an egotistical past lover, Jeanne Balibar), her dealings with the boy's grandfather. Nick Nolte as Albrecht gives one of his best performances, understated but deeply felt, a man who has not been much of a father to his own son and who fears the responsibility when his wife dies.

The story and the performances are strong enough to engage the audience.

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF PETER SELLERS (US, 2004, d. Stephen Hopkins)

One could do a tribute, one could do an overview of a career, one could do a family portrait, one could do a warts and all (or at least bits) study of a celebrity, one could probe and illustrate the work of a comic genius who succumbed to fame while never really growing up. This intriguing film attempts all of the above and, for a two hour film, does quite a good job of all of them. By the end of the film, we have a chronology of Sellers' life and career, seen him with his family – and done some psychological speculation, glimpsed many of the high spots with accurate re-enactments, been dismayed at the moodiness and immaturity of the man, regretting the behind the scenes hurts he inflicted even on those he loved while still managing to create a host of memorable comic characters.

Screenwriters, Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeeley, have condensed a great deal of material into the two hours. Director Stephen Hopkins creates a variety of moods and several worlds: homes, studios, cinema glamour. In this he has assisted immeasurably by his cast, especially Geoffrey Rush who once again illustrates the wide extent of his talent, submerging himself in the role, impersonating Sellers' radio and movie moments skillfully while creating a real character, an object of love and hate. He also impersonates several other members of the cast, including his mother, father, wife, Kubrick and Edwards, in their roles.

Emily Watson is fine as his wife, Anne, while Charlize Theron is a glamorous and bewildered Britt Eklund. Miriam Margoyles creates the obsessive and possessive mother, Peg, while Peter Vaughan is quietly ineffectual (later being a model for Chance, the gardener) as his father. Many celebrities appear, including Blake Edwards (John Lithgow) and Stanley Kubrick (Stanley Tucci).

For those who remember Peter Sellers and cherish his characters, this is a must. It may open up the work of the actor for younger audiences.

2046 (China, 2004, d. Wong Kar Wei)

I don't know.

Wong Kar Wei has made some bold films and directed the highly effective portrait of two lonely people and a restrained quest for intimacy in *In the Mood for Love*. Would 2046 continue in this direction? In the direction, yes, but...

In one sense, the film is inflated. It looks and sounds too big for what it is offering in terms of plot and characterization. Cinematographer, Chris Doyle, ensures that it looks good. There is a wide-ranging score – but here is a problem. Mixed with opera are a number of popular American songs ranging from *Perfidia* to *Sway with Me* and pop Christmas songs. They begin and then cut out in mid-sequence making us wonder whether this is a deliberate dramatic effect or whether they just finished and, too bad, the scene continues on.

Tony Leung, as in *In the Mood for Love*, can play handsome and suave, but his character here is a self-centred womanizer who claims that he has loved but gives very little sign of it in his exploitative behaviour. The women, though strong, are still his victims, even when they are played by (an older) Gong Li and Zhang Ziyi.

Contrary to publicity, 2046 bears almost no relationship to the year, the 50th anniversary of the unification of Hong Kong with China. Rather, it is a mythical place (as illustrated at beginning and end with some arresting computergraphs) where memories disappear (except for our hero's) and where the women are malfunctioning androids.

For those who like it, it will be a beautiful, even poetic, portrait of a lost man seeking meaning and intimacy. For those who don't, it is all a bit like the emperor's clothes.

THE EDUKATORS (Germany, 2004, d. Hans Weingartner)

It is helpful to know that the Austrian director is about thirty, lived for a time in a commune, and was imbued with a great desire for social justice and reform.

His principal characters are young twenty somethings who want to find something to believe in. They are fed up with the globalised consumerist, have – have not, society. Protest seems to achieve nothing, except the experience of some police brutality. What about some symbolic actions, like breaking into mansions, not stealing anything but rearranging the furniture and other trappings and leaving a note (signed by The Educators) telling the residents that they have too much money?

Obviously, this can be a risk and they fall victim to the chances they took. However, by abducting a very wealthy man and taking him to beautiful mountain countryside, they have the opportunity to assess what they believe in, what they should do (especially with some tangled relationships). They hear how it was in 1968, the rebellious protests, the optimistic dropouts and commune dwellers, the idealism that thought for some moments that the world could be changed.

This makes the second part of the film more interesting in its ideas and interactions with a veteran of 1968 and its weighing up the pros and cons of that historic period.

Oldies may shake their heads at the 'lack of realism' in this idealism or sit comfortably back in their armchairs and applaud it.

COMME UN IMAGE (France, 2004, d. Agnes Jaoui)

This is a very civilized, intelligent and witty adult drama. It takes us into a world of celebrity and would-be celebrity, a world that might be tempting but which would quickly pall in real life.

There are several central stories which intertwine. They are very well acted. We are asked to give our sympathies to a 20 year old who wants to be a classical singer. She has no self-image (except that she is talentless and overweight) and no self-esteem – which is not helped by her extraordinarily self-absorbed father with low frustration tolerance of everyone and everything, including his daughter. They are played perfectly by Marilou Berry and co-writer, Jean Pierre Bacri.

Director and co-writer, Agnes Jaoui, plays a music teacher, a sympathetic woman, one who gives some values focus to the proceedings. She is married to a temperamental novelist, Laurent Grevill, who comes to bask in the reflection of the selfish writer and publicist.

There are a number of other interesting characters, an elderly agent, a young journalist and members of a choir.

It is the intelligence and wit of the dialogue that keeps the film absorbing and the plight of the daughter and the it-has-to-be-seen-to-be-believed offhand and cruel behaviour of the father. Very French, but universal appeal.

OLD BOY (Korea, 2003, d. Park Chan-wook)

When the Koreans want to make a bloodthirsty film, they don't feel the need to hold back. After Sympathy for Mr Vengeance, Park Chan-wook has contrived a mysterious and convoluted thriller that emphasizes vengeance without sympathy. It poses a frightening 'what if...?' scenario. What if you were imprisoned for fifteen years without knowing who did it or why? How would you cope - apart from watching television and perfecting martial arts skills? And what if you were freed and found yourself doing the detective work in your own story?

In one sense, this is what the film is about. But, it is more complex than this and raises issues of freedom, manipulation and control. Along the way, there is a strong performance by Choi Min-sik as the wronged man, some expert action and stunt sequences and some grim violence. It is both intriguing and repelling.

BREAKING NEWS (Hong Kong, 2004, d. Johnnie To)

Nothing particularly new here: a bungled police raid, a shootout, a chase, criminals hiding in a block of flats and taking a father and children hostage. What is somewhat new is the role of the media and the police using the media. In order to restore its tarnished reputation, the Hong Kong Police authorities decide to put on a show of their tracking down of the criminals. Everyone is there, the police force en masse, the authorities in their trailer supervising strategy along with their media staff ready to edit footage when necessary and feed it to the avidly waiting journalists.

The film's audience has the inside edge as we know what is going on in the building. We are first hand witnesses to the cat and mouse chases. We enter the apartment and see what happens to father and children (including a hearty good meal had by all). We know how the authorities are trying to manage the media.

It generally goes as one might expect, hails of bullets, defiant stances, some final heroics. Johnnie To has made a number of martial arts movies as well as police action, so he knows what he is doing – and does it effectively.

BAD SANTA (US, 2003, d. Terry Zwigoff)

Terry Zwigoff directed the very interesting documentary about artist and cartoonist, Robert Crumb, Crumb. He also directed Thora Birch, Scarlett Johansson and Steve Buscemi in *Ghost World*. It is easy to see why he might be attracted towards the somewhat anarchic *Bad Santa*.

The humorous screenplay – one could hardly say witty as the whole film is splattered with language that Santa is not expected to use and some unsanitary habits that one does not want to see from Santa, especially his sexual behaviour – is in the realm of what inventive reviewer described as 'yukkage'. This is the kind of film where you warn, 'If you like *South Park*, then this is your kind of film. If not, try a rerun of *Miracle on 34th Street*'.

Billy Bob Thornton enjoys himself immensely as a perpetually sodden alcoholic safecracker who teams up annually with his 'short people' friend, Marcus (Tony Cox) to do a stint as Santa with the children he loathes – and then clean out the safe on Christmas Eve. In fact, they are both pretty good at this.

This year, however, things change a bit as Santa gets entangled with a lonely fat boy (a perfect performance of ingenuous niceness from Brett Kelly), taking refuge in his house with a girlfriend from a bar and finding that he becomes a little bit involved. While there is sentiment in this friendship, the edge and language are always there and the final image is of the fat boy giving his teasers the finger. Which is what the film is doing to us, whether we like it or not. But, despite the crassness, it is a bit hard not to laugh and to like it.

HOUSE OF THE FLYING DAGGERS (China, 2004, d. Zhang Yimou)

To review the plot takes only a line: the police are out to unmask the head of a rebel group who rob the rich and help the poor. And, in fact, we really see very little of this at all, just some scenes of the police planning an undercover job (although this is China in 859 AD, so that sounds a little anachronistic, but that is what happens) and a few confrontations.

So what happens the rest of the time? That is worth seeing.

First, there are some dances in The Pink Pavillion of great beauty and acrobatic grace. This is all choreographed exquisitely.

Most of the rest is fights in the forest, most of it *Crouching Tiger* style. Again the choreography is exquisite, perfect timing (admittedly some swordplay and a lot of deadly accurate flying daggers). Much of the forest is bamboo and how the soldiers all got to the top of the trees and are able to walk and fly there is beyond credibility. But it doesn't matter, it looks wonderful.

Finally, there is tragedy and battle in the snow. Extraordinarily beautiful film-making.

BAD EDUCATION/ LA MALA EDUCACION (Spain, 2004, d. Pedro Almodovar)

Pedro Almodovar is Spain's leading director, with a strong international reputation and two Oscars (for *All About My Mother* and *Talk to Her*). He was initially provocative with his films of the 1980s, especially in his attitude towards the Catholic Church and in his treatment of sexuality, especially of homosexual themes and characters.

In recent years, he has perfected his style, his ability to create intelligent melodramas, channel his flamboyant still into thoughtful and moving explorations of the human experience, often bizarre experiences.

Bad Education has been in planning stages for many years. In 2002, when Almodovar announced that he would move into production, there were immediate claims that the film would be anti-clerical. It would be a film about his own experiences of Catholic education in Spanish schools of the 1960s. However, Almodovar himself has been disclaiming the anti-clerical charge. He has said that had he made the film twenty years earlier, it would have been quite anti-clerical. He says now that he has mellowed and that, although he does not have what he calls 'the luxury' of believing in God, he values much of what he experienced in the Church (especially in liturgies, celebrations and art) during his childhood. He says he asked God to give him faith when he was a boy but God did not give it to him. He also said recently that the priests at school said that watching films was a sin and that he had to choose sin. These themes are incorporated into *Bad Education*.

The other aspect of the film that hit the headlines before its release was that of sexual abuse. While not experiencing it himself at school, he was aware of it. English-speaking countries have been aware of this widespread problem since the 1990s, culminating in the US crisis in 2002. The issue is beginning to emerge more forthrightly in continental European countries. While the issue is important, Almodovar treats it quite differently from the way it was portrayed, for example, in the recent *Song for a Raggy Boy*, where the audience briefly saw the truly abusive side of unscrupulous behaviour and the pain of the victim. Almodovar spends more time showing the emotional behaviour of the abusing priest, his obsession and emotional immaturity, but puts more blame on how the priest handles the situation and jealously exploits his authority and power within the school. This is portrayed in the visualizing of a story written later by the victim. We then see the priest in real life, having left the priesthood and married, but still a sexual predator.

Almodovar's treatment of abuse is more complex and thoughtful than what might have been expected. His judgments are mellowed at times with some compassion for the emotions of the perpetrator. His sympathies are with the victims, although he also raises questions about adolescent attitudes towards sexuality, especially in the context of Catholic upbringing, Church teaching and a sense of sin.

Almodovar is a very clever writer and is able to construct quite intricate plots. For its full impact, the film needs to be seen with as little knowledge about its structure as possible. Audiences will leave with a great deal to think about concerning all the central characters, about what is real, about what is memory, about sexual orientation, about sexual intimacy, about childhood experiences and their effect on adult development or the impeding of development, about moral choices and about God and religion.

To put all this into a proper perspective, it is necessary to acknowledge what Almodovar has said in many interviews. That, perhaps, he should not have called his film *Bad Education* because the past in the school sequences is only one of about half a dozen plot segments, that he sees the school sequences as a launching place for his interest in his characters as adults and how they interact.

Bad Education offers an opportunity to see something of abuse issues dramatized. For many people, for Catholics, the stories are often sensational headlines, condemnatory articles, court cases where justice must be done and where people in the Church have to accept responsibility. They do not have a sense of the stories, of the human dimension of what victims have experienced, what abusers have done. In this sense Almodovar's film contributes to the Church's continuing examination of conscience, especially in some countries which have not yet faced the crises experienced in the United States and other places.

MOOLAADE (Senegal, 2004, d. Ousmane Sambene)

Ousmane Sambene, from Senegal, is a veteran of sub-Saharan film-making. He can tell an excellent story as he does here. But, he is also a director with a mission.

He invites his audience into a village, showing us around, showing the details of ordinary life, of the routines. It is a patriarchal village. It is an Islamic village.

Then we are alerted to his key theme: the barbarity of young girls being submitted to female circumcision. One of the strong women of the village takes a stance against the practice. The Koran is invoked and explanations given that this is not Muslim tradition. Some of the girls refuse to be cut and an equivalent of sanctuary, Moolaade (Protection) is invoked.

The drama is in the conflict of stances, the cruel whipping of the protesting mother, the confiscation of all radios from the women and the radio burning in the square, the question of whether television should be allowed and the perennial issues of arranged marriages and the sanctifying of the whim of the head men.

Obviously this is a didactic tale but one that needs to be told.

DEAR FRANKIE (UK, 2004, d. Shona Auerbach)

What might have been just another very nice picture of a deaf boy, his struggling single mother and their problems is a very simple and moving film experience. Andrea Gibb's screenplay keeps information back from us which helps us share the struggles and then understand them (especially in a very fine ending). Director and cinematographer (using Glasgow and coast locations) Shona Auerbach is able to keep the proceedings both realistic and emotional with Emily Mortimer credible as the mother (who says that she keeps writing letters from Frankie's absent father so that he will write – the only way she has some access to his voice), Jack McElhone keeping just the right tone that avoids sentimentality as Frankie. Gerard Butler has the crucial role of the man who is asked to step in as Frankie's dad.

A small film but one which audiences will be glad they saw.

CRONICAS (Mexico, 2004, d. Sebastian Cordero)

Media ethics again. The context is a reporting team from Miami (The Hour of Truth) who are following the mystery of a murdering pedophile in Ecuador.

The audience knows almost immediately the identity of the murderer so that is not a mystery. The suspense is in waiting to find out what the celebrity reporter is going to do when he realises that he knows the identity and can make media capital out of it. However, there is the question of the police (and an officer who refuses bribes) and what the law requires concerning information, finding graves of victims as well as the rights of the accused.

The film moves with great pace showing the pressure under which the media reporters work. John Leguizamo is effective as the reporter. Leonor Watling is his producer and there is an intense performance by Damian Alcazar as the suspect.

THE ASSASSINATION OF RICHARD NIXON (US, 2004, d. Niels Mueller)

Nixon was never assassinated, of course, but there was an incident at an airport in the early 1970s where a man wanted to hijack a plane with the threat of a gun and a bomb. This story relates to that incident.

The film is principally a portrait of a disillusioned man, a man with little self-esteem, looked down on by his successful brother (whom he stupidly tries to cheat), divorced from his wife and allowed rarely to see his children, patronised by a loud furniture salesman boss and his son. He tries to read the recommended self-help books but is caught up in the rights and wrongs of truth and lies in business. And, all the while, on television, there is Richard Nixon extolling the American way of life and how much opportunity there is for everyone. This is not the perspective of Sam Bicke.

Sam Bicke is another outstanding performance by Sean Penn. We know he is destined to failure and to violence but one can't help liking him, having care and pity for him and agreeing with his feelings on the oppression of ordinary people. In his recent films, Penn has proven himself a consummate actor.

There is great support from Naomi Watts as his ordinary and hassled wife, from Jack Thompson as his supremely self-confident boss, from Don Cheadle as his good friend and support and, in just one scene, Michael Wincott as his older brother.

You know the mayhem is coming and why, but it is still shocking when it happens.

Obviously a grim film, but well worthwhile.

NON TI MUOVERE (Italy, 2004, d. Sergio Castellitto)

Actor Sergio Castellitto (L'Ora della Religione, Mostly Martha) has directed a version of his wife, Margaret Mazzantini's novel. He also takes the central role.

This is a drama of passion and identity, a middle-aged surgeon faced with his daughter injured in an accident. He opts not to operate. Instead, he takes the opportunity to review his life. It is something of a shock to discover that this dignified professional has secrets that have gnawed away at his spirit. He has been able to conceal them from his loving wife. He now acknowledges the truth.

An important part of his secret is a woman from the slums, a woman abused by her father, abused by him. She is played with great sincerity and a determined lack of glamour by Penelope Cruz. It is good as well as interesting to see Penelope Cruz in a challenging dramatic role instead of the less demanding performances required of her in Hollywood. She brings both an air of mystery as well as pathos, which makes our response to the infidelity of the surgeon more ambiguous.

POIDS LEGER (LIGHTWEIGHT) (France, 2004, d. Jean-Pierre Amaris)

A brief study of a young man burdened with unhappy memories of childhood (mocking his Italian but loving father), resenting his sister whom he really loves. He tries his hand as an undertaker and seems to be doing well. He is also an amateur boxer and successful in several bouts, finding in his coach a substitute father-figure. He also falls in love with a Vietnamese woman who supports him.

In an incomprehensibly Gallic way, he opts for self-pity, some brutal rejection of his girl-friend, walking out of his job, bashing in the ring and humiliating his sister and her fiancé. Just as incomprehensibly, people are kind to him and forgiving. While forgiveness is wonderful and it leads to a positive ending, it seems to let the hero off the hook in terms of really acknowledging his self-centredness.

WHISKY (Uruguay, 2004, d. Juan-Pablo Rebella and Pablo Stoll)

Why would a rare Uruguayan film claim 'Whisky' as a title? Well, it seems to be the equivalent of 'cheese' for Uruguayans when they are asked to smile for a photo. Not that there are many smiles on the characters in the film - although the audience will be smiling quite a lot. Two young writer-directors have given us the portrait of two very lonely people, locked in the daily repetitions of their factory routines. We smile at the day after day rituals but, actually, they are very sad. Jacobo is a 60 year old sock manufacturer. Marta is his taken-for-granted loyal assistant (aged 48). She, at least, does have a little joy in her life as she goes to the movies each evening.

When Jacobo's brother comes to Montevideo from Brazil for a memorial service for their mother and brings some of his liveliness and exuberance, Jacobo dowses almost everything with glum cold water while Marta (whom he has employed to pose as his wife for the weekend) becomes more animated in his presence. Will this visit make any change in their drab lives?

Nicely done and a chance to see a film from Uruguay.

DE-LOVELY (US, 2004, d. Irwin Winkler)

Of course, that is a Cole Porter word and this is a film about Cole Porter, part biography, part portrait, part tribute.

The device used is that of having the aged Porter meet with a producer who wants to stage a musical about his life, the characters coming into the theatre to greet Porter and then beginning the play which will include a great number of his songs – which have been specially chosen to illustrate different phases of his life and his relationships. The film keeps coming back to the producer and Porter for comments about what is happening in the biography, for some re-assessment and for Porter to be able to reflect on his life.

Jonathan Pryce is the producer and has the opportunity at the end to lead the troupe in *Blow, Gabriel, Blow*. But the focus of the film is directly on Porter with Kevin Kline giving an often incisive performance, even commenting on Warner Bros 1945 *Night and Day*, the colourful and sanitised version of his life (with Cary Grant) that, if he could survive this, he could survive anything, especially the injuries sustained in a riding accident which led to almost thirty operations on his leg and eventual amputation.

But the two features of the film are his songs and his relationship with Linda Lee Porter despite his homosexual orientation.

There are plenty of songs worked into the plot and sung by a number of contemporary artists including Robbie Williams, Sheryl Crow, Alanis Morissette and Elvis Costello. By the end one has a fairly comprehensive appreciation of his melodies, his witty lyrics, his constant theme of love, his ballads and his songs for shows culminating in *Kiss Me Kate*. We hear *Night and Day*, *Under My Skin*, *Begin the Beguine*, *True Love*, *Anything Goes*, *De-lovely*, *What is this thing called Love*, *Let's Misbehave* and, poignantly, at the end of the film, *In the Still of the Night* as well as during the final credits, *You're the Top* by Porter himself (rather squeakily).

As regards relationships, the focus is on his love for and marriage to Linda, played here by Ashley Judd as a rather charming wealthy American aristocrat who knows what she is doing in marrying Porter, supports him, often with great difficulty, for around thirty years until her death from lung cancer (there is a great deal of smoking in the film). Porter's orientation was not public in those days. The film shows his liaisons as well as the potential for blackmail.

Porter's was an affluent world, a world rather remote from the struggles of everyday life. He lived for years among the 1920s expatriates in Paris. He had a very successful Broadway career. He also took well to Hollywood for a while (with a mock presentation of *Be a Clown* sung with MGM head, Louis B Mayer).

De-Lovely is probably of limited interest, younger audiences (unless devotees of golden oldie movies) may wonder about it all, but those who remember the musicals with fondness will relish it.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS (Australia, 2004, d. Dean Murphy)

Paul Hogan has found it difficult to sustain his screen reputation since the first two *Crocodile Dundee* films. He has tried *Flipper*. He has tried another *Crocodile Dundee*. This one might restore some faith in his screen power, limited as it is to his ironic Ocker presence and humorous style.

But, this time, he also has a message. He is lending his talent and reputation to a comic plea against homophobia and a respect for people in same-sex partnerships. Hence the title – which, in fact, was the title of a Rock Hudson comedy of the 1960s (but with Gina Lollobrigida).

At first the film has every homophobic name and joke you can think of plus some very broad camp and mincing humour. Of course, this indicates that Vince (Hogan) and his mate of many years, Ralph (Michael Caton) have absorbed a homophobic culture as have the townspeople of Yackendandah where the film is set. When Vince realizes that he can get government tax relief, he proposes that they declare themselves a couple and - understatement of the film - nobody will know. Ralph and Vince do some research in learning how to mince, but do some real homework with a visit to Darlinghurst, the clothes shops and the clubs, where they make some friends they never ever dreamed they would meet.

The humour comes in people finding out, especially the tax inspector (Pete Postlethwaite down under) and Ralph's daughter (who has something to tell her father who does not know her friend's name is Peta).

It all ends well, of course, with Michael Caton delivering the message for tolerance in a moving speech with reticent feeling and Hoges keeping up the jokes.

LOVE'S BROTHER (Australia, 2004, d. Jan Sardi)

Jan Sardi has been writing screenplays since the early 1980s. They have often had an Italian-Australian background like *Moving Out* and *Street Hero*. He also received great acclaim for his screenplay for *Shine*. Finally, he has moved into the directing role.

Love's Brother is unashamedly romantic, especially the almost final sequence of a kiss aboard a ship. (Seeing the film at a market screening, I was sure I heard some sniffing among the buyers!) It is also Sardi's tribute to the post-war Italian migrants who ventured to Australia, a strange land so unlike Italy, who banded together at first, suspicious of the locals (who frequently mocked them or were hostile), but who have become part of the ever-changing Australian population. The setting is country Victoria just outside Melbourne and Sardi captures the flavour of life in those days, the quiet town where you could ride a bicycle without fear of being hit, where the local picture show screened *Demetrius and the Gladiators*, where there were 'Australian dances' and where a family could import the first espresso machine into Australia. And the parish priest was part of the community, a friend, joining in festivities, hearing confessions but also bringing more than a dash of common sense into scrupulous lives.

The focus is on two brothers, one painfully shy, the other, the younger, straightforwardly outgoing and protective of his older brother. It was the time of arranged marriages with brokers finding young women willing to migrate from Italy.

Giovanni Ribisi (*The Gift*, *Heaven*, *Lost in Translation*, *Boiler Room*) is often a passive presence on screen, rather uncharismatic. Here he has a role which really suits him and he is very convincing as the shy Angelo. Adam Garcia (*Bootmen*, *Coyote Ugly*), on the other hand, has real outgoing charm. They bring to life the difficulties of the marriage brokering. They are well supported by Amelia Warner, charming as the imported bride, Eleanor Bron as the marriage arranger, Barry Otto as the parish priest and John Bluthal still pining after thirty years for Italy.

There is a pleasing gentleness about the film, a memoir of days that are long gone but which obviously still linger in the Italian-Australian heritage.

ONE PERFECT DAY (Australia, 2004, d. Paul Currie)

The target audience for this film would be the young clubbers, especially in big cities, who need a night out to the accompaniment of the loud music beat, flashing lights, crowded dance floors and a thriving drug culture – although this is not the perfect day of the film's title.

The film itself is something of a downer in its plot, especially with untimely deaths of young people by raw drugs.

Daniel Spielman plays Tom, a musician who is unconventional, who wants to create music of the people, incorporating the sounds of the city, of nature, of the hardships of people on the street. His opera is created in and around London and performed there. Meanwhile, back in Melbourne, his young sister is desperate to talk to him about her pregnancy, his girlfriend is working as a nurse but also hoping to be a singer. When tragedy strikes, he comes back home, makes some rash assumptions about what has been going on and gets involved in working as a DJ, creating his sound, in a vast club in the Docklands. It is run by a real screen nasty. What happens is not entirely unexpected except in terms of deaths. The relatively unknown cast carry it off with support from Kerry Armstrong as Tom's mother.

One Perfect Day is the name of the song that Alysse, Tom's girlfriend composes and sings. It is a song of 'what if...?' and 'if only...".

BROTHER BEAR

Brother Bear won an Oscar nomination for Best Animation but lost out to Finding Nemo. It is not essential viewing. On the other hand, if it happens to come your way, you might be surprised at how archetypal it is.

The setting is the Pacific Northwest, rugged and beautiful country where the Native Americans roam and hunt and where Kenai (Can I?) is about to be initiated as a man in his tribe. We are definitely in mythic territory, especially when a Shawoman tells Kenai about the land in the north where the bright lights, the traditional spirits, meet the earth in a riot of colour and glory.

Kenai, however, is given the bear as his totem. He is not very pleased because he is told that it symbolises love, not exactly a 'man's' trait. That isn't the quality for a great hunter. In fact, on an expedition with his two brothers, he is pursued by a giant bear. It is only when his oldest brother, Sitka, (whose totem is the eagle, symbol of wisdom) collapses the cliff face and falls to his death along with the bear, who runs away, that Kenai is safe. Kenai pursues the bear and kills it.

Not only are we in wild territory, we are in 'shadow' territory. Kenai's two brothers, Sitka the wise eagle and Denahi the vengeful hunter, offer two sides of Kenai's potential: to acquire wisdom or to pursue violence. Now that Sitka is among the bright spirits, he has the opportunity to complement the initiation begun by the Anima, Shawoman, who has offered Kenai his totem and told him of the quest to the bright meeting-place. Sitka turns his brother into a bear. How better to learn tolerance and to understand than to walk in the pawsteps of your enemy?

Not only that, Kenai is unable to speak in human words but he can communicate with the animals. The Disney tradition is to 'people' films with a range of lovable and frightening animals. Now they are also shadow aspects of Kenai's individuation. Some of them are very funny, especially two rather hip/stupid moose. There are squirrels. There are mammoths. There are flights of migrating birds. They are all symbols of potential.

To all these animals there is a coda. Well, there is a cub bear, Koda, who befriends the bewildered Kenai, who accepts him as a bear, who is able to lead him to the elders of the pack and to the salmon pools. Koda also knows the way to the meeting place of spirits and earth. He is the shadow guide for Kenai's journey and quest, a means of reconciliation between animal and human, because the bear Kenai hunted and killed was Koda's mother. Danger is still ever-present as Danahi now pursues Kenai and Koda, thinking they are killer bears. The quest is, as it should be, fraught with perils and dangers.

The two bears also visit some caves where they see ancient pictures of hunting. Koda is able to enlighten Koda, to see the bears' plight from their point of view instead of that of the fearful and aggressive humans.

Needless to say, but saying it nonetheless, Kenai completes his initiation, sees his visionary brother in the lights of the spirits, accepts his totem and finds himself in harmony with nature - and, to make the point in a nature religion kind of way, Kenai remains a bear.

Some reviewers don't seem to have noticed anything of the above. Sight and Sound thought it was just Disney-like, by the numbers animal story, dispiriting. The reviewer got the message that 'humans are prone to original sins of hate and vengeance' but thought that this was 'over-worthy'. Just when I was going to mention the lyrics of Phil Collins' songs which comment on the themes I have suggested - 'Nothing I can do to change the things I've done', 'The path is hidden from me now... can't be free, can't see, can't face another day...', 'We are all the same, brothers all the same' - the critic referred to the 'disposable Phil Collins songs'.

If you are mainly interested in animation techniques and the box-office potential of a film, then the themes that audiences respond to consciously or sub-consciously can pass you by.

SOMERSAULT (Australia, 2004, d. Cate Shortland)

A somersault? You go up in the air in a somersault. You go to a new place, so to speak. Your feet are not on the ground. And, if you keep your eyes open, you will see everything from a different angle, the world upside down. You then land confidently on your feet. Cate Shortland's debut film is about a

sixteen year old Canberra girl who feels she has to leave home, leave her mother whose boyfriend she was caught kissing. Her journey is an emotional and maturing somersault.

While this is not new material, it is well treated, especially in Abbie Cornish's performance as Heidi. When she arrives in Jindabyne, expecting to get a job, she doesn't get it. Nor does she always manage well, especially in the sex department. There is some hope in a liaison (she sees it as love; it never occurs for him to look at it that way) with a rich young farmer (Sam Worthington). She is befriended by a motel owner (Lynette Curran in an earth-mother role) and finds that a local family begins to show an interest in her. But, with her inexperience and the emotional baggage she is carrying, she ruins most things. Instead of a somersault, she could have fallen flat on her face.

Abbie is that she is still at school, only sixteen. When we meet her, we know nothing about her and the screenplay really does not fill us in at all. All we know is that home is with her mother and live-in boyfriend. Mother works, he decides to call in sick. Abbie comes into the bedroom, examines and touches his tattoos. They kiss. Mother finds them.

Abbie is strongly introspective. This is clear in her reflections on her relationships and how she perceives herself and others. While she acts like a party animal and is easily picked up by casual predator boys, she seems to be comfortable in being alone. The taken-for-granted promiscuous behaviour may be something learnt from her mother (or may not) and seems to be an indication of loneliness and insecurity rather than who she really is. Her desire to love and be loved suggests she will become a woman who is more deeply committed to one person.

One thing seems pretty clear, she can be decisive. No sitting around waiting for something to happen. She tries for a job from someone she met in Canberra and who rashly told her to look him up. No job. While looking in a store, she tries again but is interpreted as flirting. She sees an ad and she applies. She notices details and remembers. She touches things - and she likes to touch people and to look at them, directly.

What finally emerges, after a casual one night stand and a threesome that doesn't happen, is that she does not yet need a man's love. That will come. Rather, she needs a mother. Irene, the motel manager, whose son is in gaol for murder and has offered her his room when she had nowhere to go, wants Abbie to leave after her slatternly behaviour. But Irene is too kind to be harsh. She acts like a mother surrogate and provides the solution to bring the somersault to a safe conclusion: some self-confidence and trust that her mother will forgive her. Abbie phones and her mother comes to get her. It is the kindness of others that saves her and a realisation that forgiveness is needed - from herself as well as others.

SIMONE

New Zealand-born, Andrew Niccol, had a very successful year in 1998. He directed a stylish futuristic thriller, *Gattaca*, which explored a totalitarian state and need for a rebel. He also wrote the screenplay for Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* where Jim Carrey's Truman Burbank had been an unwitting celebrity in his own reality show since he was born. The television producer, played by Ed Harris, 'played God' with Truman's life, controlling his every mood and action in every situation.

It is not a huge step to his screenplay for *Simone*, which he has also directed. He stays with the world of movies and television and the public's need for celebrity and its craving for entertainment glitz.

Al Pacino portrays a successful television producer who has troubles with his temperamental star (Winona Ryder). But a bequest from a mad scientist enables him to use his theories to create his own digital star (who is played by an actual actress, Rachel Roberts), *Simone* (S1mOne).

Simone is a construct, as is the movie we watch. We assume all kinds of things in movie-making. We know that computergraphics can reproduce huge armies for *Braveheart* and a Colosseum full of Roman spectators for *Gladiator*. But, what is the effect on the audience? So, what if the star exists only in a computer-controlled machine, appearing, lifelike, on a computer-controlled screen. It is fun to watch the stupidities of pragmatic producers like Pacino's wife (Catherine Keener), desperate to meet and be associated with *Simone*.

Fans swoon at her concerts and would swear that they saw her. She even receives two Oscars.

Niccol has given us an entertaining fantasy and satire about the tensions between our craving for reality and our idolizing of technology.

VANITY FAIR (US/UK, 2004, d. Mira Nair)

Perhaps many people think that this film has connections with the popular magazine of the same name. Rather, the magazine takes us back to one of the great classic novels of 19th century English literature, William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. Thackeray, like Charles Dickens, was an expert purveyor of the three-volume novel, serialized in magazines and, so, having a double life as a best-seller. How well can such sizable novels be transferred to the screen? And why should we see such films?

First, a religious note: Thackeray took his title from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes, 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity...' His novel offers an illustration of the futility and destructiveness of greed and ambition – the same message as that in the Gospels, 'what does it profit to gain the whole world and lose one's soul?'

Second, a social note: Thackeray took his readers back into the first decades of the 19th century, the years of the Napoleonic Wars, culminating in his defeat at Waterloo. These were the years of Regency England, a time of great public elegance, a beginning of a sense of empire, a time of belief that, despite poverty and oppression, anything was possible.

How can film-makers put all of this into a film which lasts two hours and twenty minutes, especially when a version of *Vanity Fair* of seventy years ago, 'Becky Sharp', ran for less than ninety minutes?

The task was entrusted to several writers, amongst whom Julian Fellowes, the Oscar-winning writer of another vanity fair kind of story, *Gosford Park*. The director is the Indian, Mira Nair, probably best-known for her exuberant *Monsoon Wedding*. [The Indian connection is not accidental as Thackeray himself was born in Calcutta.]

And the film itself? It is one of those wonderful re-creations of a period that the British do so well. It is quite lavish in sets and costume design, a delight for the eye. It also has a particularly strong cast. American Reese Witherspoon is cast as one of literature's most lively and memorable characters, Becky Sharp. She comes across as a nicer person than in the novel but is quite convincingly English. James Purefoy is her gambler husband, Rawdon, and Rhys Ifans (playing against type) is the faithful Captain Dobbin. Audiences will delight in so many of the supporting characters: Eileen Atkins as Miss Crawley, Bob Hoskins as Pitt Crawley and Jim Broadbent as Mr Osbourne.

And, yes, the film contains the whole book. It may be only a sketch and outline sometimes, but it gets the spirit of the novel. Not only does the audience feel it has lived through these times, but it understands this portrait of a society in transition, of the strengths and failings of human nature. It is well worth a visit into this past.

MOVIE REVIEWS

Around the World in 80 Days
Before Sunset
Blueberry
Club Dread
Confidences Trop Intimes
Connie and Carla
Control Room
Eurotrip
Flowers of Evil
Football Factory
Freeze Frame
Godsend
Highwaymen

Hours of the Day
Io Non Ho Paura
Jersey Girl
Joy of Madness
Mean Girls
Miracle
Miracle of Bern
Nathalie
Notebook
One for the Road
Paradise is Somewhere Else
Prince and Me
Spiderman 2
Story of the Weeping Camel
Thunderbirds
Tupac Resurrection
Twisted
Two Brothers
You Got Served
Young Black Stallion

MIRACLE (US, 2004, d. Gavin O'Connor)

Miracle is an ambitious title for any film. It seems particularly ambitious for this one. Although, if you consider sports figures to be the modern icons, perhaps it isn't.

You probably have to be a staunchly patriotic American to appreciate Miracle. It is essential, however, that you be a knowledgeable ice hockey fan and that you know your history. Otherwise, you may be wishing for some frequent commercial interruptions (as they do for television broadcasts at the real thing, which I can vouch for after a match in Philadelphia). The miracle in question (?) is the moulding of the American ice hockey team my coach Roy Brooks which led to their defeating the USSR team in the 1980 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, the Russians being for 15 years invincible.

When the coach is Kurt Russell who makes them work harder than Louis Gossett made Richard Gere in An Officer and a Gentleman (but they do it because they want to... again... again...again...), you know it is going to be tough stuff. He has an intuitive vision of his squad before he starts to train them and relentlessly pursues his goal. Noah Emmerich as his assistant and Kenneth Welsh as the team doctor exasperatedly try to modify his tough regime. But, you know (and history does) that it was worth it.

Patricia Clarkson (excellent in such films as The Station Master and Pieces of April) shows that she can do the expected neglected wife and mother as well.

It is all very worthy and, literally, flag-waving and would be a morale-booster for the American public in the aftermath of the war in Iraq when it was released.

CONNIE AND CARLA (US, 2004, d. Michael Lembeck)

If ever anyone proved herself a talent to be watched it was Nia Vardalos in My Big Fat Greek Wedding. Not only did she star in the film and create a vividly memorable character, she wrote the screenplay and won an Oscar nomination. The film is one of the highest non-studio box-office winners.

She had another story, another screenplay - and here it is. If it reminds you of Some Like it Hot, of course it does. Two musicians (here, moderately successful lounge singers of show tunes who love what they do) witness a murder and have to hide out. Where else but in a girls..., well, not exactly band and not exactly girls - in an LA drag queens' club. They are a rip-roaring success because the men assume they are men dressed as women whereas they are women pretending to be men dressed as women.

There are lots of show tunes, quite lavishly done in a high camp fashion, and an affectionately satiric picture of this gay world. It is, in the vein of *Priscilla, To Wong Foo, Strange Bedfellows*, a comedy plea for understanding before condemnation. By having a very straight man (David Duchovny) become attracted to Connie is bewildering to him and serves as a lesson for the wary straight audience.

But it's the girls who provide the good fun. Nia Vardalos is Connie, big hair, big voice, big ambitions. Carla is Toni Collette in yet another different role in her versatile career. The two do their own singing, impressively so. (And draw on Barbra Streisand in *Yentl* at the end to explain what has happened!)

It's all very silly, of course, but that does not matter much because it is a frothy musical comedy that advocates heart and understanding.

THE HOURS OF THE DAY (Spain, 2003, d. Jaime Rosales)

Encouraged by the information that this film won the International Film Critics' Award for Directors' Week at the 2003 Cannes Festival, you will immediately realise on watching the opening sequences that this is definitely a critics' film.

The premise is provocative and fascinating: some killers lead very ordinary and mundane lives, indistinguishable from anyone else except when they are driven to do violence to another human being. Debut director, Rosales, wants to make sure that the life of his central character, Abel, is extremely ordinary. He lives with his mother but is not unduly mothered. He has a girlfriend and a seemingly ordinary relational life. His children's clothes shop is losing money and he thinks he should sell it but finds it hard to find enough money to pay off his long-time assistant, he has friends and eats out with them. But the shots are long. At the beginning Abel shaves and then gazes (and gazes and gazes) at himself in the mirror. Most of the shots are long and static, frequently taken at an angle from an adjacent room. This artifice is naturalistic insofar as we watch the sometimes insignificant detail of daily life. It also distances us from Abel on the one hand but, especially after his first killing, we are watching him more closely, looking for clues to explain this inexplicable violence. We can only surmise. He is very introspective but seems very unimaginative, something of a loner, could have an obsessive eye for order and cleanliness.

And the film just stops, leaving us to reflect on what we have seen, an almost boring life. The murder sequences are both graphic and unsensationalised, very much along the lines of one of the most realistically ugly killings on screen, that in *Kieslowski's Decalogue* and *A Short Film About Killing*.

The critics were right, Abel and the mystery of his repressed violence bursting out stay in the memory.

THE PRINCE AND ME (US, 2004, d. Martha Coolidge)

As the status and reputation of European monarchies fluctuates, Americans seem to have an abiding fascination with the trappings of an institution they rebelled against and rejected more than 200 years ago. This time it is not the British monarchy but the Danish royal family who, incidentally, in May 2004, just before the film's release celebrated the wedding of the Crown Prince to a commoner, a journalist from the other side of the world, Tasmania. The film may seem a little déjà vu. But it won't stop the royalists - except when you look at the glamorous side of royalty, it is like a fairytale, but when you look at minutely detailed daily schedules of factory openings, sod turning and photo opportunities with the media on 24 hour royal watch, the fairytale becomes something of a nightmare.

So, this is a more contemporary and thoughtful take on the prince and the possible princess.

The strength of the film is that we quickly get to know the characters and ambitions (or not) of the two central characters. He is the headline playboy with a passion for fast cars and racing them and a coterie of beautiful female hangers-on. She comes from strong farming stock in Wisconsin, is determined to get top marks and gain entry in Johns Hopkins to become a doctor who will make a difference - she has already visited the poorer countries of Latin America. She does not know him, finds him very irritating and spoilt at first, then warms to him and falls in love not before teaching him how to slice sandwich

meat and take him to the farm. She is not a blushing violet and is very straightforward with her opinions - and, finally, with the prospect of becoming queen.

Julia Styles can be tough (Ten Things I Hate, The Business of Strangers, Mona Lisa Smile, Save the Last Dance) so it is interesting to see how she will handle her dilemmas. Luke Mably fortunately looks as if he actually might be a prince of somewhere and makes a decent fist of the transition from playboy to statesman via Wisconsin. His parents are played by a benevolent James Fox and an almost relentless Miranda Richardson. Ben Miller had to help Johnny English to get out of all his scrapes and messes. He does the same here for the Prince.

A must for fashion, gossip and royalty magazine readers.

TWISTED (US, 2004, d. Philip Kaufman)

Ashley Judd is a striking screen presence. She has appeared in quite a number of thrillers: early in her career, A Time for Killing and Heat; more lately, psychological thrillers with psychosexual overtones, Eye of the Beholder, Kiss the Girls, High Crime and now she is a policewoman in Twisted. She is on the way up in her career (but holds a deep, disturbing secret that her father was a serial killer and murdered her mother). However, she is a troubled woman, careless in her sexual relationships and frightened when she sees that the victims of a new serial killer have all been intimate with her.

She partners Andy Garcia and she (and the audience) become suspicious of him. Samuel L. Jackson is her mentor. Eventually, she is arrested on charges of murder but allowed out to act as bait to the killer – which, of course, is duly taken and the mystery solved. Many critics said the identity of the killer was obvious to them. Well, maybe...

This is quite a dark thriller, routine in many ways, especially when the director has a strong reputation with such films as The Right Stuff, Unbearable Lightness of Being and Quills. But Ashley Judd makes it reasonably worthwhile.

THE STORY OF THE WEEPING CAMEL (Mongolia, 2003, d. Byambasuren Davaa, Luigi Falorni)

A pleasing docudrama filmed in Southern Mongolia. The director, Byambasuren Davaa, comes from this area, grew up in the city but wanted to portray the way of life in the Gobi desert that his grandparents had lived. The film focuses on an extended family, their relationships, the different generations: the wisdom of the grandparents, the practical skills and experience of the parents, the portrait of two young brothers and their little sister. The film's showing life in the home, with attention to the fine details of the decorations and hangings in the tent are often quite funny and moving.

The film also focuses on the camels which the people herd in the desert. The grandfather beginning with his story of the camels originally having antlers but then giving them to the envious deer – but the deer never returned the antlers, which left the camels perpetually staring into the distance. Central to the film is a very difficult birth of a camel calf and the mother's disdain for her young, the desperation of the young colt, especially to get to his mother to feed. The family send the young boys into the town to bring back a violinist to play ritual music to soothe the mother, and this is effective. This part of the film is quite emotional as audiences respond deeply to the mother's rejection and then her weeping at the music and drawing close to the colt. The film also shows the young boys interested in city life and television and the finale of the film shows the city coming to the desert and the family setting up a satellite dish on their tent.

The film was the official Mongolian film nominating for selection for Best Foreign Language Oscar. It won a SIGNIS commendation at the Hong Kong Festival.

AROUND THE WORLD IN EIGHTY DAYS (US, 2004, d. Frank Coraci)

Better to sight one's sights rather lower for this pantomime version of Jules Verne's classic novel. It has been co-produced by Jackie Chan who takes on the role of Passepartout (ensuring that one of the

major stops on the way is in a Chinese village), the roguish hero who accompanies the rather uptight Phileas Fogg on his epic journey. British comedian Steve Coogan is Fogg and plays him ultra-seriously. It is left to Chan to offer the lighter touch (and some martial arts acrobatics). Cecile de France is the artist who adds glamour to the proceedings.

The film is amusing but often rather silly for adults. The slapstick (plenty of it) is for the younger audiences. It also evades many of the difficulties of how Fogg and co actually got around the world so quickly when they seem to have been bogged down in Turkey or India or China and then, with little or no explanation have reached their next destination.

Fogg has invented some eccentric machines which offers some fascination, especially building the flying machine from the transatlantic steamer after advice from the Wright Brothers (a funny cameo from Owen and Luke Wilson as Orville and Wilbur cycling through the desert). There is also a subplot where the entertainingly dastardly Lord Kelvin (Jim Broadbent giving it the right touch of exaggerated villainy) employs a female Chinese general to pursue Passepartout who has taken back from the Bank of England a jade Buddha stolen from his village.

Part of the entertainment for the adults is the range of guest appearances, including a glimpse of Richard Branson with a hot air balloon, Arnold Schwarzenegger sending himself up as a Turkish potentate, Rob Schneider as a smelly San Francisco homeless man and Kathy Bates as Queen Victoria.

Not the definitive version.

THUNDERBIRDS (UK, 2004, d. Jonathan Frakes)

There are two approaches to reviewing Thunderbirds: the first is by those who saw the series on television with its puppetry and animation and will be eager to see whether their memories have been honoured in this live action adaptation; the second is by those who never saw the television series and who are looking at Thunderbirds as a stand-alone film. This reviewer belongs to the latter group.

Maybe because it is directed by Jonathan Frakes, who appeared in the latterday Star Trek films and directed one of them, but there are Trekkie moments, especially in the conception of the chief villain, The Hood, played with generally quiet but sadistic relish by Ben Kingsley (especially his power to immobilise opponents by the stare of his cat's eyes) as well as his odd-looking associates. (For a while, it looked as though the film was over-mocking anyone with glasses who had to be a brilliant nerd, those who stammered and a villain with both glasses and buck teeth, but in the middle there are some rebukes for those who laugh at other's limitations or eccentricities).

What the film seemed most reminiscent of was the Spy Kids series. While the Tracy family, Dad and four sons (plus Alan who is still at school and on the receiving end of some of Dad's disapproval but who, of course, with the help of two young friends, saves the day) are the Thunderbirds, they are not spies. Rather, they are an elite squad who can turn up at a moment's notice (well, perhaps two or three, but their spaceship like vehicles really are fast) and remedy flood, fire or even dredge a monorail carriage from the Thames.

Bill Paxton is a sturdy goody with Anthony Edwards almost unrecognisable as the resident boffin. Sophia Myles, rather pretty (and always) in pink and Ron Cook as her unflappable chauffeur – they live a rather Lara Croft way of life – are the Thunderbirds' allies.

This is a film that seems geared to young teenagers in an old-fashioned Boys' Own Adventure way that has to learn to work in a team, with the bespectacled brains and that Boy's Own Adventures have to make way for Girl's Adventures too.

THE FLOWER OF EVIL (France, 2003, d. Claude Chabrol)

During 2003, 2004, several French films have taken their audiences back to the years of World War II, especially the German occupation and the activities of the Vichy government. There was *Effroyables Jardins* with would-be Resistance heroes suffering the consequences of a daring act of sabotage. There was *Bon Voyage* with its mixture of seriousness and satire at the expense of those who compromised with the Germans.

Chabrol, the prolific director of case studies in crime and a documentary-maker in the 1990s on Vichy themes, has set this psychological and political drama in the present but continually harks back to the 1940s. On the surface, as always in Chabrol's domestic thrillers, all looks well. Here the mother of the family is committed to being re-elected to local government, to the disapproval of her husband who may or may not be trying to sabotage her campaign by anonymous letters. His son has returned to France after years of study in the US and is taking up again his relationship with his step-sister. Meanwhile, his aged aunt runs a tight ship at home in the elegant French manner.

The film opens with a dead body and then flashes back to how the killing came about. The family has a shady past of collaboration with the Nazis and commercial profit that ensued. There have been accusations of murder in the past.

Chabrol reveals the strengths and weaknesses of the whole family, a telling family portrait while all the while raising the tension about revelations of the past and the dirty tricks used in the campaigning. This is brought to life by a strong cast led by Nathalie Baye as the politician and a moving performance by veteran, Suzanne Flon, playing the aunt who, of course, has the key to all the events.

CONFIDENCES TROP INTIMES (France, 2003, d. Patrice Leconte)

This is the archetypal French drama, an intense portrait of adult characters, an absorbing case study of relationships, a cool, clear yet impassioned dissecting of emotions and emotional turmoil, directed by one of France's best directors for this kind of film with top performances. (I liked it.)

It begins with a mistake, a disturbed middle-aged woman goes into the wrong office to meet a psychiatrist to discuss her problems. The lawyer who listens to her finds he cannot reveal the mistake and continues the visits. He does, however, confide in the actual psychiatrist and gets his advice. The doctor-client relationship is on-and-off, depending on the moods of the woman. But, it is clear that the sessions are doing her good, especially in her relationship with her husband. The sessions are also doing the lawyer a great deal of good, helping him to come out of himself, reassessing the relationship he has ended with a woman (in whom he can also confide), ultimately precipitating life-directional decisions for them both.

Sandrine Bonnaire has built up a solid reputation over the last twenty years as an actress of sensitivity and skill. She makes the woman in crisis and her erratic behaviour quite credible. Fabrice Lucchini has excelled in period dramas, as the ultimate villain in *Colonel Chabert* and *Le Bossu*, so it is interesting to see him handle a contemporary role that has great emotional complexities.

A satisfying cinema experience.

THE NOTEBOOK (US, 2004, d. Nick Cassavetes)

If ever there was a big-budget Hollywood feature that proved that you can make a movie today just as they used to, it is *The Notebook*. It is lush and romantic, pretty as many pictures, its heart beating on its sleeve. Not a film for the cynics.

Based on a bestseller by Nicholas Sparks, it begins in the present with an old man reading a story from a notebook to an old lady in a home for the elderly. It is James Garner reading to Gena Rowlands (mother of the director, Nick Cassavetes). The woman is afraid, disturbed and suffering from dementia. But she listens attentively to what she says is a good story.

Then we see the story, coming back to the present every so often. It is the 1940s in the American south. Summer and holidays. Noah, who works in a lumber mill and has very few prospects, is attracted to Allie, a vivacious young girl from a wealthy family who is on holidays. They fall in love, they... well, it is not too hard to anticipate what will happen...

Ryan Gosling gives a credible performance with a difficult role: an earnest young man in love, disappointed in love, off to World War II and the attempt to settle after the war. Rachel McAdams is wonderfully spirited as the emotional young girl, pressurised to conformity by her mother (Joan Allen) and then trying to find her true self.

The danger with this kind of film, inviting us to lose ourselves in the emotions of the characters, is that it can become too much, at times too twee, at times too melodramatic. But, this is what the film intends to be and does it.

CLUB DREAD (US, 2004, d. Jay Sandrasekhar)

Written, acted and directed by a US comic group called Broken Lizard. Their earlier film, *Supertroopers*, was easily reviewed: avoid. This one is not quite so bad although its first part, with randy young adults coming to a Caribbean island to let loose, would convince insurgents against the United States and its culture that they really had a strong cause. If this is American culture and morality... Then it turns into murder and mayhem with a continually disappearing cast. This could have been interesting if they had stolen plotlines from Agatha Christie (especially *And Then There Were None*), but there is no major surprise when the killer is revealed. I'm sure many other reviewers have summarised: Club Dread-ful.

TUPAC RESURRECTION (US, 2004, d. Lauren Lazin)

Rather biblical overtones for a documentary about the Gangsta rapper, Tupac Shekur who was killed in a drive-by shooting in Las Vegas in 1996, aged 25. One reason for the title is that all the words that Tupac speaks are culled from interviews during his short lifetime and some glimpses from the few films that he made. However, he made his mark as a singer, a rapper, with his provocative (and, for many, offensive) lyrics). So, almost a decade after his death, Tupac is giving us a first person autobiography. (Another, more cynical reason, could be to promote his records which are still selling well.)

His mother (who produced the film) was a Black Panther and his memories of his growing up in this political context as well as his training in literature and drama in Baltimore show a well-educated young man who would write, not only his rap, but quite an amount of poetry. His career (and his self-acknowledged arrogance) put him in the public eye and set him up as a role-model. This is the image we take away from listening to Tupac and looking at this outline of his life in retrospect.

However, he had many clashes with the police, especially when charged with sexual harassment and assault (going to jail for almost a year). He defends himself but one would have liked to know more of what actually happened and why. This is especially true of his final year, his deal with Death Row Records, the clash between the rap artists of the East Coast and the West Coast, the huge profits involved (and entrepreneurs with criminal backgrounds). This was explored in Nick Bromfield's 2002 documentary, *Biggie and Tupac*, which gives quite a different perspective on the Death Row company and the involvement of the police and the FBI in keeping the rap artists under surveillance.

YOU GOT SERVED (US, 2003, d. Christopher B. Stokes)

If you have life in South Central Los Angeles as a priority on your list of interests, you will find this another angle on life in this troubled neighbourhood. If it seems rather remote, then it is not a must see.

It's one of those films that has a specific audience in mind and plays to it: the fans of 'street dancing', a vigorous form of acrobatic dancing where teams vie against each other (it is not an art form for individualists but rather for group performance) something like the way rap artists compete against each other, one trying to outsmart and improve on their opponents.

The plotline, however, is very, very well-known: rival groups, friends dancing together and then falling out (with drug dealers and money worries in the background), the possibilities of self-improvement by going to college, romances and rivalries. It works but it is too familiar. Stay with the vigorous dancing.

ONE FOR THE ROAD (UK, 2003, d. Chris Cooke)

This film has its sobering moments. It's not the kind of film you would rush off to see when you are feeling weary. Rather, it is a heightened slice of life.

Several men who have been charged with drink driving offences are obliged by the court to go to a self-help and discussion program – and after the sessions go down to the pub to discuss their lives and have a drink. They come from very different walks of life. As they get used to one another and listen to each other's stories, their lives begin to interconnect. Jimmy is a young lad who wants to sell his father's warehouse (where his father was a failure) and get enough money to go to Thailand and start again. Paul, a salesman, takes Jimmy on as a project, to help him persuade Richard, a wealthy property developer, to buy the warehouse. The other principal character is Mark, a taxi driver.

As the course goes on, they understand each other better and we get to know them fairly well. Paul is splitting from his wife; Jimmy starts a relationship with a girl from the pub; Richard starts an affair with Jimmy's mother, and they have plans for what Jimmy should do. But, each of them is a very flawed character and very little goes as planned, including a rude shock when Richard suffers a heart attack.

They are not a particularly likeable group, which means that we find it hard to identify with them. Rather, we are observers, very much aware that these are very average human beings with strengths and weaknesses and, while we would not necessarily like to spend a night at the pub with them, they need understanding and some affirmation.

EUROTRIP (US, 2004. d. Jeff Schaffer)

Sex-obsessed American teens let loose in Europe (well at least in the Czech Republic with back drops for other cities like London, Paris and Rome). The geography is not too hot and they go a very circuitous route from Paris to Vienna. They get into all kinds of trouble as they try to find the hero's penfriend in Austria (where they meet a six year old goosestepping, moustachioed child – it's that kind of film). The funniest section is a visit to the Vatican where they toll the bell that signals the Pope is dead and by a series of quirky accidents, they create a fire which gives off white smoke, try on mitres and are covered in curtains at the papal window – with the Pope watching it all on his own television. It's not exactly worth sitting through the rest for this sequence. More likeable than many teen movies, but it's still silly and sex-obsessed.

NATHALIE (France, 2003. d. Anne Fontaine)

The French are preoccupied with relationships, often very seriously and often in a somewhat dour manner. This is one of those dour films, written for a middle-aged audience who can empathise with the marital crises that threaten a long commitment.

Director, Anne Fontaine (whose previous film, *How to Kill My Father*, was a fascinating study of the relationship between a middle-aged man and his long-absent father), brings a strong feminine sensibility to this film. She is aided immeasurably by her stars, Fanny Ardant and Emmanuelle Béart. Gérard Depardieu, as the husband, is placed more in the background, becoming more and more the object of judgments by the women and by the audience.

The couple have been married for over twenty years. He has a somewhat cavalier attitude towards women even though he loves his wife. She is shocked to learn of his infidelity which, he says, means practically nothing to him. Her response is not what we might expect. She goes by chance and partly deliberately to an escort club and impulsively offers to pay one of the women (Béart) to start a relationship with her husband and report the developments to her. While the woman does what she is paid for, she realises that she is becoming friends with a woman from a completely different walk of life and a different level of society. She begins to value this friendship more and more. So does the wife, preferring to meet up with the prostitute and talk rather than to be with her husband.

Audiences at one stage might realise where this friendship could go and, at the end, have to re-assess their perceptions of each of the characters. Fanny Ardant, a woman of poise and dignity in her 50s, has a great opportunity to portray the intensity of a woman who loves, feels a betrayal and is led on a path of greater self-awareness in her new friendship. She is the focus of the film, even mesmerising as the director lets the camera linger for a long time on her, giving us time to watch and reflect. In fact, it is a film for serious reflection.

SPIDERMAN 2 (US, 2004, d. Sam Raimi)

Sam Raimi deserves our congratulations for having directed a blockbuster movie, Spiderman, that blended the comic-book fantasy derring-do with a blend of humane sensibility and humour. He deserves our congratulations for having made a sequel that capitalises on all the qualities of the original movie and makes them even better.

This is an assured film, the makers confident in their abilities to provide exciting and entertaining action, along with some spectacular stunt work (crashing and rolling cars, chases up the sides of walls, a fight on top of a speeding train), with computergraphics to create a New York which is really a US Metropolis, and a tour-de-force villain, complete with vicious mechanical octopus-like appendages. But, Raimi has no hesitation in quietening the action to spend a lot of time exploring the intense and complex personality of Peter Parker. Tobey Maguire is completely at home in the role and has made it his own. Peter is the shy, even clumsy introvert, unable to hold down a job, failing in his studies, inarticulate in his inability to express his love for Mary Jane (Kirsten Dunst making her more than a two-dimensional screaming heroine under threat – which she also does), awkward in relating to his Aunt May (Rosemary Harris), unwilling to tell his friend, Harry (James Franco) the real identity of Spiderman who was responsible for the death of his father.

His work in keeping law and order and rescuing those in danger means that Peter has difficulty with his true identity. His inner potential, a more extraverted hero, emerges when he is Spiderman. He has a highly developed sense of responsibility and duty which he sees as requiring self-sacrifice in renouncing his love for Mary Jane, especially since Spiderman's enemies would put her life at risk (which they do). Aunt May gives him a strong pep talk about the need for heroes, pointing to their young neighbour who wants Spiderman to return.

Alfred Molina is fine as Dr Otto Octavius, a sincere if ambitious scientist whose experiments go disastrously wrong and mutate him into Dr Ock, an eight-limbed monster. He is not an innate villain. He makes tragic choices but is finally confronted by Peter and follows his conscience. Rosemary Harris may never have dreamed that she would appear in a film, held aloft over the city by Dr Ock, hanging on to a gargoyle by her umbrella and falling to be rescued by Spiderman. Very welcome is the return of J.K. Simmons as the politically incorrect editor of The Daily Bugle with a penchant for throwaway one-liners that give bite to the dialogue. (Even Cliff Robertson and Willem Dafoe, who must have been disappointed that they died in the original, have an opportunity to appear in vision sequences.)

Spiderman 2 has us looking forward to the next instalment.

THE MIRACLE OF BERN (Germany, 2003, d. Sonke Wortmann)

Unless you are German (and there is every reason to remember the victory in the football/soccer World Cup in Bern in 1954) or unless you are Hungarian (where this film would not have done much box office because Hungary lost), you may not be aware of this post-war miracle presaging the post-war miracle of Germany's economic boom. These days, youngsters are urged to Bend it like Beckham. In those days, they were just as enthusiastic for their local and their national teams. This is the message of this feel-good film (again, unless you are Hungarian) which was a big box-office success in Germany.

Actually, there is comparatively little football in the film so those who are not fans or even in the know about soccer codes will be able to watch the film comfortably. The main play is rightly reserved for the final of the World Cup. In the meantime, there are other very interesting German themes to consider.

The film is set in the Ruhr, in Essen, in the mid-50s. The post-war recovery is not yet in full swing though Essen has its heavy industry and its mines. Prosperity is not yet in the air there. The Lubanski family are having a tough time running a bar, mother, daughter and two sons. The father has been a prisoner of war in Russia since 1943. In the month of the World Cup, many of the prisoners are repatriated. The film takes us into the experience of the war of the ordinary German soldier, the privations and hard labour in the Russian camps and the repercussions on the psyches of the prisoners who simply tried to survive. This takes its toll as the father (Peter Lohmeyer) returns home. Germany is less rigid than when he left and the only way he knows how to deal with his family is reserve and

discipline. Much of the film shows the family trying to cope and the father having to learn to adapt and to mellow his harsh ways.

This is especially true for his youngest son (born after his departure, a son he was not aware of.) The son is played by Peter Lohmeyer's actual son, Louis Klamroth. Louis is a dead-keen football fan, not so good at playing. The feelgood climax of the film is in Louis being able to participate in the miracle of the win.

It won't change your life if you don't see this film (except for the German audience who will bask in its joyful spirit film, its acknowledgement of the past and its hope for the future) but, if you do, it will be an enjoyable experience.

GODSEND (US, 2004, d. Nick Hamm).

Dr Frankenstein had the best intentions, to create life. Dr Robert de Niro, whose institute is called Godsend, wants to create life but audiences need to be alert to his motives and his methods.

A very happy family (dad, Greg Kinnear, mum Rebecca Romijn-Stamos, Adam, their son, Jonathan Bright) are plunged into tragedy and grief when Adam is accidentally killed. Could Robert de Niro have the answer to their prayers, the possibility of cloning their son? The screenplay makes the distinction between what is legal and what is moral, morally good and morally bad. What the Dr Frankensteins of this world (and of the literary and cinema world) forget is that as they attempt to 'play God', they are prone to temptations of hubris.

After setting up the biogenetics and ethical questions and seeming to say that all is well because we feel good about it, it then moves, as do so many films which raise biogenetic questions, into critical mode and dire warnings about errors, procedural mistakes and unknown malevolent motives. This means that Godsend moves into horror movie and slasher thriller – the excitement of which tends to make us forget somewhat about the moral message the film was made for in the first place.

JERSEY GIRL (US, 2004, d. Kevin Smith)

Has Kevin Smith undergone a transformation or, even, a conversion? Well, no. Those who are afraid that his moving into romantic comedy and family drama may have altered his perspective on life (well, it has, really) will be reassured by the constant bodily function jokes, sexual references and an underlying tone of irreverence. Matt Damon and Jason Lee have a satirical scene. However, audiences will not have seen so many statues of Mary and cribs in a film for a long time. Kevin Smith is still highlighting Catholicism. That said, a review needs to focus on the romance and the family.

Kevin Smith has become a father in real life. This seems pretty obvious while watching the film. He is positively doting on the little girl, Gertie, in the film. He is also looking at the responsibilities of parents, especially fathers. (At the end, apart from the first credit to God whom Smit acknowledges as still interested in him, the dedication is to his own father, recently deceased.)

After Dogma and Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back, many critics hoped that these would be the last of his 'adolescent joke' films. They wanted him, even urged him, to grow up. Now that he has changed tack in themes, they decry his selling out to Hollywood (at least to Miramax) and his wearing his heart on his sleeve.

This is certainly a romantic film. Ben Affleck (a Smith regular who responds better to Smith's direction than to any other director) falls in love with Jennifer Lopez (in a rather self-effacing brief performance) who dies in childbirth. His father, George Carlin, a New Jersey council worker, takes care of the baby but urges his son to do his share. This becomes even harder when he bad mouths Will Smith (who later turns up with a family-oriented little homily) and loses his job. There are some really tender scenes between Affleck and his daughter (which hard-nosed critics – probably more hard-hearted – loathed) which will appeal to parents.

Into their lives comes a vivacious student who works at the local video store. She is played very nicely by Liv Tyler – and the romance is not too obvious. Raquel Castro as the young Gertie holds her own with the adult cast – but she is quite precocious.

MEAN GIRLS (US, 2003, d. Mark S. Waters)

For a lot of the running time of Mean Girls, one might feel that one was eaves-dropping on adolescent chat and gossip in a girls' locker room! But, there is more to the film than that. It is the age-old story of the nice but naïve outsider who is finally welcomed by the peer group, succumbs to their moral (or less than moral) pressure and becomes as bad as they are, ruining people's lives. Even though all is well at the end, there is a final gulp as we see the next group of freshers arriving and know that the cycle will begin again.

What a school they all go to! A tour of the cafeteria reveals all kinds of groupings, nerds, snobs, racial groups, the critical outsiders – and the Plastics who are everything that teenage magazines (and their leader, Regina,) dictate. Director, Mark S. Waters, scored a hit with Freaky Friday, starring Lindsay Lohan as the brash teenager who suddenly found herself in her career woman mother's body and who had to play both parts, which she did very well. This one is not too much of a stretch. She is the home-schooled daughter of anthropologists who work in Africa but she is now attending school for the first time. She pals up with the critics who enlist her in their upsetting of the Plastics. It's all classes, mean tricks, vying for Prom Queen, parties and invitations (and not) and stealing dates, all that kind of stuff. Lindsay is caught up in plotting and manoeuvres and almost ruins her own life as well as everybody else's.

The vitality of the film comes from Rachel McAdams (so effective in The Notebook) as the unscrupulous leader of The Plastics. She is the personification of conscienceless glamour.

Is this is what is meant by a Girls' Own Story? Only joking – like the film!

THE FOOTBALL FACTORY (UK, 2004, d. Nick Love)

All you suspected about football hooligans is brought to the screen – and more. It is hard to tell what non-British audiences will make of this film apart from confirming a lot of opinions and prejudices. These men are truly a rough and brutal lot.

Actually, the film must be quite well made because we feel as if we have got to know these people, even though we would never want to meet them. We have been led into their world and, for a time, trapped there.

The central character (Danny Dyer) reminds us that he works in a boring job all week and so what could be better on the weekend than bashing fans from rival football clubs, a whole of drinking and a bit of sex. The various leaders in the hooligan hierarchy are introduced, the groupings and loyalties explained clearly, the tactics laid out before we see them in action.

One of the disturbing features of the factory is that the next generation is on the hooligan assembly line from the earliest years. We see the kids bashing – and moving into drugs and petty thieving. The rivalries in north London also have racist overtones.

It is all quite well done, well acted, especially by Dyer who you think is an innocent at times but who is able to regress very easily, by Frank Harper as Billy Bright, the not-so-bright bully boy who wants to be boss and by Jamie Foreman as a racist, British National Party type taxi driver. These are the people behind the headlines – seeing a film like this means that they are no longer mere statistics but people whose lives are real, however regrettable their yobbish attitudes and behaviour.

JOY OF MADNESS (Iran, 2003, d. Hana Makhmalbaf)

Her sister Hana made a 73-minute documentary about the making of At Five in the Afternoon. It was called Joy of Madness. The focus of the film is on the casting and the efforts of Samira Makhmalbaf to find the non-professional performers she wanted for the film. The film is very interesting in its initial focus on a young woman who speaks very volubly and with emphasis on a more Taliban interpretation on the role of women and their nature as being secondary to men. The second part of the film concentrates on the approach to an old Mullah who wants to be photographed and agrees to go in the film and then backs out, wondering what people will think of him and his position. He is the man who

was to play the old father in the film. The third part of the film is the approach to a schoolteacher and trying to persuade her to take the role of the central young woman. She is agreeable but again feels hampered because of the dominance of men, especially with her impending marriage and the approval of her fiancé. The film is very Middle Eastern in the fact that everybody uses words rather than writing, shouts, is insistent on principle, brings religious motivation and all are very strong in bargaining rather than coming to immediate contracts. The film presents Samira Makhmalbaf as very intense, lacking in humour, very forceful in trying to get what she wanted. It is an insightful background to the feature film.

PARADISE IS SOMEWHERE ELSE (Iran, 2003, d. Abdul Rasul Golbon)

Paradise is Somewhere Else is a debut feature set in rural Iran near the Afghan border. The film focuses on a young man who tends sheep. However, he is saving money to migrate to the Emirates. His father is a technician and engineer in a local factory. He feels the pull of getting away from the rural surroundings and is able to get an Afghan refugee to take his place with the sheep. His parents allow him to leave, his father even offering him money. His mother is resigned. The grandfather also lives with them. Just before he is about to leave, his father is killed in an accident at the plant. Local custom talks about revenge. The young man gets a rifle and takes the opportunity to shoot at the chief engineer, whom he wounds. There are interrogations, the police come after him. The young Afghan hides the rifle and he is arrested in the young man's place but refuses to reveal where he is hiding.

The young man has become a friend of the Afghan who tells him the story of his family, and has tape recordings from the family in Afghanistan, with the possibility of his sister crossing the border into Iran.

The Afghan is taken into prison, interrogated, promised that he will be set free but is taken into the city. The young man goes to the border, encounters a big number of Afghan refugees crossing through the desert into Iran. He meets his friend's sister. He hesitates at the border, not knowing which way to go, deciding to return to Iran but the utility has already gone into the distance and he is left stranded, where the film ends.

The film highlights the difficulties consequent on the Afghan war, the Afghan refugees in Iran, the hopes of Iranians for a better life in such places as the Emirates - and the consequences on society as well as on the individuals.

IO NON HO PAURA (I'M NOT SCARED) (Italy, 2004, d. Gabriele Salvatores)

Salvatores' film *Mediterraneo* won an Oscar for Best Foreign Language film in the early 90s. Audiences who have liked this film very much are talking about another nomination, at least.

This is a film about children, about innocence and loss of innocence and of cruel betrayals by parents. In the languid summer of 1978 (and Salvatores is expert in creating warm bright summers amid the cornfields outside a remote and very small and insular southern Italian village), the children play. Michele is a natural leader but he is also caring of his little sister. Going back to an abandoned farmhouse, he stumbles on a secret that has disastrous consequences for him and his family, especially his father who has just returned home, bringing with him a group of friends who are revealed as sinister.

This is the kind of film where it is best to know as little of the plot as possible so that the developments will come not only as a surprise but as a challenge and will pack some emotional power. It is a quality production and engrossing both in its story of the children and of the adults. It is also a film that honours moral integrity.

FREEZE FRAME (UK, 2003, d. John Simpson)

This is quite a bizarre cinema experience. It looks like an experimental short extended into a feature, using Super 8 and High Definition Digital cameras (but it still takes the audience into a dark and darkened world where we tend to peer to see more clearly what is going on despite the claims of the high definition). And, perhaps, peer we should since the plot involves an obsessive man who films

himself (he is his own Big Brother) and has an enormous stock of catalogued and dated cassettes of his life, 24/7. Perhaps it is just as well because another obsessive, a detective, is convinced that he has committed a murder and is determined to find the evidence. One of the troubles is that, while we can have reality television and video, it does not necessarily stop anyone editing the material, inserting false information and altering times.

This leads to a rather more than expected convoluted plot and complications about the murder and who did it and why – and how. Besides peering at the dark visuals, the audience has to peer into the plot to make sure they can follow it as best they can.

It is a surprise to find a shaven Lee Evans abandoning his comic style and portraying a very seedy and sad possible murderer. Irish actor, Sean McGinley, is appropriately intense as the dying detective. Ian McNeice is a publicity-seeking forensic expert and Rachael Stirling (Diana Rigg's daughter) is a mystery woman. Experimental and bizarre.

HIGHWAYMEN (US, 2004, d. Robert Mandel)

This film is one for those who wonder what Jim Caviezel does when he is not working for Mel Gibson. And a surprising answer it is. This is a short hyper-revved action, vengeance show with Caviezel taking a cue from Mel's career, suffering a lot and doing a variation on Mad Max.

The plot asks of its audience a considerable suspension of disbelief. Caviezel is a nice doctor who is deliberately run down by a psychotic car nut (Colm Feore). He gets nuttier because he is severely injured (and has several mechanical limbs that match the technology of his diabolical car) by a vengeful Caviezel who goes to jail for his pains. When he gets out, they stalk each other on the highways and byways, the psychotic killing people in savage road attacks but not realising that he had left one witness alive. She is protected by Caviezel – up to a point, because she is obviously bait for the final showdown.

It runs for just over 80 minutes, has its spectacular moments on the big wide screen and was directed by Robert Mandel who directed what is now a classic of madness-on-the-road and violence movies, *The Hitcher*. It has probably revved its way already to the video/DVD market.

TWO BROTHERS (France, 2004, d. Jean-Jacques Annaud)

In the late 1980s, Jean-Jacques Annaud directed the impressive nature film, *The Bear*. That was its simple title. This time his focus is on tigers but the title is *Two Brothers*. He wants us to look at the animals in comparison with human beings, to think of the animals like human beings and respond to their power, their might, their playfulness, their emotions and memories as if they were human. The film is also a plea for the conservation of the tigers whose population numbers are drastically reduced from one hundred years ago.

The tiger are best and the location scenery is impressive too. The humans, on the other hand, led by Guy Pearce as an adventurer-trader, are less well-rounded in characterisation than the tigers. In fact, most of them are more than a little shifty: greedy villagers who want to get rid of the tigers who prey on their animals, French officials who feel that they are lost in a distant outpost, circus people who could not care less about their animals, a prince who concludes that to be as impressive as his father, he has to be cruel and organises a kind of Coliseum combat in a local arena between the two tiger brothers. The appeal to the cruelty and curiosity of the human spectators is rather alarming.

But it's the memory of the magnificent tigers that lingers.

THE YOUNG BLACK STALLION (US, 2004, d. Simon Wincer)

A quarter of a century ago, *The Black Stallion* took its place in cinema history as a classic horse movie. It was followed in 1983 by *The Black Stallion Returns*. These films were based on the novels of Walter Farley. Now, we see the prequel to the familiar stories. This is the story of the stallion from his birth in North Africa to his winning a thrilling race with the young girl who found him in the desert riding him to victory, just like National Velvet.

The film has a short running time since it was made in the IMAX format. IMAX films run for about 45 minutes. The film was shot in the dunes of Namibia and the desert mountains of South Africa. On the giant screen, the scenery is magnificent. So are the scenes of horses galloping through the barren landscapes. Director Simon Wincer is an expert with horses having made *Phar Lap*, *The Lighthorsemen* and some of the *Young Indiana Jones* series.

The plot is exactly as you would imagine so there are no surprises (except, perhaps, at the ready acceptance of a young girl actually racing let alone winning). The pleasure is in the storytelling and the beauty of the film.

BLUEBERRY (France, 2004, d. Jan Kounen)

A French western? Yes. It obviously pays homage to the European-made westerns like the so-called Spaghetti Westerns, although most of *Blueberry* was actually shot in Mexico, some sequences in Spain. It also pays homage to American westerns with Ernest Borgnine and Geoffrey Lewis in the cast. Also in the cast are Michael Madsen and Juliette Lewis. However, the hero is Vincent Cassel (his younger self being played by Irish Hugh O'Connor).

This is one of those films which seem more interesting to think about and discuss than watching the film itself. It is a bit long, repetitious, sententious and, even during the hallucination sequences, the mind tends to wander.

The distinctive aspects of the film are its emphasis on Shamanism and its being based on a popular French comic strip, not familiar to English-speaking viewers, the activities of a sheriff, Mike Blueberry. The western activities are familiar enough, pursuit of greedy gold-seeking villains who trespass in forbidden Indian territories. It is in the picture of Indian mysticism, the role of the Shaman, the trances brought about by altered mind states (especially from herbs and potions) and the need for individuals to go into their deeper selves, face their dark side and try to find the place in the universe and be linked to all aspects of the universe. This, of course, has a strong 'new age' appeal to viewers and may get the film a following from audiences who ordinarily would not watch a western.

BEFORE SUNSET (US, 2004, d. Richard Linklater)

In 1995, audiences were divided concerning Richard Linklater's *Before Sunrise*. Some thought it a tedious talk-fest, a young man and a young woman meet by chance and spend several hours in a train journey and a walk through Vienna, discussing a range of experiences that interested them both (but not, apparently, some of the audiences). Others thought it an absorbing and thoughtful, intelligent and relevant reflection on contemporary life and values by the young. It won the prize for Best Director at the 1995 Berlin Film Festival and a commendation from the Ecumenical Jury.

Nine years later, the director, Richard Linklater, has teamed up with his two stars, Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy, and brought them together for more talking and sharing. Nine years on, he is a successful novelist on a tour of France, she is a worker for an environmental group who comes to his interview to meet him again. This time the film works with screen time as real time. The conversation goes for about 80 minutes before he is to go to the airport for his plane.

Hawke and Delpy have matured physically and in dramatic stature. He is more laid-back, ironic but earnest in asking questions and talking about his failures. She is even more vivacious, a little hardened by her experiences, more emotional and sometimes volatile, with a great yearning for (and fear of) being loved.

Their conversations are stimulating even if they do run through them at a rapid rate, alighting on all kinds of issues, often making astute observations that can strike a chord in the audience. For those who liked *Before Sunrise*, *Before Sunset* is a must. For those who did not, this sequel should be avoided. But, it is still good to see younger film-makers working on an intelligent adult drama.

CONTROL ROOM (Qatar, 2004, d. Jehane Noujaim)

With all the excitement generated by Michael Moore's Fahrenheit 9/11, this brief documentary runs the danger of being lost in the crowd. That would be a pity. It is not flamboyant and satirical like Michael Moore's film, but they are useful companion cinema experiences.

Control Room is a documentary about Al Jazeera television and its role during the first month of the war in Iraq. It is not specifically an attack on the Bush administration. It has a strong point of view, of course, but it is a film where Al Jazeera can make a case for itself, especially against the criticisms of the US military and of Donald Rumsfeld.

It uses the traditional documentary techniques of interviews with the various personnel involved in the station, managers, producers, translators, reporters and office staff. Some of these are clearly critical of the American invasion and sympathetic to the plight of the Iraqis. The documentary also includes footage screened on Al Jazeera, especially images of dead American soldiers as well as Iraqi officials interrogating bewildered captured American personnel. Interspersed are excerpts from the daily military briefings at Central Command for the Coalition (in Qatar where Al Jazeera is located) and a continuing conversation with a patriotic young American military media officer who is more open to the contradictions he finds in the waging of the war, the bombings, the pictures of the dead and wounded and the information given by the US. The film also includes some American network reporters' criticism of the briefings, especially their being shown the famous deck of cards with the 'Most Wanted' Iraqi leaders but then not being given access to the cards themselves.

While each station has its policy and determines what is to be screened and how material is to be edited, Al Jazeera is specifically set up for Arab viewers and has a policy of wariness about American sources. The criticisms made by the Americans, especially Donald Rumsfeld with his insistence on showing the truth, imply that the American policy is one of objective reporting. Seeing what is allowed on screen and seeing some of the 'puff' (and brief) and flattering pieces designed for the network audiences reminds us that the American reporting of the war is patriotic, at times jingoistic and means that American criticism of Al Jazeera needs to be made with a look at American behaviour. This culminates in the bombing (with live action footage included) of the Al Jazeera broadcasting headquarters in Baghdad in the early weeks of the war and the death of a journalist on the roof of the building.

It is also important to see what happened in March-April 2003 and hear what was said then in the light of the subsequent events of 2003-2004. This is a film about perceptions and the creating of perceptions.

BIG BOUNCE, The
BOURNE SUPREMACY, The
CATWOMAN
CINDERELLA STORY, A
DIRTY DANCING 2: HAVANA NIGHTS
GARFIELD, THE MOVIE
HOME ON THE RANGE
I, ROBOT
KING ARTHUR
MAN ON FIRE
SPARTAN
STEPFORD WIVES, The
13 GOING ON 30
WELCOME TO MOOSEPORT
WHOLE TEN YARDS, The

THE WHOLE TEN YARDS (US, 2004, d. Howard Deutch)

With all the best will in the world, it is impossible not to say that this is a very silly film. There was some entertainment in The Whole Nine Yards, the tale of a fashionable but nervous dentist whose wife hires a killer to eliminate him – and who then finds that he actually lives next door to a hitman.

Matthew Perry capitalised on his kind of jittery, awkward smiling persona from Friends. Bruce Willis was all crooked smiles.

Here they are again in a plot that twists and turns with very little signalling – and which has to be explained to the dentist (and to us) by the hitman at the end. It is to do with the father of the gangster that Willis killed in the first one, only now we find there was a kind of family relationship and the father, just out of jail, is not happy. The dentist's wife (formerly the hitman's wife) is abducted. The hitman's new wife, who was the killer hired in the first one to get rid of the dentist, wants to do a hit and wants to get pregnant. It may spoil the ending to know that everyone's wishes are fulfilled – with an extra \$280, 000,000 that none of them really need. It is all presented in a silly sitcom kind of way.

GARFIELD (US, 2004, d. Peter Hewitt)

Garfield is a cult comic strip cat. Having seen only a few strips, I had to review the film in itself and leave it to the Afficionados to decide whether the movie was faithful to the comic. What surprised me was how much geared to children's enjoyment and expectations the action was, leaving the voiceover humour for the adults. There is plenty of slapstick pratfalling as Garfield tests out whether he has nine lives or not. He gets into all kinds of scrapes despite being a model of complacent sloth!

Audiences have been spoiled in recent years with a good selection of excellent cats on screen. The very entertaining Cats and Dogs led the way. Nathan Lane's voicing of Snowball in both Stuart Little films was very funny along with his lowlife cat friends. Of course, Puss in Boots, voiced by Antonio Banderas like a fairytale Zorro, almost stole Shrek 2. Well, Garfield is not bad but would be a runner up in the Oscar for Best Cat. Bill Murray is the voice of Garfield, using that familiar sardonic tone without the amusing nervous urgency that Nathan Lane could mix with his funny lines as Snowball. Like Snowball, Garfield is rather large, overfed and expects the world, or at least his owner, to pamper him. When a dog comes home and seems to be stealing affections, well...

Breckin Meyer is the owner and Jennifer Love Hewitt is the vet he is in love with. Stephen Tobolowsky enjoys himself as a mean-spirited TV animal program host who abducts the new dog – who, despite himself, Garfield feels he has to rescue.

Only 80 minutes or so. Amusing but not a philosopher's cartoon.

I,ROBOT (US, 2004, d. Alex Proyas)

Isaac Asimov was one of the great science-fiction writing pioneers of the 20th century. He introduced robots before they were a fashionable topic for fiction and fantasy. He also introduced the three laws of robotics designed to safeguard the humans who had engineered the robots and who now used them as servants.

This line of imagination has been fruitful in speculating about human nature and technology, about human intellect and feelings. Interesting films in this genre include Blade Runner, AI – Artificial Intelligence, Bicentennial Man and such entertainments as Forbidden Planet and The Stepford Wives.

Here, Asimov's stories are taken as the basis for an updated plot. The Chicago world of 2035 is sufficiently recognizable in its ordinariness, although it has the kind of building developments and technology centres that are quite imaginable. Robots are key figures and new line models are being continually improved in automated serving skills.

Will Smith plays a detective who has an antipathy towards the machines and their seemingly impeccable logic: he had been saved by a robot in a car drowning accident instead of the child he thought should have been saved. He is so edgy that he pursues a robot through the streets thinking he was a mugger when (we knew) that he was only getting medication for his owner. But this edginess means that he is the best contact that a frightened engineer can make to try to reverse a malevolent trend in the main computer which is turning the new robots against the humans. What follows is part detective work, part action thriller, part final confrontation with an army of computer-graphic rogue robots.

It is not as if the message were exactly new now. But, that is not the point. Humans need reminding of their pride in thinking that they can conquer all worlds and harness artificial intelligence for their own needs. The machines think that humans sometimes need protection from themselves and this logic leads them to apply violent methods 'for the humans' own good'.

It is always interesting to see again that, in a world which continually hails scientific advances, one of the roles of movies is to warn against dangers by telling the Frankenstein monster story over and over again in new guises.

THE BOURNE SUPREMACY (US, 2004, d. Paul Greengrass)

Robert Ludlum was, perhaps, the key popular American novelist of the Cold War, with Russian-US conspiracies as well as those of Neo-Nazis and the kinds of power-hungry megalomaniacs that are the villains of the James Bond stories. While Ludlum died in 2001, novels under his name are still appearing and the movie franchise from his Jason Bourne trilogy has proven very successful in this era of terrorism.

Jason Bourne was effectively introduced in 2002 in *The Bourne Identity*. He was an amnesiac with the instincts of a trained spy and killer. Which he was. However, we followed the exciting steps he took to discover who he was and how the world's intelligence agencies had used him. Now he is back because the agencies are using him as a fall guy to cover some secret Russian American collaboration in money deals in the early 1990s – and he wants to know who he is setting him. In fact, we first guess who it is and then know before he does. This means that while we are one step ahead of him as he travels from Goa to Naples to Berlin to Moscow, we are caught up in his use of his wits to get out of deadly situations as well as to expose and wreak vengeance on the villains.

And quite an exciting trip it is. In the hands of director Paul Greengrass (documentaries on the killing of British Stephen Lawrence as well as the award-winning *Bloody Sunday*), it is non-stop pulsating. The credits name two editors – and they must have had their work cut out since the film is so fast-paced, so many of the edits lasting only a few seconds. There is so much hand-held camera work that the audience feels that it is right in there, trying to keep pace with Bourne. There is also a pulsating and pounding score and, in a big cinema, with the sound turned up, especially during one of the most hectic car chases you'll see, through the Moscow streets and tunnels, you can forgive yourself for feeling somewhat exhausted even though you have been simply sitting in your seat.

Matt Damon now successfully embodies Jason Bourne. Some of the original cast are back: Brian Cox, Chris Cooper (glimpsed in flashback), Franka Potente and Julia Styles. The best addition is Joan Allen as a CIA field commander who is determined to get Bourne and has to discover that he is not the enemy. A stylish and absorbing action thriller that will please conspiracy theorists. And Ludlum has provided the title for the next instalment, *The Bourne Ultimatum*.

SPARTAN (US, 2003, d. David Mamet)

This is a dark and frequently dark-looking film. It has to be. We are being taken inside the American Secret Service, that group of highly-trained men and women who guard the president and other VIPs. Some years ago, Clint Eastwood made an entertaining version of David Baldacci's *Absolute Power* where the Secret Service had to protect the President in his off-hours and in his off-behaviour, especially when they had to follow political advisor's orders to clean up messes and keep the lid tight on the truth, no matter what.

Things have not changed, in fiction-land at least. This time the focus is completely on the Secret Service, the rigid fidelity to their protective commissions, no matter what the moral or immoral context.

The film opens with a tough training and testing session supervised by Val Kilmer. It stays very tough, especially for Kilmer who is not an agent in command. Rather, he is like a Spartan of old, sent as a loner to work for the king, a loner who lives what we now call a spartan existence. He supervises but obeys orders. He can read people. He can interrogate physically and psychologically. He is tough and loyal, even when he has to find the daughter of the president who may have been inadvertently abducted by a white slave trade ring operating between the US and Dubai and the Middle East.

If this seems fascinating, you will want to see the whole film. Val Kilmer is at his best in this kind of role, especially when surface cracks appear and he has to question orders, feel moments of compassion for the victim, use his own initiative, especially against the sinister, all-knowing and controlling political minders and advisers.

What makes *Spartan* even more interesting is that it was written and directed by celebrated playwright, David Mamet. Mamet has written many dark screenplays (*The Untouchables*, *The Verdict*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*). He is also at home in a men's world, an official macho world that sees itself righteously as the custodian of good in the world when, in fact, there is corruption under the surface. More US conspiracies.

THE STEPFORD WIVES (US, 2004, d. Frank Oz)

In 1975, Bryan Forbes made a version of Ira Levin's novel, a blend of women's magazine pages and a horror film. Levin had already written of diabolical incarnations (*Rosemary's Baby*) and the cloning of Hitlers by Josef Mengele (*The Boys from Brazil*). Stepford was the ideal, American picture-perfect town, with picture perfect wives who had been transformed into robots to be the perfectly domesticated women and wives any fat-cat chauvinistic American male could want. This was ironic feminism in William Goldman's screenplay although some of the feminists took a fundamentalist, uncritically literal, interpretation of the film and missed its satire.

At the beginning of the 21st century, you can't do an exact remake. Feminism has moved on. Men are becoming more sensitive – but not to the extent that another version of *The Stepford Wives* would not go amiss. But, it is too late for horror surprises. And, after all, we live in a post-modern and flip one-liner world. Why not go for the comic elements, stay with the satire? And have Paul Rudnick write it? He is a master of camp humour with *Jeffrey and In and Out*. And have Frank Oz direct it? He was the voice of Miss Piggy so he knows more than a thing or two about pretentious putting on the glamour and he has directed many comedies (*Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*, *Housesitter*). And that is exactly what has been done – to the ire of those who don't think it should be funny and of those who think it isn't funny enough.

There are certainly a lot of funny things in it. The opening television awards with the parody of the reality shows and the dollar signs in the executives' eyes set a satiric tone. When the sacked executive (Nicole Kidman, who does not have to be a real Stepford wife until the end of the film) and Matthew Broderick (definitely open to the possibility of robotising the wives) arrive in Stepford, they are greeted by town hostess, Glenn Close in a nicely-judged, almost over the top performance that deserves some kind of award. Who else should be there (but not Stepfordised and therefore able to make wisecracks) but Bette Midler in a welcome return to the screen? The sinister presence, all smiles and charm, is Christopher Walken. They have changed the ending a bit so that contemporary feminists may be momentarily wondering whether anything has changed!

THE BIG BOUNCE (US, 2004, d. George Armitage)

Elmore Leonard is one of my favourite crime-writers. He has a skill in communicating heroism in characters who could be considered deadbeat. He creates kookie supporting characters. And, he writes with great deadpan wit. I can't speak for him here, but I would be very surprised if he liked or even approved of this version of one of his earliest novels. It was actually filmed in the late 60s with Ryan O'Neal but did not set the box-office alight. Nor this time. The ingredients are there, the sketch of the characters, Leonard-like situations on the edge of morality and the law. But the hard-boiled wit is missing, except perhaps in the performance of the always reliable Morgan Freeman.

The central character is played by Owen Wilson who has been very amusing in a lot of films. Here he makes you realise that he is giving the same drawly, seemingly lame-brain, good-natured but narcissistic performance that he gave in *Shanghai Noon*, *Shanghai Knights*, *Starsky and Hutch*, *Around the World in Eighty Days*, *I Spy* and *Meet the Parents*, that this is one and only Owen Wilson performance.

The supporting cast looks good on paper, Gary Sinise, Bebe Neuwirth, Charlie Sheen, Willie Nelson, Harry Dean Stanton, Vinnie Jones, but they really haven't got much to do.

Little bounce and not so big either. Better to look at director George Armitage's tough Florida thriller, *Miami Blues*, again.

DIRTY DANCING 2: HAVANA NIGHTS (US, 2004, d. Guy Ferland)

Sixteen years between the very popular original and the sequel does not seem to be a good sign. This one is just a time passer. Set in the Havana casinos in the late 50s, just before Castro's revolution and the ousting of Battista, it is the story of a poor young man who has a talent for dancing but works in the grounds of a big hotel. He comes across a young American going to school in Havana while her father works in a local company. Her mother had been a professional dancer but is now very protective of her daughter.

If a screenwriting class were given this basic scenario and told to do a treatment in half an hour, what would they come up with? The boy is poor, his brother a revolutionary desperate to avenge his father; he gets sacked. The girl has a date with the son of the company owner who drunkenly comes on to her and she resists, helped by the poor boy who then teaches her some Latin American dance moves. They secretly enter the New Year's Eve competition. They practice a lot – and are helped by Patrick Swayze looking older than he did in the sequel set decades later. The competition is held, the revolution is successful – but do they win? And that is, in fact, more or less what happens.

Diego Luna made an international impact in *Y Tu Mama Tambien* and has appeared in *Frieda*, *Open Range* and *The Terminal*. British Romola Garai is the would-be dancer. It is a slight entertainment.

WELCOME TO MOOSEPORT (US, 2004, d. Donald Petrie)

A little comedy that is amusing but doesn't stay in the memory. It is a big screen vehicle for Ray Romano who has had such popular and award-winning success on television with *Everybody Loves Raymond*. Everybody loves his character in *Mooseport*, Handy Harrison, a plumber. He is the proverbial nice but reticent guy, not as self-confident as he should be, reluctant to propose to his long-time girlfriend (Maura Tierney). He looks as if he should have been in a Frank Capra movie of fifty or more years ago.

Into the nice and quiet town of Mooseport comes the former American president, the only president ever to get a divorced in office. He is going to retire – well, he is going to play golf and go on a lucrative lecture tour to pay the ex-first lady's alimony. And who is this heroic but two-timing president? Gene Hackman. Which makes one wonder what he would have been like as a Frank Capra villain instead of Edward Arnold. Perhaps Gene Hackman is too modern with his surface charm and his ability to be mean and dangerous underneath.

He is asked to stand as mayor (which might save him on alimony). But Handy has also been urged to stand. Twists, turns, busted romances, the noble thing – and a visit from Christine Baranski doing her comic turn as the wilful ex-first lady. Marcia Gay Harden represents loyalty to the President. Rip Torn is the political adviser who wants to take on Handy.

Since there is nothing very much ironic in the title but rather a genuine welcome, this all ends up sweetly and nicely.

MAN ON FIRE (US, 2004, d. Tony Scott)

In a 2004 interview, Denzel Washington affirmed that, after so many nice-guy roles, he would like to do some villains. He won an Oscar for his nasty turn in *Training Day*. He was verging on the criminal in *Out of Time*. Here he gets to be a bit of both, at least a drunken disillusioned government assassin who has to take a heroic stand.

Director Tony Scott worked with him in *Crimson Tide*. Now he gives him the chance to emerge from the confined world of a submarine to go to a violence-ridden Mexico to become a bodyguard. He is helped to get the job by his long-time associate and pal, Christopher Walken. And the job is to guard an eight year old girl, especially going to and from school because there are gangs involved in abductions as a means of raising quick millions.

Should he take on the job because his charge is the precocious Dakota Fanning who gives the impression that she could well look after herself? In fact, she looks as if she could grow up to be a mixture of Margaret Thatcher and Hilary Clinton. On the other hand, she acts as if she had reached that stage already (and see her or don't see her in *Uptown Girls* and *The Cat in the Hat*). Her parents are played by Marc Anthony and Australian Radha Mitchell.

It is not revealing anything significant in the plot to say that the little girl is abducted. After all, that is what we were expecting. However, the film is almost two and a half hours long and much of the first hour is spent in Denzel first not liking the little girl, not wanting to be her friend but then softening because of her neglectful father, helping her with her work, coaching her and definitely becoming her friend. He now has the motivation to go through the rest of the film tracking down a network of quite ruthless kidnappers (with a twist that those who know these films will expect). With his background as a killer and now off the bottle, he gives the kidnappers far worse a time than they were expecting. He is now on fire. And he has come to like the little girl so much that he is prepared to lay down his life for her.

Which means that this is quite a big-budget, long actioner with feelings that enables Denzel Washington to be both bad and good, his image intact. It is entertaining in its way but lacks some of the fire of its title.

CATWOMAN (US, 2004, d. Pitoff)

After her appearance in *Die, Another Day*, her Oscar for *Monster's Ball* and her being one of the stars of the two *X Men* movies, everything was possible for Halle Berry. She appeared in the psychological horror film, *Gothika*, which received a mixed response, and then went on to *Catwoman*, which did not get a mixed response. The response was generally negative.

Catwoman is a rather flashy show, directed by Pitoff, a Frenchman who was a set designer on the films of Jeunet and Caro, like *City of Lost Children*. He has a taste for the exotic. However, the screenplay is not really exotic. The credits remind us of the sacred images of cats, especially in ancient Egypt and we remember that this has been popular at least since *Cat People*, with many variations. However, the mythology is only alluded to and the real role of *Catwoman* is to right some wrongs, especially in the cosmetics company where she has worked as an artist. Her target is the owner, the arrogant and womanising boss (Lambert Wilson). We know, however, that she should beware of his wife (Sharon Stone), the past face of the company but whose face and character have literally hardened like marble because of the destructive chemicals in the product that is being heavily promoted.

When the cat takes over Halle, she can become just like Spiderman, confident, agile, saviour of the city. When she comes to, she is more like a glamorously diffident Peter Parker. She needs her friends (rather camp) for support as well as the detective who stumbles into her life (Benjamin Bratt). Since Spiderman is successful in portraying the psychological struggles of Peter Parker, there was no reason why *Catwoman* could not. But it doesn't, leaving a good-looking but rather flat story until the inevitable showdown between Sharon and Halle.

KING ARTHUR (UK/US, 2004. d. Antoine Fuqua)

High hopes that this would one of the holiday spectaculars. It was not. This is not surprising as it is a very dark and dour film, not the kind of derring-do hijinks that one would want for a holiday break.

The screenplay was written by David Franzoni who wrote *Gladiator*. That was a rather literate epic, centering on the philosopher emperor, Marcus Aurelius, and the military statesman, Maximus. There are a number of literary allusions in *King Arthur*. Especially surprising are the several references to the monk, Pelagius (the theological enemy of St Augustine) and his teachings on human self-sufficiency over God's grace. There are also references to the Pope and Rome and one of the main protagonists is a bishop.

But that might not have been noticed by those wanting what older audiences used to call 'a good stoush'. They would have been looking for the battles. And, in that, they would not be disappointed.

There is a particularly effective battle on the ice, between Arthur and five knights and Guinevere who is now a champion archer. (Many of the critics were quick to point out that Eisenstein, once upon a time, did this more effectively in Alexander Nevsky. But those who did not recognise Pelagius would not have made the Eisenstein connection either and not been bothered one way or the other. While on comparisons, some of the battles were Braveheart-like and I would guess that many of the audience would have made that connection.)

This is pre-Camelot Britain, so there is no trace of any singing or wondering what the simple folk do. Rather, Arthur and his knights are political hostages from Asia, forced by the Roman empire to fight for them for fifteen years. Arthur and his fellows have been fighting the local Britons, the Woads, so called because of their painting their faces for battle. Merlin is one of their leaders. When their time of service has expired, the knights are asked to go on one more mission. On their return, they encounter the marauding Saxons and join with the Woads to defeat them – thus giving Arthur a united kingdom.

This means that we are dealing with pre-imagination, pre-legend Arthur, a dark Arthur, one whom audiences would find it hard to warm to, little sympathy let alone empathy. The choice of the never-prone-to smile Clive Owen for Arthur reinforces the theme but it is his darkness and dourness that cloud the film. (He does have the trace of a smile at the end.) Ioann Gryffudd is Lancelot but there is nothing much of a triangle between Arthur and Guinevere and himself. Guinevere is the young and athletic Keira Knightly. The one who does make an impression, especially since he is indeed from Scandinavia, is Stellan Skarsgaard as the leader of the Saxons, a rough and tumble, violent lot.

Once one gets used to what King Arthur is as a film rather than what advertising and hopes led one to believe what it would be, it seems to improve.

13 GOING ON 30 (US, 2004, d. Gary Winick)

Here are some more mean girls. At school, they are particularly unpleasant to Jenna, using her assignment plans, coming to her birthday party but then tricking her to hide in the cupboard waiting for the kiss from the boy she has a crush on. But, all she gets is a kiss from the best friend she takes for granted, the chubby Matt. No, that is not all, she gets her wish fulfilled, that she be 30.

She is big (just as once Tom Hanks was). She gets a terrible shock to find that she has become worse than any of the mean girls, has lost touch with Matt and seems to be one of the most disagreeable editors on the magazine she used to idolise at 13. While there are a few jokes about a gawky 13 year old in a 30 year old's body, the plot is more about how she can become a better person. Fortunately, she tracks down Matt who is really a very decent guy, although engaged to a super-energetic professional, and a very good photographer. We watch Jenna move from mean to amenable to sugar and spice.

Jennifer Garner is more used to being in action on television's Alias. She has a pleasing screen presence here, a Julia Roberts smile and some comic timing. Mark Ruffalo is the nice grown-up Matt. Fame has come to Andy Serkis after being Gollum and here he is as the supervising editor of the magazine.

The title probably describes the target audience for the film.

A CINDERELLA STORY (US, 2004, d. Mark Rosman)

There are several archetypal stories which are told over and over again, in different guises and adapted for different eras: the Frankenstein doctor and monster, for instance, or Beauty and the Beast. And, of course, Cinderella. This Cinderella lives in California, now, where, as the DJ announces, you are not judged by who you are but by what you wear.

Samantha – Sam - has a wonderful father, who reads his motherless daughter fairy stories. For her sake (there could be no other reason), he marries the impossible Fiona who has two impossible non-identical twin daughters. They loathe Sam so, when her father dies heroically in an earthquake and Fiona inherits his popular diner, it is slaving away in the diner for Sam while the ugly sisters have synchronised swimming lessons and cat-fight. Fiona, who is not the brightest bulb in California and who mistakes the fashion pages and cosmetic surgery for class, makes life difficult for Sam. Difficult,

but not impossible, because she has an eccentric friend (who will be the mice equivalent taking her to the high school dance), is loved by those who work at the diner (where Regina King will be the godmother who gives her a dress) and who has a chat-room relationship with a Princeton charming, where she hopes to study.

The parallels are amusing, especially as these days she could not lose her slipper but certainly could drop her locked mobile phone. Actually, the potential prince has more than enough troubles of his own since he is just like those heroic jocks that Freddie Prinze has played, great at football but a secret poet within, with his yob peer followers and tagged by the blonde cheerleader - who, with her little court are yet more mean girls,

Hillary Duff is lively and sweet as Sam. The music swells when Chad Michael Murray appears so you know he has to be the prince, despite appearances, though one warms to him. The most enjoyable part of the film is watching Jennifer Coolidge as Fiona, crass as they come but obviously relishing this opportunity to create a tanned and pastel screen monster-mother.

HOME ON THE RANGE (US, 2004, d. Will Finn, John Sanford)

With this film, Disney hand-drawn animation, which has prevailed for almost seventy years, comes to an end. Dreamworks and, especially Pixar Studios, have proved that computer animation is the present and the future.

What we have here is a rather old-fashioned story, with an old-fashioned look that is reminiscent of Clarabelle the Cow and of the Looney Tunes and their chases and slambang pratfalls.

It is the story of three cows who come from a dairy farm called A Little Patch of Heaven. Villains rustle cattle, want to buy out poor and helpless widows and give the west a bad name. We share the adventures of the cows, as well as their trying to get on with one another. Maggie is an interloping show cow, so is voiced with her kind of panache by Roseanne Barr. The lady of the farm, called Mrs Calloway, sounds like M, Queen Elizabeth and Queen Victoria because she is voiced by Judi Dench. Amusing with her New Age psychological observations and explanations is Jennifer Tilly voicing Grace. So, there are all kinds of adventures, perils and bonding till the cows come home.

Perhaps the plot and action will seem old-fashioned to today's children. The adults can reminisce and enjoy the voices.

ALAMO, The
ANCHORMAN, THE LEGEND OF RON BURGUNDY
CHRONICLES OF RIDDICK, The
DODGEBALL, A TRUE UNDERDOG STORY
FACING WINDOW
HELLBOY
MY ARCHITECT
RAISING HELEN
STAGE BEAUTY
TERMINAL, The
VILLAGE, The

DODGEBALL, A TRUE UNDERDOG STORY (US, 2004, d. Rawson Marshall Thurber)

In one sense, this is quite an idiotic film, plot, characters, behaviour. But, it is also often quite funny in an endearing kind of way. Depends, of course, on your sense of humour.

If you have never heard of Dodgeball, then you have never read the magazine that one of the characters subscribes to, 'Obscure Sports Monthly'. Perhaps, after this movie, somebody will start up dodgeball teams!

As the title indicates, this is the old, old, old story of a hopeless team that, against all odds and dastardly deeds of the opposition, wins the championship. Who are the hopeless team? Well, first you need to know about White, the proud (better, ultra arrogant and full of himself) owner of a de luxe gym, with all the facilities, motivation videos (starring himself) and New Age training jargon (which he mixes up). He used to look like Jabba the Hut gone to seed, but now he is Narcissus in spandex. He covets, however, Average Joe's gym (to make a car park) where losers and oddballs seem to comprise the non-paying customers. Since they have to come up with \$50,000 in a month, what else can they do but enter the dodgeball championship?

Ben Stiller goes really over the top as White, a sometimes hilarious caricature of inane self-importance. By contrast, Vince Vaughan as Pete, owner of Average Joe's, seems positively laid back. White has musclemen bodyguards who become his team. Pete as derelict a bunch that you could find, although he gets the support of the foreclosure lawyer who is repelled by White's gauche advances.

The comedy is in the gallery of eccentric characters, the training for dodgeball by a wheelchair bound, rough mouthed Rip Torn (plenty of knockabout comedy here), the matches themselves and the commentary by Gary Cole and his platitudinous assistant.

A silly night out with a fair number of laughs.

RAISING HELEN (US, 2004, d. Garry Marshall)

If you are not a heart on sleeve movie buff, then you had better steer clear of Helen. If you are, then there are enough sitcom elements to bring a smile and a tear and the enjoyable presence of Kate Hudson and Joan Cusack.

Helen (Kate Hudson) is the youngest of three sisters, raised by her perfect mother-earth sister, Jenny (Joan Cusack), after their mother died. When their older sister and her husband are killed in a car crash, Helen is bequeathed the children (three of them). She is a very successful career woman in a modelling agency (run with tight lipped British definitely-not-heart-on-sleeve executive played by Helen Mirren – she would not be going to a movie complex to see Raising Helen). What is Helen to do?

Reminiscent of Kevin Smith's Jersey Girl, Raising Helen shows Helen trying to raise the children as best she can. This is where the sitcom elements come in: 15 year old infatuated with student DJ goes to motel, boy won't play basketball because that is what he did with his father, little girl is learning to tie her shoelaces (Unmarried with Children). To help Helen in the fortitude area, she is supported by the hunkish Lutheran pastor, principal of the local school as well as by poor Jenny who already has three children and is pregnant. John Corbett as Pastor Dan is a Lutheran equivalent of Bing Crosby going my way but unimpeded by a vow of celibacy. He is pretty wooden but Helen does fall for him.

Garry Marshall has directed some very popular sweet-toothed entertainments, especially Pretty Woman. Raising Helen, even though it does have situations that parents can easily identify with, is, perhaps, just too sweet.

THE ALAMO (US, 2004, d. John Lee Hancock)

The Alamo has an extraordinary status in American history, the last stand battle of a small group of men and women in the church near San Antonio, a stand against the overwhelming forces of the Mexican General Santa Anna to the death. Davy Crockett and Jim Bowie (of the knife fame) died during the siege. John Wayne starred as Crockett in a big-budget re-creation of the events in 1960. The film had the same title as the present version, The Alamo.

This Alamo did rather poorly at the American box-office. Is it the film itself? Is it the American spirit in 2003-2004 with the events of the war in Iraq and the aftermath? What image of American heroism was needed at this time?

First of all, the film is rather dark and not quite so heroic as forty years earlier. It also tries to look for the truth behind the legends and finds some feet of clay (or, rather, ordinary fallible human beings) and that did not sit well with the public who were caught up in the war against terrorism.

Since most people know the outcome, the film opens with the defeat and General Sam Houston on his knees. Back we go to the big dreams that Houston and other pioneers had for the opening up of Texas and for its being part of the Union (we are in the mid 1830s). Davy Crockett, from the Tennessee wild frontier and more latterly from Congress in Washington, responds to the call and arrives in San Antonio. General Santa Anna and his men make a surprise march through the winter and the siege of the Alamo begins.

There are tensions within the fort. The commander leaves, placing young and by the book Travis in charge. Jim Bowie and his roughneck followers are not impressed. Mistakes are made and the battle begins. Houston, who has a drinking problem, does not have the confidence of community leaders and is not there. He persuades them that he should raise a force.

There is a great deal of heroism in the fighting but the Americans are no match for the Mexicans, the small roughly clad fighters against the quite magnificently uniformed soldiers. Bowie dies of consumption. Crockett is executed. Houston eventually lures Santa Anna away and defeats him in an 18 minute fight with the Mexican signing away Texas in exchange for his life.

Billy Bob Thornton is the standout in the acting, really brining Crockett alive as a credible hunter, leader and genial gentleman. Jason Patric is Bowie and Dennis Quaid is Sam Houston.

ANCHORMAN, THE LEGEND OF RON BURGUNDY (US, 2004, d.

Senses of humour are notoriously different. One cultures hilarity is another culture's stone-faced incomprehension. This could be the fate of Anchorman. However, these first sentences are offered as an excuse and a defence for saying that I found it very funny – all the way through. In fact, I had to wipe my eyes so that I could read the sub-titles for the conversation between the dog and the Kodiak Bears during the climax!

Ron Burgundy was invented by Will Ferrell (who proved that a human elf over six feet tall could be engaging in Elf). He enlisted the talents of writer-director, Adam Carrel and developed this parody of a San Diego TV news anchorman of the 1970s, the days when anchormen were celebrities and the women did not have a chance. The film is a succession of funny sketches as we see a really not very bright Ron basking in his reputation, then dismayed when the networks employ a woman and, in a cruel fate as he absent-mindedly throws a burrito out his car window and the enraged cyclist that he hits boots his pet dog into the river in retaliation, misses his time – and she goes on instead and is successful. Christian Applegate enjoys herself as Ron's rival.

There are some very enjoyable turns by the supporting cast, especially from Paul Rudd and Steve Carrell (the TV announcer who fell victim to Jim Carrey in Bruce Almighty) and Fred Willard (the announcer in Best in Show). Audiences will want to be on the lookout for cameos from Vince Vaughan, Luke Wilson, Tim Robbins and Ben Stiller as rival anchormen. Jack Black is the irate dog-kicker.

The comedy tends to avoid the bodily function jokes that seem to be requisite for American satires. Rather, it is the situations, the verbal humour, sight gags and general genial spoof of the pretensions and macho assumptions of those days.

THE CHRONICLES OF RIDDICK (US, 2004, d. David Twohey)

Riddick is Vin Diesel, playing the character introduced in David Twohey's Mars actioner, Pitch Black. It is said that there are Vin Diesel fan clubs. The appeal eludes me. He is one of the most po-faced, unsmiling, uncharismatic screen presences – no touches of humour, no irony, no lightness.

The plot is akin to a Star Trek adventure but the audience needs to be practiced in remembering the names of distant planets and galaxies, especially when some of their names include numbers and they miss some of the action wondering which planet is being attacked and which one saved.

And Judi Dench is in it! She, Colm Feore as the archvillain who demands conversion to his somewhat obscure religious stances or brain-washed slavery or extinction, and Linus Roache all pronounce their dialogue as if this really was an important chronicle. Vin Diesel and the mercenaries use dialogue that sounds like blunt, crass and cussing leftovers from *The Fast and The Furious* (and the director is to blame because he has written the screenplay).

The sets and action are impressive as are most of the effects, although just hiding behind a rock or in a cliff crevice on a planet surface called Crematoria (with temperatures in the hundreds) seems sufficient to stop being crisped.

It is more a descendant of episodic cliff-hanging old serials than the more recent space adventures – and this review has avoided the obvious ‘riddickulous’!

FACING WINDOW (LA FINESTRA AL FRONTE) (Italy, 2003, d. Ferzan Ozpetek)

Director Ferzan Ozpetek migrated from Turkey to Italy and has made all his films there, including *Hammam* and *Le Fate Ignoranti*. He incorporates themes of migration into all his films. He also includes themes of sexual identity, especially issues of homosexuality.

Facing Window is a very moving film, well worth seeing. It opens in Rome in 1943 with the German occupation and a murder which is not explained until the latter part of the film. We appreciate the identity of the killer when the action moves to 2002 but are not sure of his guilt or not. This gives an edge to the film.

The focus is on a young working-class couple with two children. She is an accountant in a chicken factory. He works in a trucking station on the night shift. They have two children. They take care of an elderly man in the street, find that he has lost his memory and bring him to their home. He changes their lives. The wife (Giovanna Mezzogiorno) is acerbic and critical. In her initially reluctant helping of the man, she discovers where her true values lie both in the work she wants to do and in her relationship with her husband and her attraction to the bank manager whom she sees out of the facing window. In a sequence where she looks across from the facing window at her own apartment, we see the emotional conflict between a new life and valuing what she has.

Massimo Girotti, veteran of more than 60 years in Italian films, brings great dignity to the role of the old man, a deep humanity that affects all those he contacts. It is through him that a quiet plea for judging people beyond their sexual orientation is made. This is a satisfying Italian drama.

THE VILLAGE (US, 2004, D. M Night Shyamalan)

Although it has been quite successful at the box-office, a number of reviewers and audiences have said that they were disappointed by this film. Perhaps, expectations were both wrong and too high. After *The Sixth Sense*, *Unbreakable* and *Signs*, Shyamalan is expected to always bring us a big, mysterious thriller with some shocks and twists. While *The Village* does have some shocks and a twist, it is more of a small film, almost what is called an ‘arthouse’ film, the kind of film that, if it were screened at a festival without audiences knowing who made it, would be received well.

What *The Village* is strong on is atmosphere and suggestion. Sometimes it is too quick on suggestion and the plot leaps ahead as if it had been cut down from a longer film. The 1897 look, tone and action is maintained. In fact, a village set was built in fields just outside Philadelphia to create authenticity. This evokes responses to such communities as the Amish. However, religion is not what motivates people. What motivates them is security from the outside world which has been cruel to them. The other motivation is fear, that outsiders will intrude and, even more important, that their children will not want to leave, not even want to go into the woods where ‘those we do not speak of’ live. Actually, the people are continually mentioning those they do not speak of. This is especially the case because of weird events and apparitions that create an atmosphere of fear.

The elders control the village and people’s lives, frequently meeting in council. William Hurt, as a kindly teacher, presides. His blind daughter (Bryce Dallas Howard) is attracted to the reticent Lucius Hunt (Joaquin Phoenix). She is also admired by what used to be called ‘the village idiot’ (Adrien

Brody). When Lucius needs medicine, she is permitted to go to the outside world, 'the towns' to seem it. The over-literal mock the film by asking who would send a blind girl into the woods on such a journey. Since, the events are meant to be looked at symbolically rather than realistically, it is evident that she is a special girl with special gifts to confront the evil.

How does the twist work in a realistic sense? In a symbolic sense? That is why you need to see *The Village* to work out.

[Controversy arose in the US as *The Village* opened. The Science fiction channel publicised their two hour documentary, *The Buried Secret of M. Night Shyamalan*, alleging that it would raise some secrets and scandals. They then apologised. What it really was was a pseudo-documentary, a serious mockumentary made by professional documentary-maker Nathanael Kahn – who recently made a fine tribute to his father, Louis Kahn, *My Architect*. This film runs for two hours, has lots of interviews, especially at the set of *The Village*, but it is all tongue-in-cheek, in a Shyamalan way, as if all his films were based on mysterious, psychic and out-of-life experiences of Shyamalan as a child. It is very clever and well worth seeing.]

MY ARCHITECT (US, 2003, d. Nathanael Kahn)

Many architecture critics consider Louis Kahn, a Jewish migrant from Estonia, to be the greatest American architect of the 20th century. There is plenty of evidence in this fine documentary to support the claim. His work is to be found in many American cities but the film reaches its climax with his designs for the government centre in Bangladesh.

Kahn seems to have been something of a workaholic genius. There is a great deal of footage of Kahn himself in the film.

However, he also had three children, one by his wife and one each by two of his associates. The director of this film is one of those children. He has set himself a quest: to try to find his father. This means that *My Architect* has a great deal to offer on American architecture. But it is also, the exploration of a character who did not reveal very much of his inner personal life but who obviously had a forceful influence on the women he loved and on his children.

Nathanael Kahn's gift as a documentary maker (as is very evident in his mockumentary on M. Night Shyamalan) is that most of his interviews are not just set studio pieces, formal interviews, guests sitting in a chair alongside the director and providing talking head material. He catches people on the move, in ordinary life-situations, carrying on a conversation so that the audience has a camera-eye view of the interviewee so that we feel that we know those being interviewed and this is all a perfectly natural discussion. Kahn is always present but is not intrusive. He is as much a subject of his films as the name in the title. He has the knack of involving us in his quest.

THE TERMINAL (US, 2004, d. Steven Spielberg)

For those who travel, two hours watching people working and waiting in an airport terminal may create some sense of *déjà vu*. The terminal here is JHK in New York.

On paper, the basic plot may seem far-fetched. However, it is given some plausibility as we follow the fate of Victor H, a visitor to the US who finds himself falling into an administrative crack that lasts for nine months. While he was in the air, there was a revolution in his eastern European nation which has led to all visas being declared invalid. The US has not recognised the interim government. As administered by officials who live by the book and the rules and are not strong on compassion. In fact, they wish he would make a break for it so that the 'unacceptable' visitor could be arrested by another authority.

It makes you wonder what on earth you would do in a similar situation. The regulations are against you. You have very limited language. You have very little money. People are suspicious.

Tom Hanks played Victor sympathetically, as might be expected. Stanley Tucci gives a strong performance as the airport boss, stubborn, sometimes wily, always concerned about his own position above all else. Catherine Zeta Jones is a friendly flight attendant.

The film dawdles sometimes. After all, two hours is quite a long time to stay in an airport at the best of times. But, the film grows on you and takes on something of a contemporary fairytale as Victor settles in at Gate 67 and befriends many of the staff, even acting as a matchmaker with the passport control officer who stamps his documents every day as 'unacceptable'.

Steven Spielberg's films are always touched with sentiment, easily to be dismissed as 'too American'. It is Spielberg raising some empathy for migrants and asylum seekers and their being victims of red tape. It is also Spielberg giving the Americans something feelgood at a difficult political time.

HELLBOY (US, 2004, d. Guillermo del Toro)

Guillermo del Toro (director of *Mimic* and *Blade 2* as well as the fine Spanish Civil War drama, *The Devil's Backbone*) became a fan of Mike Mignola's comic book, *Hellboy*. He lobbied for the job of directing and wrote the screenplay. Mignola himself (who acted as an art director on *Blade 2*) acts as producer, declaring that del Toro has given a striking visual interpretation of his character and events.

And it is a striking production, visually, full of exotic characters and locations, special effects and stunt work. *Hellboy*, apparently, came into this world through a portal in space in Scotland, 1944, in a ritual presided over by the Nazis, since Hitler had become involved for some years in the occult. American allies are able to disrupt the ceremonies (presided over by a revived Rasputin) and *Hellboy* grows up under the care of a kindly professor (John Hurt) becoming very American in attitudes, language and behaviour, a rather laid back daredevil who has chosen good instead of evil but has not really grown up and is spoilt and petulant. The professor has also collected a number of paranormal individuals, including a merman and a firestarter. Their exploits are a build-up to the final apocalyptic confrontation that should end the world. Plenty of action here.

Hellboy gives Ron Perlman a starring role. He is once again a variation of the Beast who is in love with the beauty (Selma Blair as the firestarter). Perlman creates an unusual character, a hero, monstrous looking but both childlike and childish – and a lot of deadpan humour. He has to face moral choices like any good hero, to give his life for the girl, to vindicate and, of course, to save the universe.

This is comic book heroics with a difference, plus a mish-mash of mythologies and Catholic imagery, and is above average for this kind of action thriller.

STAGE BEAUTY (UK, 2004. d. Richard Eyre)

The English Civil War of the 17th century, the protectorate of Oliver Cromwell and the subsequent restoration of the monarchy under Charles II have been the source of many films (*Cromwell*, *To Kill a King*, *Forever Amber*, *Restoration*). The focus of this film, as the title indicates, is the theatre. During the time of Cromwell's Puritanism, the theatres were closed for almost twenty years. However, actors trained in secret, waiting for the day of re-opening.

Through *Shakespeare in Love*, audiences remember that men took on all roles in the theatre, including the roles of women. At the time of Charles II, women were forbidden to act. From his experience of his mother's acting, from his time in exile in France where women were permitted on stage, and at the urging of Nell Gwynn, it is suggested, he revoked the regulation, reversing it so that only women could play women's roles. This had terrible repercussions on the actors who had for years trained themselves in women's gait, manners and attitudes.

Stage Beauty is the story of Edward Kynaston (Billy Crudup), mentioned by diarist Samuel Pepys as the most beautiful actor in London. At the opening we see him performing the role of Desdemona to Tom Wilkinson's Othello. His personal assistant Maria (Clare Danes) has ambitions to play Desdemona herself.

With a touch of *Restoration A Star is Born*, his career collapses as hers develops, with the patronage of the King (Rupert Everett) and Sir Charles Sedgely (Richard Griffiths). Clare Danes is charming as the

would-be actress (a term that Kynaston has never heard of mocks in amazement). Billy Crudup acquits himself very well in a most difficult role. He persuades us that he has been trained to live to play women's roles, expert in flirtation as well. He also persuades us that this is a devastating crisis for him and his career. As for his life, it raises questions of his sexual identity in a period that was characterised by its licentiousness.

Stage Beauty takes us willingly into the history of the English theatre (especially the final performance of the death of Desdemona) and makes us reflect on the manners, mores and morals of the period.

VANITY FAIR (US/UK, 2004, d. Mira Nair)

Perhaps many people think that this film has connections with the popular magazine of the same name. Rather, the magazine takes us back to one of the great classic novels of 19th century English literature, William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. Thackeray, like Charles Dickens, was an expert purveyor of the three-volume novel, serialized in magazines and, so, having a double life as a best-seller. How well can such sizable novels be transferred to the screen? And why should we see such films?

First, a religious note: Thackeray took his title from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes, 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity...' His novel offers an illustration of the futility and destructiveness of greed and ambition – the same message as that in the Gospels, 'what does it profit to gain the whole world and lose one's soul?'

Second, a social note: Thackeray took his readers back into the first decades of the 19th century, the years of the Napoleonic Wars, culminating in his defeat at Waterloo. These were the years of Regency England, a time of great public elegance, a beginning of a sense of empire, a time of belief that, despite poverty and oppression, anything was possible.

How can film-makers put all of this into a film which lasts two hours and twenty minutes, especially when a version of *Vanity Fair* of seventy years ago, 'Becky Sharp', ran for less than ninety minutes?

The task was entrusted to several writers, amongst whom Julian Fellowes, the Oscar-winning writer of another vanity fair kind of story, *Gosford Park*. The director is the Indian, Mira Nair, probably best-known for her exuberant *Monsoon Wedding*. [The Indian connection is not accidental as Thackeray himself was born in Calcutta.]

And the film itself? It is one of those wonderful re-creations of a period that the British do so well. It is quite lavish in sets and costume design, a delight for the eye. It also has a particularly strong cast. American Reese Witherspoon is cast as one of literature's most lively and memorable characters, Becky Sharp. She comes across as a nicer person than in the novel but is quite convincingly English. James Purefoy is her gambler husband, Rawdon, and Rhys Ifans (playing against type) is the faithful Captain Dobbin. Audiences will delight in so many of the supporting characters: Eileen Atkins as Miss Crawley, Bob Hoskins as Pitt Crawley and Jim Broadbent as Mr Osbourne.

And, yes, the film contains the whole book. It may be only a sketch and outline sometimes, but it gets the spirit of the novel. Not only does the audience feel it has lived through these times, but it understands this portrait of a society in transition, of the strengths and failings of human nature. It is well worth a visit into this past.

VERA DRAKE (UK, 2004, D. Mike Leigh)

Vera Drake, a film by Mike Leigh, won the Golden Lion at the 61st Venice Film Festival. This British film won a further boost when Imelda Staunton was named as Best Actress.

When it screened halfway through the festival, headlines appeared: a film about abortion. The presumption seemed to be that *Vera Drake* was 'pro-abortion'. A potential scandal makes for ready copy. This continued in most of the reporting about the film and its awards. The buzz about *Vera Drake* being a front-runner for the big award led to speculation about how the Catholic church would respond. Italian journalists are said to have a reputation for being critical of the church, if not stridently anti-clerical at times, so this would provide a field day.

In the event this did not happen, although the members of the Catholic jury for the SIGNIS award (for the World Catholic Association for Communication) were alerted to the sensitivity of the situation.

Two factors contributed to a more intelligent discussion of the film. First was the film itself. Mike Leigh is a master film-maker. He has won awards in Cannes for *Naked* and his very moving, *Secrets and Lies*. Other films include the Gilbert and Sullivan portrait, *Topsy Turvey* as well as the picture of very ordinary London life, *All or Nothing*. *Vera Drake* is in the *All or Nothing* tradition. Vera Drake is a fifty year old housewife in North London in 1950. She is generous to a fault. Nothing is too much trouble for her. Everyone says she has a heart of gold. She is the proverbial good woman. The first half of the film is a moving portrait of this woman whom Imelda Staunton's performance makes memorable.

Without any lead in we are shown how she also performs syringe abortions for women and girls 'in need'. She has done this for twenty years or more. Her family know nothing about it. When one girl suffers complications, hospital authorities inform the police and Vera is subject to questioning and arrest.

The second factor for discussion was Mike Leigh's press conference. He was quick to point out that his films treat social issues but never provide unequivocal answers. He provides the equivalent of a case study (something like what seminarians explored in the past during their moral theology course). Leigh noted that, while we bring our own agenda to the story, we are invited to consider a wider range of perspectives. It is not simply, or simplistically, moral judgment by unnuanced application of moral principles. Catholic confessional practice has traditionally urged for more delicacy of conscience and a greater appreciation of what full knowledge and full consent mean in the context of responsibility for actions and for sin. Leigh said that some audiences would view Vera as a saint, committed to assisting women; others would see her as a monster, destroying lives.

Most audiences hurry out as soon as final credits roll. For those who stay, they will see that Leigh dedicates his film to his parents, a doctor and a midwife.

The difficulty with labelling a film 'about abortion' is that this merely tells us the subject, or one of the subjects, of the film. The Biblical story of David and Bathsheba is about adultery and murder but that is just a labelling description. What we need to know is 'how' these issues are presented. This is the criterion for a moral evaluation of a film. This means, as a correspondent for Vatican Radio was reported as saying on air during the Venice Festival, that Leigh's film is 'difficult and interesting' and 'avoided propaganda and tentative and facile conclusions'. Catholic teaching has always urged the faithful to condemn the sin but not the sinner. Leigh's portrait of Vera Drake contributes to that way of looking at her despite what she does.

COLLATERAL (US, 2004, d. Michael Mann)

When Tom Cruise's name appeared alongside that of Jamie Foxx on the posters for *Collateral*, there were some cynical remarks that Cruise's career was on a downward path. No longer sole billing above the title. Be the billing as it may, *Collateral* gives us a very strong Cruise performance – as is that of Jamie Foxx.

Collateral is a very satisfying thriller. The action sequences are well executed, though stretching credibility more than a little at times (the shootout in the club, the pursuit to and through the LA Subway). The dialogue is much more interesting than in most thrillers. Cruise, as the cold stone-killer, has a lot to say about life, about death, about executions and about the place of men and women in the grand scheme of things. Foxx, as the taxi driver with dreams of running his own perfect limousine service with a top clientele, has a lot to say about life and passengers, about ambitions and frustrations and about morality. *Collateral*, therefore, is an intelligent thriller.

Direction is by Michael Mann who these days is put on a pedestal by many critics. After all, he directed the first Hannibal Lecter film, *Manhunter*, back in the 1980s when he was producing *Miami Vice*. He has also directed *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Hear*, *The Insider* and *Ali*, not a bad record.

Shooting digitally, he brings Los Angeles to life, especially since the action time is from evening to dawn, a Los Angeles nightlife. The musical score is continually changing in style, from piano solos to jazz, to orchestrated accompaniment. Collateral is satisfying visually and aurally.

There are some memorable sequences: the visit to the Jazz Club and the reminiscences of the trumpeter who played once with Miles Davis, the interview with the gangster chief (Javier Bardem) where Foxx pretends to be Cruise and gradually rises to the occasion, outsmarting the gangsters, the finale in the train which fulfils a story Cruise tells about a dead man riding the subway for hours before anyone noticed he was dead.

Cruise, with his silvered hair, his dress suit and his guns, gives an effective performance, playing well off Foxx's warmly human interpretation of an LA taxi driver. The main focus is well supported by collateral benefits of screenplay and technique.

DEAD MAN'S SHOES (UK, 2004, d. Shane Meadows)

Until now Shane Meadows has been noted for small domestic dramas set in the British Midlands, *Twentyfour Seven*, *A Room for Romeo Brass* and *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands*. These films focus on children and youth, employment and tensions in families. In *Romeo Brass*, there was a very sinister character, especially in relationship to children, played by Paddy Considine. Paddy Considine's career has taken off with *Last Resort* and *In America*. He now comes back to work with Shane Meadows, not just as an actor, but as a co-writer of this sometimes frightening story.

It is a very difficult film to label. It opens with home movies of family and two young brothers. It moves to a domestic drama as the two brothers make contact with each other as the older, more protective brother (Considine) returns from military service. It then takes on a sense of menace as they track down a group of local yobbos who tormented the younger brother because he was mentally disabled and they enjoyed the bullying.

Now comes the blood and we realise that we are in for a frenzy of vengeance. Which we are. But, Meadows is not always predictable and there is more to the character of the younger brother than we first realise. The final victim for vengeance has something of a different story from the rest which gives the ending a different tone from predicted (but chilling nonetheless).

The older brother is obviously an avenging angel character but his character is mixed with some more kindly aspects. The posters speak of a film of redemption. There is very little redemption, if any, for the bullies. Is the brother, after his violence and bloodletting, redeemed?

Brief, taking place over a five day period with each day precisely introduced, with black and white flashbacks to the abuse of the young man, this is often an ugly film, but compelling as well.

AE FOND KISS (UK, 2004, d. Ken Loach)

For almost forty years, Ken Loach has devoted himself to films with passionate social concern. Not only is he still going strong, his reputation is higher than ever. During the last decade, he has won awards, critical acclaim and a larger following from the general public. His collaborator for the last seven or eight years has been a Scotsman, Paul Laverty, who spent some time in a seminary. This religious interest has been prominent in some of the films (like *Carla's Song*) and it is one of the key elements of *Ae Fond Kiss*.

'*Ae Fond Kiss*' is a quotation from the poet, Robert Burns. The two protagonists of this film are involved in more than a fond kiss. He is an earnest young man, a local DJ, who lives with his family, preparing for an arranged marriage. She is a music teacher at the school which his younger servant attends. The crucial information, however, is this: he is the son of Pakistani migrants to Glasgow, strictly traditional and devoutly Muslim; she is a Catholic and her school is Catholic.

The romantic element is treated as might be expected, delightful little details (like moving her piano with his local friends) and a sudden holiday in Spain (where some of the production money came from). Much of it is routine with a touch of sentiment.

The drama arises when the family discovers the truth. Once again, a lot of this is what we might expect. The Pakistani parents are adamant. The prospective in-laws are shocked. The son is defiant. Where the film is of greater interest is in the Catholic response: the principal wanting to keep the teacher but the parish priest giving her a severe lecture on moral standards and examples for the children.

Matters come to a head when the Pakistani older sister finds that her boyfriend's family will not permit a marriage because of her brother's involvement with a non-Muslim. She makes a very strong case for self-sacrifice on the part of the couple, making a plea to both parties. However, we live in a very emotional world, where sympathies for those in love are usually stronger than relying on principles.

Loach and Lavery offer us a story where the issues are clear but where the answers are very difficult.

TRAUMA (UK, 2004, d. Marc Evans)

When Marc Evans made a digital horror thriller, *My Little Eye*, two years ago, he was hailed as one of Britain's up-and-coming directors. *Trauma* is a bit more up-market, with a bigger budget. It is stylishly made – but it requires a great deal of concentration from audiences.

Colin Firth is Ben. He emerges from coma, hospitalised after being involved in a car accident where his wife has died. As he undergoes therapy (with an unseen psychiatrist) and tries to resume life by moving into an abandoned hospital area, he becomes more and more convinced that he is somehow involved in a murder investigation, the death of a singer for whom his wife was a featured dancer. He meets friends, attacks his wife's sister, makes friend with a nice neighbour (Mena Suvari) who takes him to a séance conducted by Brenda Fricker.

BIRTH (US, 2004, d. Jonathan Glazer)

Birth seems a very strange film. In fact, many people would call it silly. However, it has very good credentials. The screenplay was co-written by Bunuel's collaborator, Jean-Claude Carrière, with the director, Jonathan Glazer. Glazer had made a big impression with his brief and somewhat brutal British gangster thriller, *Sexy Beast*, with Ray Winston and Ben Kingsley in an Oscar-nominated performance.

Birth is a New York story. It begins with a death and transfers to a birth. For those who believe in reincarnation, it seems to be a rebirth. The difficulty is that the man who died was a middle-aged jogger. He is reincarnated in a young boy who, at ten years old, claims that he is the long-dead husband of widow, Nicole Kidman.

It depends on one's point of view whether the film is metaphysical or religious or simply psychological. From a metaphysical point of view, the plot seems impossible. From a reincarnational point of view, this kind of plot could even be plausible. From a psychological point of view, it offers a great number of difficulties. How does the boy have all the information – and how does he persuade the widow that he is genuine? Ultimately, the plot seems to be resolved on a psychological level.

Jonathan Glazer has a distinctive visual style, and he is in no hurry. The opening jogging credits sequence seems rather too long for its dramatic value. At other times, the camera stops and contemplates different characters. There is a striking scene as Nicole Kidman listens to an orchestra in concert and the camera seems to remain on her striking face for at least a minute.

The film has strong acting which carries it along in some way. Nicole Kidman, sporting a very brief, effectively different hairstyle, is the widow who becomes absorbed in the claims of the boy. This might seem impossible. However, she is caught up in the memories of her husband and so follows through investigating and believing the child. He is played by Cameron Bright who appeared in *Godsend* and in *The Butterfly Effect* (here rather more impassive and blank. In the other films rather sinister). Danny Huston plays Nicole's fiancé. Lauren Bacall is her mother – and Lauren Bacall has the most sardonic, realistic and down-to-earth lines in the whole film.

The supporting cast is interesting, Peter Stormare as the dead man's best friend, Anne Heche as Stormare's wife with a secret of her own.

The film is stylishly made – but the topic itself, even with reference to the title of the film, makes one wonder.

THE MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE (US, 2004, d. Jonathan Demme)

The difficulty in understanding public figures is, of course, that we see only what the media present to us. In 2004, during the presidential election campaign, there was a George Bush who was attempting to persuade the nation that he was a leader, a firm, decisive and courageous man. And then came Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* and the images of the president in the immediate aftermath of the crash into the twin towers: the president with no minders, sitting quietly alone in the Florida classroom reading the children's story. What is the real image? What is the manufactured image? There is a nice line in *The Mirror Crack'd* where Angela Lansbury remarks about Hollywood: 'Under the artificial tinsel is the real tinsel'.

The character played by Meryl Streep in *The Manchurian Candidate* is a dramatic reminder of this dichotomy between image and reality. She is Eleanor Shaw, a senator, wife of a senator, mother of a Gulf War hero who is standing for Vice President of the United States.

The Manchurian Candidate was originally a novel by celebrated writer, Richard Condon. It appeared at the end of the 50s, in the aftermath of the Korean War and America's hostility towards the Soviet Union and the countries behind the Iron Curtain, as well as an antipathy towards China. The film version was released in 1962, directed by John Frankenheimer and starring Frank Sinatra and Laurence Harvey with Angela Lansbury in a very chilling performance as Harvey's mother. However, events overtook the film with the assassination of J.F. Kennedy and the emergence of an era of conspiracy theories. The film was withdrawn from circulation and not released again until the late 1980s.

Jonathan Demme (*Silence of the Lambs*, Philadelphia) has decided to update the plot for his remake. (The previous year he had remade Stanley Donen's *Charade* as *The Trouble with Charlie*, starring Mark Wahlberg.)

The early 21st century, especially after the tragedy of September 11, 2001, as well as the Iraq War, offers a setting for a new version of *The Manchurian Candidate*. This time the focus is on brainwashing but not solely by an enemy (here, Arabs during the first Gulf War). The villains are in fact both politicians and the leaders of huge corporations using mind-altering chemicals to achieve their aims. The film was released in 2004, the election year as well as the year of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, as Michael Moore exposed aspects of the Bush administration, life in America and its paranoia as well as the links between corporations and government.

Frank Sinatra played the investigator, Marco, in the original version. Here he is played by Denzel Washington. In the original, Laurence Harvey was the soldier who was reputed to have led his group to safety – which, in fact, did not happen. This perception was the result of the brainwashing. Liev Schreiber is very good in the Harvey role as Raymond Shaw. However, the writers have changed the plot insofar as, originally, the son of the senator was the assassin. Here it is Marco. Now, Raymond Shaw, after the experience of the war, comes back to take his place in American politics, moving to a vice-presidential nomination and, with the possibility of an assassination, to be president himself. In the background his mother is lurking. Angela Lansbury played the mother in the original film. This time it is Meryl Streep – playing the opposite of some of her kinder and more gentle roles. Just as in the first film, it is chilling when the audience realises that it is the mother who is controlling her son and ordering him to kill.

At the movie's climax, we see Eleanor Shaw's manufactured image. Her son is the Vice Presidential candidate. She is beaming happily, all sweetness and light. Invited to dance by her son, she shrugs modestly. She insinuates that she should be simply in the background, the loving mother rejoicing in the success of her son. But, this is the moment of assassination, her son completing his breaking free of his mother, manoeuvring her into a literal dance of death. And he dies with her. We will never know what influence she will exercise over him both as mother and as wielder of hypnotic power.

We have no difficulty in surmising what she would have been like. We have seen her real self, the image of her real self in her interactions with her son and with the powerbrokers behind the scenes.

Eleanor Shaw seems to be a dominant personality, complicated by the fact that she sees herself born to power, descendant of prestigious politicians, widow of a politician whom she despised and discarded as a failure to live up to her expectations, mother of a success who is a creation of her own schemes and power plays, whom she will not allow to fail like his father. She has to control his mind and his will. Like Michael Douglas as Gordon Gecko in *Wall Street*, she portrays a character who has chosen to be locked into their personality, exploiting it and using it destructively and deceived by seemingly logical rationalisations that they are at the service of people and a cause instead of the fulfilment of their greed or ambitions.

She can play the game of pretending to be her opposite when she phones her son and meekly apologises for interrupting him, a sweet and unassuming mother whose only thought is for her son. She thinks nothing of ruining her son's love for Senator Jordan's daughter. When Senator Jordan's campaign stands in her way, she controls her son, willing him to kill the Senator with the consequent death of the woman that he truly loved.

The revelatory sequence is that when she meets with the powers that be in Washington to force them into accepting her son's nomination. The men she confronts are tough leaders. She is not deterred. She shrewdly applies political blackmail with language to boot. She is no lady here. Masks are off and we see and hear just what a ruthlessly determined woman can do to browbeat opponents into submission.

The film is rather long, pales at times in comparison with the exposes and the wild conspiracy theories that have prevailed in more recent times. However, it is a good example of stylish film-making and is well grounded in Richard Condon's novel.

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE (UK, 2004, d. Michael Radford)

The Merchant of Venice is one of Shakespeare's most popular plays both for performance in theatre as well as for study at school and university. It is surprising that it has not been filmed before except for television versions of theatrical productions.

The play has been adapted by its director, Michael Radford. Radford has a range of credits including the 1984 version of Orwell's 1984, *White Mischief* and the Italian tribute to Pablo Neruda and his postman, *Il Postino*. The text has been pruned but the essentials are there. The film has also been opened out and uses many actual Venetian locations to enhance the action, the beauty, the historical sense of the film. In fact, most of the sequences look like the paintings of Titian or Tintoretto come to life.

The film also has the advantage of an unspoken prologue which dramatises the attitude of Christians towards Jews in Venice in the late 16th century. It takes its cue from many of the indications given in the text, especially in Shylock's speeches. The film vividly shows the merchants, the Rialto, their despising of the Jews, spitting on them, Antonio spitting on Shylock. It also has sequences in the synagogue with the Jews, especially Shylock, at prayer. An explanation is given about the attitudes towards the Jews at the time, the forbidding of the Jews to own any property and hence their having to depend on money-lending and usury.

The acting also carries the film well. Al Pacino, rather more quiet than some of his more strident performances, embodies Shylock. Some of his speeches, while passionate, tend in some moments towards the low-key, which is very effective. This is true of his famous speech, "If you prick us, do we not bleed..." as well as his speeches at the trial.

Jeremy Irons, of course, seems born to be the perennial martyr and brings great dignity and solemnity to the role of Antonio. The film acknowledges some of the speculation about the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio but highlights the fact that older men in Venetian society took on proteges and supported them rather than the indications of any kind of homosexual relationship. These clues are indicated in the film. Joseph Fiennes is very good as Bassanio but the surprise of the film is the

American actress Lynn Collins who is a most persuasive Portia. Once again, the “quality of mercy” speech is played somewhat low-key.

The sequences of the caskets are well done, the genial arrogance of the Duke of Morocco, the foolishness of the Prince of Arragon and the romance of Bassanio.

The film is Shakespeare particularly well spoken, articulate, poetic – with strong performances and visuals to match.

LA FEMME DE GILLES (GILLE’S WIFE) (Belgium, 2004, d. Frederic Fonteyne)

Gilles’ Wife is an intense drama of interpersonal relationships. It is set in the 1930s in a provincial French or Belgian town. The film lovingly re-creates the details of the look and life of the people and of the town itself. The film has an authentic feel and a sense of period.

The film was directed by Frederic Fonteyne. Fonteyne had achieved some acclaim with his 1999 film, *Un Liaison Pornographique*. It also was a story of powerful personal relationships. This time he has adapted a 1937 novel of the same name by Madeline Bourdouxhe.

The film focuses on Emmanuele Devos, the star of *Sur Mes Levres* as well as *Roi et Reine*. She has a commanding presence on-screen, a strong woman yet able to communicate vulnerability. Clovis Cornillac is Gilles.

The film seems to offer a picture of domestic life of the period, the hard work at the factory, the housewife at home, delightful twins. However, Gilles soon begins an affair with his wife’s sister. So impassioned is he that he eventually tells his wife and makes her complicit in the affair. The portrait of the husband and his obsession seems particularly intense and almost exasperating for the audience. However, the response of the wife is also puzzling – making the audience ask whether it is better for a wife to erupt, condemn her husband, even oust him or, as happens here, bear the pain interiorly, try to help the husband get over his infatuation as far as possible.

It is extraordinary the length that Gilles’ wife goes to in order to save the marriage. But it does take its toll on her and, as the film progresses and the behaviour of her husband becomes more erratic, seemingly repentant and then just as madly involved, it becomes too much for the wife. She kills herself – and one wonders whether the burden of such a time given to bearing the pain leads to this depression and death.

The film is interesting and entertaining in a particularly French way and demands reflection.

DELIVERY

Delivery is a film set in Athens, not in the beautiful city of tourism, not in the city of ancient monuments, but rather in the underside of the city highlighting the poorer neighbourhoods of Athens. This is the world of street people, of refugees, of people touched by some kind of madness.

A young man arrives by bus in Athens. It is not clear where he is from, whether he is Greek or whether he is Albanian as many suggest. He speaks very little. Yet he seems very much alive, wants to get work, has ambitions to be a motorcycle courier or a pizza delivery boy. After being treated in a kindly way by some people, he does get employment in a pizza restaurant. He is also befriended by an eccentric old man who attempts to sell bottles of water amid the traffic on the Athenian streets. He is able to board with him. His other relationship is with a young woman who works at the shop, who is involved with a Chinese gangster, and acts as a prostitute. Whether this man wants to save her, is in love with her is very difficult to know, especially when she suffers a breakdown and he takes her to hospital.

He himself becomes a victim of the streets, of the people that he listens to, of the younger people who mug and rob him. Again, he interiorises his rage so that at the end of the film it erupts irrationally and he kills a stranger. He is then seen, or his point of view is seen, rising over the city. Is he some kind of spirit, angel, avenger?

The film is grim in its look, in its content – but is a different angle on life in contemporary Greece.

BINJIP (THREE IRON, EMPTY HOUSE) (Korea, 2004, d. Kim Ki-duk)

Writer-director Kim Ki-Duk has become a favourite on the international cinema scene. Self-taught and proud of it, he tells a range of stories, often focusing on the violence inherent in Korean life, especially in Seoul and the cities. At other times, however, he can become quite lyrical, especially with his beautiful film *Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter and Spring* (2003). He has been represented at many film festivals, at Venice with *The Isle*, a film of sadomasochism as well as beauty. His gangster films include *Bad Guy* and *Samaritan Girl*.

This film was a complete surprise for audiences at the 2004 Venice Film Festival. The film delighted everyone and finished with the International Critics' Prize, a commendation from the SIGNIS jury, a winner of one of the Silver Lions as best director.

The film is rather beguiling, focusing on a young man who does not speak throughout the whole film. He seems to be well educated and has a very shrewd way of finding which houses are occupied or not, putting advertisements on the door locks and then occupying and squatting in houses where the ads have not been removed. However, he is absolutely obsessive and meticulous in making sure that everything is tidy, doing the washing, mending any mechanism that is not working. He cooks, cleans, watches television, listens to CDs – and then moves on to the next house.

In one house which he mistakenly thinks empty, he finds a woman who has been physically battered by her husband. He settles in and only later discovers her, running away but yet, in fascination, returning. She quietly responds to him and in fact goes with him to share in his squatting escapades. A relationship builds up between them, he offers her love and care, she becomes dependent on him. Their adventures are not always easy - a prize-fighter returns home suddenly and gives the hero quite a boxing.

When they occupy a house where they find an elderly dead man, the young man is arrested for murder. What happens afterwards is not always clear in terms of realism and fantasy. During his imprisonment what he does, especially tantalising the guards, could be construed as realistic. However, he may have died and what we see is his ghost or some kind of spirit. On his release he is able to wreak some vengeance on those who have persecuted him but goes back to the house and to the wife who is delighted and who is then able to become a more joyful person, even speaking a few words herself.

The film is symbolic, not only does the young man occupy the houses, he occupies some of the characters within them – moving from this physical world to aspects of spirituality and transcendence.

ROI ET REINE (KING AND QUEEN) (France, 2004, d. Arnaud Desplechin)

King and Queen is an ambitious drama of relationships. It was written and directed by Arnaud Desplechin, director of *Esther Kahn* and a number of French dramas.

The star of the film is Emmanuele Devos, the star of *Sur Mes Levres* as well as *Gilles' Wife*. She also appeared in *Esther Kahn* and several of Desplechin's earlier films. She dominates this film, an intense woman, facing herself, her father, her sister, her former husband and the meaning of her life. By way of contrast Mathieu Almaric is quite eccentric as the ex-husband. We first see him suffering from mental disturbance at home, resisting the attendants from the mental institution. His behaviour with a psychologist (Catherine Deneuve) is bizarre and he is confined to an institution. When he is released, his behaviour continues erratic, sometimes quite charming, especially with Emmanuele Devos's son whom she wants him to adopt as well as with his ageing parents. A scene with his father in his shop which is suddenly held up and the father surprising his son by being able to dispose of the guns of the would-be robbers deftly and quickly.

The film runs for two and a half hours, focusing on these two characters and their interactions.

What is important is the portrayal of the central character, Nora, and her relationship with her father. An academic, he has spoilt her. When she intends to marry again, she travels to prepare for the wedding but finds her father seriously ill and takes him to hospital. On his returning home, she has

compassion on him because of his pain and administers an overdose of morphine. This is shocking for her sister who berates her - but she explains her loneliness in trying to cope with her life and with her father. The surprising aspect of the film and visually arresting is the appearance of her dead father, speaking a last letter to his daughter in which he condemns her, calls her selfish and hateful, loves her but also despises her. This becomes the catalyst for her final choices in terms of marriage, her future, her son and his being adopted by her ex-husband or not.

The material is long and this makes it more difficult to appreciate and to be intrigued. Nevertheless, the performances, especially of the two central characters, and of the father, mean that there is a great deal to reflect on in terms of surfaces, reality, love and hate, fidelity and commitment.

ZULU LOVE LETTER

The world has wondered what has happened in South Africa after the end of the apartheid regime. Has racial prejudice disappeared? What of those guilty of persecution and cruelty during the apartheid times? What of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and its effect on ordinary people?

This film tries to dramatise some of these issues and offer some answers. The focus is on a very strong woman, Thandeka, (a vibrant take-notice performance by Pamela Nombete Marimbe) a journalist who experiences her own writer's block and an emotional block in trying to deal with the events of the late 1990s as well as what happened to her during apartheid. The audience is invited to share her emotional journey, as she tries to make a solid relationship with her daughter who was born deaf after her mother had been battered during months of imprisonment. The young girl wants to relate to her mother but realises that her mother wants to save the world and has been less interested in relating lovingly to her. The journalist does take her daughter on some of the trips to find out the truth of what happened.

A particular concern is a young woman who accompanied her, who was a source for material and was arrested and killed by apartheid forces. Two white men and a black man who reappear during the film, are apprehensive about revelations to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and then try to kill murder the journalist. They succeed in killing her ex-husband and injuring her daughter. The final focus is on the mother of the young girl who was killed and as they persuade her to give evidence to the Commission.

The central character is very determined, alienating people and the audience at times, yet expressing some of the deep anguish of the period. By setting the film in modern times, amongst working journalists, amongst the settlements outside Johannesburg as well as in the city itself and its outskirts, it seems particularly relevant.

LETTERS TO ALI (Australia, 2004, d. Clara Law)

Letters to Ali is a documentary made by Clara Law (Autumn Moon, Floating Life, Goddess of 1967) and her husband, cinematographer Eddie Fong.

The film begins with autobiographical material, showing how Clara Law and Eddie Fong migrated to Australia in the mid-90s and the effect of the new country on them, especially living in the suburbs, becoming Australian citizens and voting. The focus of the film, however, is social concern about refugees seeking political asylum in Australia and their being detained in such centres as Baxter and Port Hedland. Clara Law had read a letter by an activist in the Melbourne Age, contacted her, discovered that she was involved with her whole family in communicating with some of those in detention, especially a young boy from Afghanistan called Ali. He had been taken by the Taliban, his family had disappeared. He travelled by plane to Indonesia and then by boat and was picked up and taken to Port Hedland where he was kept in detention, sometimes isolation. Court hearings, especially concerning whether he was a minor or not, found against him, although after a long time he received a temporary permit to move to Adelaide.

The film shows a journey from Melbourne to Port Hedland. It highlights the personalities of each of the members of the family as well as of Clara Law and her husband. The journey is entertaining as a documentary, the group wending its way from Melbourne to Port Augusta, up through the Centre, through the Tanami Desert. It was the first time Clara Law had experienced any kind of camping.

The film also includes some interviews, some documentary footage from films and from the news, especially in protests outside the detention centres. No cameras are allowed inside Baxter or Port Hedland, so there was no footage of what it was like within the centres, merely the group going to the entrance and the security checks. However, the verbal commentary and the phone calls indicate how difficult it is, physically and psychologically, for so many people to experience such detention for so long.

One of the interviewees in the film is former Minister for Immigration, Ian McPhee, who explains the history of immigration to Australia and the different attitudes, especially in the 70s and early 80s. The end of the film brings an interview with Malcolm Fraser, more a statesman in his later years, speaking about justice and implicitly critical of the decisions of the Howard government and the inhumane treatment of those seeking asylum, whether they were to be permitted to remain in Australia or not.

The film is a contribution to Australian consciousness about its history, about the successive waves of migration, of the attitudes of those who migrate, settle in and are prejudiced against newcomers to the country. It is a plea for a reassessment of the conditions, the nature of security, the inhumane treatment and lack of civil rights of those interned.

CRIMINAL (US, 2004, d. Gregory Jacobs)

Criminal is a very entertaining piece of cinema. It is based on the Argentinian box-office success, *Nine Queens*. It keeps fairly close to the original screenplay, adapting it to contemporary Los Angeles, communicating character as well as the con trick in under ninety minutes.

The film was directed by Gregory Jacobs and co-written by him. Jacobs has acted as producer for the company headed by George Clooney and Steven Soderberg, including the episode by Soderberg in *Eros*.

The film boasts an excellent performance by the very versatile John C. Reilly (*Magnolia*, *Chicago*). Reilly had appeared in somewhat similar circumstances in Paul Thomas Anderson's *Hard Eight*, a story about a gambler and his apprentice. This time Reilly is the gambler, Diego Luna (*And Your Mother Came Too*, *Frieda*, *Open Range*, *The Terminal*) is the apprentice. The cast also includes Maggie Gyllenhaal as Reilly's sister, in charge of management at a swanky Los Angeles hotel. Scot, Peter Mullan (director of *Orphans* and *The Magdalene Sisters* as well as appearing in *My Name is Joe*) appears as a wealthy European businessman.

The focus of the film is the relationship between the master criminal and his apprentice, the apprentice with the touch of humanity and care about the victims, the master impervious and objective, even thinking that the victims were stupid to be conned by himself. When they get the opportunity for "the big one", the young man, a Hispanic, becomes indispensable for the plan. However, a number of people become involved, each wanting their cut when a forgery of an American monetary document is sold to the European businessman.

If one knows the original, one can see the workings of the confidence trick taking place throughout. If one doesn't know the original film, the resolution will come as a surprise, especially of all those involved in the attempt to take down the criminal.

The film uses the Los Angeles settings, casinos, homes, streets as well as the luxury hotel to great effect. In fact, it is exemplary in covering its characterisations as well as its plot within such a brief running time.

DEMOISELLE D'HONEUR (THE BRIDESMAID) (France, 2004, d. Claude Chabrol)

The Bridesmaid is an adaptation of a Ruth Rendell novel by Claude Chabrol. Chabrol, always interested in crime stories, had adapted another Ruth Rendell story in the 1990s, *The Ceremony*.

This film is standard Chabrol. It focuses on a family, partly dysfunctional, partly loving. It also focuses on madness and crime, the bewilderment of people innocently caught up in this world of madness.

Chabrol has been making films since the late 50s, numerous films along these lines. This one is neither better nor worse than any of his others. Benoit Mangimel (who had appeared in Chabrol's *The Flowers of Evil*) is a young salesman who has to deal with his mother, a genial woman who loves cooking and pampering her son, a sister who is about to be married and a younger sister who is seemingly irresponsible. At his sister's wedding, he glimpses the bridesmaid whom he had heard about from his sister (Laura Smets) and is attracted to her. She expresses her love and her sense of destiny for him. As time goes on, we realise before he does that she is obsessive and that he is in some kind of danger. This, of course, is what happens, to his dismay and, sometimes, to his shock.

Laura Smets is interesting as the rather bewildering bridesmaid who lives a strange narcissistic life and who is revealed to be quite mad. By contrast, Aurore Clement is a picture of commonsense as the hero's mother, concerned about her daughters, wondering whether she should marry again.

Chabrol has always been able to offer civilised entertainments, particularly French entertainments with insight into the French middle class.

5 x 2 (CINQU FOIS DEUX: FIVE BY TWO)

Since 1999, Francois Ozon has become a world-class director with a world-wide reputation. In 1999 he made a small film, *Criminal Lovers*, which was in competition in Venice. He followed that with his own French adaptation of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Water Drops on Burning Rocks*. In 2001 he made the striking psychological drama *Under the Sand* with Charlotte Rampling, following it with a musical starring eight of France's leading actresses including Catherine Deneuve, Danielle Darrieux, Emmanuele Beart, Isabelle Huppert, Ludovine Sagnier, and followed it with a different kind of film, *The Swimming Pool*, a murder mystery and psychological thriller with Charlotte Rampling and Ludovine Sagnier. With *5 x 2* he again changes course, although his focus is, as in most of his films, on his female characters.

One of the striking features of *5 x 2* is its structure. It begins at the end, so to speak, with divorce proceedings. As it moves backwards in time, it covers five significant moments in the lives of the two central characters.

This particular technique was used in the 1980s by playwright Harold Pinter in his play and the film version of *Betrayal*. It means then that the response of the audience is to the moment in hand on-screen knowing where it will lead while continually moving back to the beginning of the relationship.

Ozon is particularly well served in this film by his leading lady, Valeria Bruni-Tedeschi. Valeria Bruni-Tedeschi is one of France's most distinguished actresses and has appeared in films for most of the significant French directors. She also wrote and directed her own film in 2003, *It's Easier for a Camel*. The husband in the film is played by Stephane Freiss. The veteran couple Francoise Fabian and Michael Lonsdale appear as the heroine's parents.

The moments that the film focuses on are the divorce and its aftermath (a bizarre sexual encounter which highlights brutality and augurs badly for the future), a domestic scene of guests for dinner including the gay brother of the husband, the sequence of the birth of their child where the mother goes into labour and is supported by her parents (cantankerously arguing with each other) and the husband is not able to face up to the reality of the birth, the joy of the wedding sequence and her strange experience when the wife cannot sleep and wanders out to watch the guests, including her parents, still dancing and where she encounters an American who makes advances towards her and, finally, the beginning of the relationship where the couple meet on a resort beach and swim out at the end of the film towards...

While the structure has been used by Pinter, other directors are entitled to try their hand at this method and Ozon has been very successful.

TOUT EN HIVER SANS FEU (Switzerland, 2004, d. Greg)

If one had asked the members of the jury SIGNIS during the Venice Film Festival, 2004, ten minutes into the film whether they thought it had a chance for any award, the response would have been a definite "No". It opens bleakly with Swiss mountains, Swiss snow, falling trees, workers in the forests

and suggestions that it will be another one of those very serious portraits of isolated people and their problems.

In a way, this is still the case. However, the humanity of the writing and the direction soon come through and the audience is emotionally affected by the characters and their difficulties. There is nothing particularly new, just the way that the director has skilfully drawn his characters and drawn the audience into empathy with them.

At the opening of the film, a couple has suffered the tragic loss of their only daughter, five years old, in a fire in their barn which has also destroyed the herd and buildings of their farm outside the town. The wife is not coping at all and has to go into an institution and undergo therapy to recover some kind of equilibrium. The husband, a stoic man, tries to manage on the farm but is unable to pay his way and relies on an old school friend to get a job in a factory.

This is where the film moves in an unexpected direction. A number of those working and holding managing positions in the factory are Kosovan refugees. When the man hears the story of the Kosovans, especially that of the cook to whom he is attracted and her six year search for her presumably dead husband, some of his own problems become insignificant. While he is infatuated with this young woman and befriended by her rather genial brother and invited to Kosovan celebrations, he is still devoted to his wife and very much concerned about how she is coping. His wife is influenced by her rather bitter sister who is quite antagonistic to her sister's husband.

Not a great deal happens in terms of plot. There is an explanation of character, there is an insight into vulnerability, into strengths and weaknesses of human nature – and the possibility of some kind of mutual understanding and the possibilities for reconciliation. While there might not be much fire and heat during the winter, there is a great deal of humanity which offers some hope for warmth in the spring.

PALINDROMES (US, 2004, d. Todd Solondz)

Palindromes is another film from the bizarre imagination of writer-director Todd Solondz. In the mid-90s Solondz was introduced with *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, a portrait of a dysfunctional family and a young adolescent girl and her ambitions. He followed it with the excellent *Happiness*, a very demanding film with a whole range of themes, especially of a sexual nature. He also made *Storytelling*.

This film is not quite as good as the previous films. Perhaps it had a small budget and was made in something of a rush. However, it indicates enough of Solondz's themes to take its place in his canon of movies.

He uses the title of the film both for the names of some of the characters, especially his central character Aviva, but also for the structure of the film. It ends where it began – after a journey from the east coast of the United States into the Midwest and back again.

One of the interesting aspects of the film and Solondz's imagination is that he has a different actress to play Aviva in all the different sections of the film. It is a surprise to find at first that she is a young black child who then changes into a white teenager. However, the late-teenage Aviva is a very large black girl, with a very polite and sweet soft voice. At the end of the film, as a way of reviewing our understanding of Aviva, he shows a collage of each of the actresses who portrays her. (Of significance, one of the adult Avivas is a cameo by Jennifer Jason Leigh.)

The film is also structured in chapters with the names of various characters shown and illustrated with an exaggerated birthday card colour and look. These chapters are the steps on the journey of Aviva, especially with her desire to be pregnant, her attempts to achieve this with a rather sex-preoccupied young man, the pressure on her from her ambitious mother to have an abortion, the abortion and its consequences with her running away from home, finding refuge with Mama Sunshine and a whole household full of handicapped people. The film also highlights the issue of abortion – the pressure on the adolescent by a mother who had an abortion herself and takes this as the norm. It shows the abortion clinic with the protesters outside, it also shows the doctor and the staff performing the abortion

– and the aftermath with Mama Sunshine’s husband being a vigilante and hiring people to kill the doctor. The irony of this is that the killer is the same man, the driver who picked up Aviva on the way.

The film comes to some kind of resolution – especially with the desire of Aviva to have children, not knowing that, because of the abortion and the subsequent operation and the hysterectomy, she is unable to become pregnant. There is a good cast including Ellen Barkin as her dominant mother and Richard Masur as the father.

CAFÉ LUMIERE

Café Lumiere was made by Taiwanese director, Hou Hsiao Hisen, (Flowers of Shanghai, Millennium Mambo). Having made many films in Taiwan and examining Taiwanese society and history, he has now gone to Japan and has decided to make a tribute to the celebrated director Ozu (whose centenary of birth occurred in 2003).

The director takes themes dear to Ozu (Tokyo Story was the best-known of his films) and offers a portrait of a young Japanese woman, her relationship with a Taiwanese student, her friendship with a bookseller in Tokyo, her relationship with her parents. The cinematic style is borrowed from Ozu and is meant as a homage to him. There are long focuses on particular characters, a gentleness in presenting the action as well as the interpretation of character.

The film is entertaining in itself, a reminder of the skills of Ozu in presenting ordinary Japanese life and some of its transcendent dimensions. However, the film is ultimately quite slight in its characterisation while strong in its impact.

CHIAVI DI CASA (THE HOUSE KEYS) (Italy, 2004, d. Gianni Amelio)

This is a very moving film by Italian director Gianni Amelio (best known for the political thriller Open Doors, and for the humanity Ladri di Bambini and Lamerica).

Andrea Rossi, a disabled teenager, portrays Paolo, a young boy hurt during a difficult birth and growing up intelligent but disabled. His father, played by Kim Rossi Stuart, could not bear his presence after birth. At this juncture of his life and fifteen years later, he now wants to see his son again and renew (or, really begin) the relationship.

The film takes place mainly in Berlin where the couple go for hospital tests. The father wants to bond with his son but finds the tests very difficult as well as some of the behaviour of his son. He is helped by a parent who has been looking after a disabled daughter for twenty years. She is played by Charlotte Rampling in a most sympathetic performance.

The film concludes open-endedly – the father reconciled with his son, the son seeming to accept his father – but, in a crisis on a highway, the boy reverts to somewhat autistic behaviour, leaving his father weeping and the audience wondering how the relationship will continue.

STEAM BOY (Japan, 2004, d. Katsuhiro Otomo)

Steam Boy shows how Japanese animation has developed at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. Director Katsuhiro Otomo had previously done a lot of work with comic strips as well as animated features. He is best known for his 1988 feature, Akira.

Steam Boy is an extraordinarily ambitious project. The animation is vivid and detailed. The characters are well drawn, well developed psychologically. There are extraordinary action sequences including a runaway train and an abduction via a balloon. There is a huge battle between armed forces, ships and tanks, robotic soldiers at the London Exhibition of 1866.

The director was interested in the scientific background of the film, he and his team visiting England to study the science museums as well as the history of the development of steam engines in Britain. This is acknowledged in the inclusion of Robert Stevenson and his steam trains as part of the action. The film opens with a huge experimental plant in Alaska and a devastating accident. The action moves to England, with glimpses of Manchester (again in great detail of houses, streets and mills) and then

moves to London itself and the Great Exhibition. The director was also interested in the scientific background, the possibilities of experiment both for serving people as well as for warfare and arms development. Instead of doing a science fiction feature set in the future, he decided that audiences would understand the development of science by his going back into this historical period. There are evil characters, mad scientists as well as good scientists – but the focus is on a young boy, Ray Steam, who does experiments on his own but wants to vindicate his father and grandfather. There are also sinister American interests in the background, especially in selling international arms.

The film was made in 2004 and released at the same time as another extraordinary Japanese animation feature, *The Mysterious Castle of Hull*.

EROS

Eros is a compendium movie, consisting of three short stories. There is opening animation done by Lorenzo Mattotti, which recurs between the episodes. It is a focus on the themes of erotic relationships and love. There is also a theme song, by Caetano Veloso, entitled “Antonioni’s Love”, which is also sung before each story.

The best of the stories is the first, that by Wong Kah Wei (*In the Mood for Love*, 2006, Happy Together). It is a chamber piece, set in Hong Kong in 1963. It features Gong Li (the lead in so many of Zhang Yimou’s features of the 1990s, *Raise the Red Lantern*, *The Story of Qiu Ju*). She works with Chang Keng in this film and portrays a prostitute who has several wealthy patrons. He is her tailor. The film is set in lush hotel rooms as well as in the tailor’s workplace. The film develops the relationship between the two, her arrogance and dominance, her seductive use of the tailor for her own wishes, her downfall – as well as his growing obsession and continued fidelity to her. The film was photographed by Christopher Doyle, who photographed so many of Wong Kah Wei’s films as well as Philip Noyce’s *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and *The Quiet American*. The film is very moving, has excellent performances and an adult treatment of themes.

The second story is an amusing one by Steven Soderbergh (*Sex, Lies and Videotape*, *Solaris*, *Ocean’s Eleven* and *Ocean’s Twelve*). It is in both black and white and colour, the black and white section being a therapy session where executive Robert Downey Jr is talking about his dreams to therapist, Alan Arkin, who prefers to be looking at people outside the window and making paper planes to alert them to what he wants to communicate. There is a wry comedy in the characterisation of the two men as well as their interaction - which is capped off by the revelation that Arkin also plays Downey’s boss in the real life (?) sequences and is the subject of humour with his false toupee.

The third story is by veteran Michelangelo Antonioni, so much admired in the 1960s with such films as *L’Avventura*, *La Notte*, *Blow Up*. This is a story of a brittle marriage – however, the stilted acting does not help audience sympathise with or understand the bickering couple. When they see a young woman riding on the beach on a horse, the husband is tempted and goes to her tower house and has a sexual encounter with her. She later lies on the beach and encounters the wife. The film is open in its depiction of sexuality and nudity – and, if Antonioni’s name was not on the film, it could be mistaken for an exploitation film, a kind of soft-core porn short story by a dirty old man. It is a pity to see this as one of the last films by Antonioni, no matter how worthy his intentions of portraying a brittle marriage and of lust.

L’AMORE RETROVATO (Italy, 2004, d. Carlo Mazucci)

L’Amore Retrovato is a very old-fashioned kind of film. It is set in 1936, the time of fascism in Italy (although fascist pressure does not appear explicitly in the film except for the invasion of Abyssinia by Mussolini in 1936 and the men being called up for active service). Instead, the film focuses on ordinary people, relationships, an affair.

Stefano Accorsi, who was appearing in many Italian films at the beginning of the 21st century, is a banker who encounters a young woman with whom he had a relationship in the past. She responds tentatively, especially when he does not recognise her on the train, then gives herself fully to the affair. She is played by Maya Sansa (*Good Morning Night*) and has a very vibrant screen presence which means that audiences identify more with her than with Accorsi.

Audiences do not see Accorsi's wife and child until quite late in the film and then only from the point of view of the woman, sympathy being with the two having their affair. There are echoes of Brief Encounter with so much of their meeting happening at railway stations and on trains. The colour photography is quite lush, the Tuscan and Ligurian coast, the country towns. There is also an evocative atmosphere of the period – just before the outbreak of World War II. A postscript set in 1945 shows the devastation experienced during the war, the hunger and poverty, people travelling on trains in open cattle trucks, people about to try to rehabilitate themselves and their lives.

For those who do not like this kind of old-fashioned film, it is too much of a lush and sentimental romance. On the other hand, this means that it could well have great appeal to a popular audience.

A HOME AT THE END OF THE WORLD (US, 2004, d. Michael Mayers)

A Home at the End of the World is based on a novel by Michael Cunningham, best known for writing The Hours. He has adapted his novel for the screen.

The film is set in Cleveland, Ohio, in the late 60s and the early to mid-70s and then makes a transition to New York City in the 80s. It is a period of openness, drug experimentation, sexual freedom, even in cities in the Midwest.

The film focuses on an average family, living in Cleveland. However, it is touched by tragedies. The story is about two young boys. Erik Smith is very good as the young Bobby, who befriends the rather ordinary-looking, braces on teeth, Jonathan. They become friends, Bobby spending a lot of time at Jonathan's home, especially in the company of his mother, played by Sissy Spacek.

As time goes on, Jonathan goes to New York City to study while Bobby stays as a baker in Cleveland. Ultimately, he too has to go to New York City.

A particular theme of the film is sexuality, especially the relationship between the two boys. It might seem at first that it is simply sexual experimentation between the two. As it emerges, both have a homosexual orientation, Jonathan (Dallas Roberts) living the life of the gay culture of New York City and ultimately contracting AIDS (although this theme is quietly underplayed). Bobby (Colin Farrell) is not sure of his identity and is challenged when their flatmate Robin Wright Penn wants to have a child by him. His experience is bisexual: loving the young woman, loving the child, but devoted to Jonathan.

The film is very sympathetic with its characters and has a very interesting performance by Colin Farrell, playing rather against type as a quiet and uncertain young man. (He went on to portray Alexander the Great after this film.) Robin Wright-Penn gives a vivacious performance as the eccentric young woman. Sissy Spacek is very sympathetic as the mother and has a number of wise contributions to make.

The film is modest, with a short running time, yet in many of its moments it is very touching.

THE THREE ROOMS OF MELANCHOLIA

The Three Rooms of Melancholia is a documentary feature. It is spoken in Russian, Chechen, Arabic and Finnish. The director is Finnish, and has made a number of documentaries. She decided to go to Russia and Chechnya to film stories about the conflict between the republic trying to rebel and Russia.

Her first room of melancholia (Longing) is set in a school set up just outside St Petersburg. Established by President Putin, it is for young (very young) orphans who are to do military training. The focus is on discipline, a severe kind of life for young boys. Several of them are introduced by name and their backgrounds given. However, at the core of the story is the focus of the animosity of the orphans – and its being geared towards Chechnya and Chechen rebels.

The second room of melancholia is in Grozny itself and is filmed in black and white (Breathing). The scenes of devastation of apartment blocks, street by street, in Grozny are both dismaying and alarming. Western audiences know about the destruction in Chechnya but probably have not had the opportunity

to spend some time actually contemplating the ruins, the consequent difficult way of life, the poverty of the survivors, their attitude towards the brutality of the Russian soldiers.

This is taken up in the third room of melancholia, set in the neighbouring small republic of Ingushetia (Remembering). The contrast between the rolling hills with the shepherds and the distant mountains of the Caucasus, form a contrast with the ruins of Grozny even though this is only four kilometres from the Chechen border. The film focuses on a woman, who had been an orphan herself, who now gathers together orphans in Grozny, brings them to a shelter and helps them find a new way of life. Since Chechnya is an Islamic republic, there is an emphasis on the mosque, on the men praying, on the role of religion for both men and women and, especially, in the training of the children.

The director has drawn on Scandinavian technical advice and help for her putting the film together. It screened at the Venice Film Festival during the very time when the Chechen rebels took the hostages at the school at Beslan with a death toll of over 300 people, including many of the children. It could not have been more topical.

PROMISED LAND (Israel, 2004, d. Amos Gitai)

Israeli director, Amos Gitai, has made a number of documentaries over the years. While he has a doctorate in architecture, he has chosen to focus in more recent years on film-making and has moved from documentaries to features and fiction.

He has shown life in contemporary Israel (Aldila), he has gone back to 1948 and shown the origins of the state of Israel as well as the plight of the Palestinians (Kedma). This time he has strong social criticism of Israel as well as the Palestinians and the various groups, like the Russian Mafia, who are manipulating refugees, especially in the exploitation of the white slave trade.

The film opens in the Sinai Desert, the Bedouin conducting a group of women refugees to Israel (and reminding the audiences that with all the races and empires that have come and gone, they are still there). What is alarming in the desert is a sudden auction, taking place in the dark, where the exploiters arrive, brutally examine the women and bid for them. French actress Anne Parillaud is frightening as the woman conducting the auction. It is one of those shocking sequences that will remain in the mind and memory, that women can do this kind of thing to one another. In the background are the Russian criminals who are going to supply Israeli brothels with these women.

In a transition to the resort town of Eilat, the women are further humiliated, stripped naked and hosed like cattle. They are then dressed, made up – with another significant cameo by German actress Hanna Schygulla. At this time there are some moments of tenderness, especially for some of the women who are frightened and regret their choices.

The film then takes a journey to Haifa where several of the women are placed for work in the hotel Promised Land (with its deceptive biblical overtones and the title for the film). Here the interest of the film is in an English woman as well as a woman from Estonia – with evocative memories of a choir singing in an Estonian Orthodox church, the psalms of blessings on Israel. The young woman is played by Diana Bespechni and the English woman by Rosamund Pike (Die Another Day, Pride and Prejudice). It is only by an act of terrorism, a bomb exploding near the hotel, that the two women are able to escape.

The film is made with much hand-held camera work, often in the dark, resembling the techniques of so many of the contemporary reality television programs. It is a draining experience, often ugly – but an alert to this kind of evil in the contemporary world.

SAIMIR (Italy, 2004, d. Francesco Munzi)

While Saimir tells a familiar enough story, especially about the difficulties for political refugees, it is done with a sense of urgency and humanity. The refugees are from Albania, travelling by night to the east coast of Italy. It shows the Albanian communities established in some of the Italian towns, their banding together for support, their clubs, the young gangs who specialise in burglary of homes as well as other crooked deals. It does not paint a sympathetic picture of so many of the refugees – wanting to

be involved in crime or forced into it. It also presumes on the background of eastern Europe where, for so many decades, people took stealing for granted in order to be able to better themselves or to survive.

The film focuses on a young lad, Saimir (Mischel Manoku) who assists his father Edmund (Xhevdet Feri, a classical Albanian theatre actor). They receive the refugees, help distribute them. No questions are asked and money is taken. The father, meanwhile, wants to marry an Italian woman but his son resents this because of the memory of his own mother.

Saimir is assimilating into Italy, is attracted to a young girl at the beach, goes out with her but frightens her by showing her the place where stolen goods are stashed and offering her an expensive necklace. She runs away, he goes to the school and shouts abuse at her – later realising that his behaviour is unacceptable. When he sees a young teenager being brought into the country as a prostitute, he reacts angrily and is bashed. His father tries to rescue him – leaving his wedding celebration to save his son. It is too late. The boy wants to take some revenge on all those who are destroying his life and perpetrating this evil. He reports them to the police.

The film is one of many films of the early 21st century about migrants from eastern Europe. Italy itself produced Gianni Amelio's *Lamerica* in 1994, highlighting the problems of refugees. Ten years later Saimir is continuing the story.

LAND OF PLENTY (US, 2004, d. Wim Wenders)

German director Wim Wenders has had a varied career for almost forty years. Beginning in his native Germany, he made a number of small-budget black and white features, He also made a version of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* as well as an epic road movie, *Kings of the Road*. He then went more up-market with *The American Friend* and moved to the United States and made such films as *Hammett*. He reached his peak in the mid-80s with the award-winning *Paris Texas* as well as the popular cult film, *Wings of Desire*. His career during the 90s was mixed, both in Europe and in the United States. Here is something of a return to his earlier form.

The film was made in sixteen days plus a five-days' trip across the United States. It is a response to the atmosphere in the United States after September 11, 2001. The film has two central characters: one a Vietnam veteran who probably experienced poisoning, has come home convinced that America won in Vietnam, is paranoid about terrorists and works as a security guard. He has also cut himself off from his family. The other character is his niece, daughter of missionaries who worked in Africa, who is returning home to the United States after ten years, having worked in Israel and with the Palestinians. She is a devout Christian, not afraid to pray openly. She works in a refuge in Los Angeles, *Bread of Life*, allegedly in the hunger capital of the United States.

The film shows a drive-by killing of a man from Pakistan whom the security officer suspects of being a terrorist but who is known to the young girl who seeks out his brother and finds out the very ordinary truth about this vagrant man on the streets.

The film then shows the challenge between people of faith in human nature, faith in God and those who are caught up in the paranoia of the war on terrorism.

John Diehl, veteran of many films, is excellent as the security officer. Michelle Williams is the young woman. There is a good supporting cast. The film is interestingly shot, digital camera work, the contemporary musical score, finishing with a Leonard Cohen song.

The film was released in the same year as Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 911*. It was the year for the election of the American president – and these films contributed to American consciousness about what had happened during the years of the George W. Bush administration.

A LOVE SONG FOR BOBBY LONG

This is one of those films that audiences would like to be better than it seems. It will possibly be remembered for John Travolta's white hair and his portrayal of an alcoholic former literary professor.

The film is set in New Orleans, initially showing a shuffling Travolta going to a funeral. It intercuts with Scarlett Johansson as a young woman living in Florida. The funeral is that of her mother. When she comes to New Orleans and meets Bobby Long (Travolta) and the other flatmate, Gabriel Macht, in her mother's house, there is a set-up for conflict.

As might be expected, after the attempts made by the men to get rid of her, they take an interest in her studies, enable her to go to school, and bonds are created between them. The film is quite genial in its way although Travolta's character originally displays quite some meanmindedness towards the young girl.

There are constant references to the works of Flannery O'Connor, especially *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, and it would seem that the characters are meant to be the same kind of fringe characters as in O'Connor's novel. There is a whole lot of drinking, a whole lot of music as these characters and their friends on the edge of society get together to eat, tell stories, play music, celebrate. However, there is a tragic background to the whole story which is gradually revealed, the beginning of Bobby Long's downfall from being a celebrated professor to an alcoholic bum.

There is a surprise at the end (perhaps not so surprising) with some delayed feelgood sentiment.

MAR ADENTRO (Spain, 2004, d. Alejandro Amenabar)

Spanish director Alejandro Amenabar is well known for his successful films, *Open Your Eyes* (remade in the US by Cameron Crowe as *Vanilla Sky*) and the Nicole Kidman vehicle, *The Others*.

This time he has written and directed a film based on a true story, an accident in 1968 where a young man dived into a shallow pool, broke his neck and lived for the next twenty-eight years as a quadriplegic. His name was Ramon San Pedro and his autobiography was published along with his poetry.

The film is also a case of special pleading for assisted suicide. It focuses on an association for assisted suicide, its hiring of lawyers to build a case to present to the Spanish courts. However, the application is rejected and assisted suicide remains an offence and those who are involved in any way are considered criminals.

The film boasts an extraordinary performance by Javier Bardem. In his mid-thirties, he is required to act age fifty-five for most of the film, elderly, thinning hair, lying in his bed as a quadriplegic. However, he is able to bring the character to life, show the vitality of the man (despite his continued assertion that he wants to die). There are some flashbacks to the accident as well as a beautiful fantasy sequence where he gets out of bed and flies over the Spanish countryside to the music of "Nessun Dorma".

The film is classic in its style, beautifully photographed, beautiful location scenery. It is also populated by a gallery of characters who would be at home in a 19th century novel: the victim himself, the middle-class lawyer suffering from a degenerative disease who takes on his case, a Mother Earth type of woman who works at the local cannery, wants to do good, becomes his friend, bringing her children and who, eventually, assists him in his death. He has been cared for for many years by a most patient sister-in-law, a portrait of a good woman, and his older brother who strongly disapproves of his wanting to take his life. There is also the son of the family, still at school, a kind of surrogate son to the quadriplegic. There is also Ramon's father with whom the young man clashes.

The film highlights a central character from the association for assisted suicide, shows the special pleading, especially in an emotional final phone call. The film comes to a conclusion with the central character taking his life, speaking straight to video explaining what he has done and why.

The film is propaganda for change in legislation, appeals to the emotions of its audience rather than to a detached objective look at moral principles about suicide.

Javier Bardem won the Best Actor award at the 2004 Venice Film Festival.

I CAN SEE IT IN YOUR EYES (Italy, 2004, d. Valia Santella)

I Can See It In Your Eyes is a brief Italian drama, centred on a very dominating mother, her rather repressed daughter and her granddaughter. The film is very much a woman's film and is directed by first-time director Valia Santella.

The film offers a portrait of a singer who dominates her family and is extraordinarily self-centred. She is played by veteran Italian actress Stefania Sandrelli who has appeared toplining Italian films since the early 60s. She is perfectly convincing in the role. By contrast Teresa Saponangelo offers a more modest screen presence. The catalyst for further interaction between mother and daughter is when the mother abducts the little girl, who also suffers from asthma and is in danger of an attack, on what she sees as a liberating trip, telling her not to worry about illness and being pampered by her mother.

When the girl has an attack, it is an opportunity for the mother to come to some kind of realisation of her impact in the family, the aftermath of an operation on her throat which could destroy her singing career, accepting her daughter.

While the performances are strong, the material is that of a television movie.

A LESS WORSE WORLD (Argentina, 2004, d. Alejandro Agresti)

This is an Argentinian film directed by Alejandro Agresti, a director who spends much of his time in Europe but has a strong eye for life in Argentina. His films include Secret Wedding, Wind With The Gone, Valentin.

While the film is set at the beginning of the 21st century, it evokes memories of the Time of the Generals as well as of the Falklands War. A woman who thought her husband had died, discovered that he is still alive and has never seen his daughter. She and her two daughters travel south from Buenos Aires to find the father. In the meantime, in the aftermath of the war where he disappeared, he has set up a life as a baker in the provincial town, well liked by everyone.

The film evokes the atmosphere of the towns of Argentina, life in the towns and on the road. It also is a fine character study of the central characters as well as of a number of supporting people. The film also highlights the tensions between mother and daughter, the daughter angry with her mother's overprotectiveness, not having felt the need for a father and discovering that she had one, trying to reconcile with him.

The dialogue offers a great deal of reflection on the nature of family but also invites its audiences to reflect on the long-term consequences of a war like that with Britain on the Falklands, the effect on the soldiers and their subsequent lives and the repercussions for families.

THROW, LET IT GO DOWN (RUDAO) (Hong Kong 2004, d. Johnny To)

This is a Johnny To film, To being a veteran director from the Hong Kong industry with a range of films like the martial arts myths of the Heroic Three to the police thriller Like Breaking News.

This is a martial arts film, focusing on a hero who is about to go blind but who wants to defeat any opponent in combat before he loses his sight. The other central character is a former champion who is a gambler, a victim of people manipulating his life and turning him into an alcoholic. The third character is a young woman, a very irritating and self-centred young woman who wants a job as a singer in a nightclub with the aim of going to Japan to appear in the movies. The lives of the three intertwine, especially in connection with another martial arts champion who is also linked with the gangster world of Hong Kong.

The film is a character study, highlighting the interactions between the three central characters. The martial arts fights are presented with vitality – and to the accompaniment of some Chinese songs.

Not as easily accessible for western audiences as other films from Hong Kong and other films by Johnny To.

MYSTERIOUS SKIN (US, 2004, d. Gregg Araki)

Mysterious Skin is a surprising film from writer-director, Gregg Araki. For more than a decade he produced many B-budget films like Splendor, Nowhere, The Doom Generation, The Living End. His films were noted for sexual themes, drug taking. He also had a homosexual focus in many of his stories. They were full of coarse language, rough and ready in both form and content.

With Mysterious Skin, he has adapted a novel by Scott Heim. Its focus is on paedophilia, the sexual abuse of young boys. The novel came out in 1995 when charges were beginning to surface in various organisations, especially the churches.

This film focuses on families and the paedophile is the baseball coach. The setting is the late 1980s, early 1990s.

The film is strong in its portrayal of sexual abuse. However, Araki keeps a balance between the prurient and showing the dramatic and dire impact of sexual abuse. While some audiences may find it disturbing, it is a necessary disturbance, learning to understand the reality of paedophilia, the psychology of the abuser, the long-lasting effects of the experience on the abused.

The film focuses on two very different boys. As teenagers they are portrayed by Joseph Gordon Levitt and by Brady Corbett. Levitt portrays a young hustler. Corbett portrays an introverted young man who has blocked out the abuse and begins to think that the missing hours of his life were caused by his being abducted by aliens. By the end of the film, when the two adolescents come together, they go to the house where the abuse took place and the hustler explains to the other boy what actually happened. This is a harrowing experience as the young man realises what has happened to him, the memories come back. This is the moment when the film ends, leaving the future for the two boys and a sense of wonder and anticipation as well as alarm for the audience.

The film also has a good supporting cast with Michelle Trachtenberg (Harriet the Spy, television's Buffy the Vampire Slayer) as the best friend of the hustler. Jeff Licon is a good friend to both of the boys. Bill Sage does well in the unenviable role of the coach. Elizabeth Shue appears as the mother of the hustler while Lisa Long and Chris Mulkey are the parents of the disturbed boy. Billy Drago and Richard Riehle appear as clients of the hustler.

After a long career in his own almost private kind of films, Araki has made a significant contribution to American movies and to an exploration of serious themes.

PS (US, 2004, d. Dylan Kidd)

Dylan Kidd made a strong impression with his first feature, Roger Dodger with Campbell Scott. It was a portrait of a callous young man, ambitious, careless in his relationships, guiding his nephew through a night on the town in New York City. This film is quite different and was adapted from the novel with the film's co-writer, Helen Schulman.

This is a New York story, much of it being set at Columbia University in the Arts Department. Laura Linney is on-screen most of the time as the administrator of admissions to the department. Linney proved to be an excellent actress during the late 90s and the early decade of the 21st century with such films as Primal Fear, The Truman Show, House of Mirth and, especially, her role in You Can Count on Me.

She can portray strong and she can portray vulnerable. The cast is excellent with Gabriel Byrne playing Linney's estranged husband. When she gets an application from a young student calling himself F. Scott Feinstadt, she recalls a relationship she had twenty years earlier with a young man of that name – who went on to have a relationship with her best friend and was killed in a car accident. She has vague feelings that this student might be the same man come back. However, the film does not pursue this ghostly line at any length, just suggesting it as a possibility.

Topher Grace (The Mona Lisa Smile) is the young man and matches the acting with Laura Linney. Marcia Gaye Harden is her best friend, Paul Rudd is her ex-addict brother, Lois Smith her mother.

The film focuses on a lonely professional woman, still loving her husband, shocked to find that he is a sex addict, a moving scene where he reveals this to his wife. In her loneliness, she dwells on the memories of the past and clutches at a relationship with the young man. Ultimately, it can go nowhere and she is in danger of alienating the student who has great potential as an artist. She speaks with her mother, with her brother, with her husband, with her best friend – and from that advice she is able to make some decisions as to what her future must be.

The film is direct in its presentation, does not raise suspense about the sexual relationship, introducing it almost immediately – with the result that the audience has to think about what it means rather than anticipating when it will happen. This is more mature writing and direction and offers more serious food for reflection about commitment, fidelity and love.

AGNES AND HIS BROTHERS (Germany, 2004, d. Oskar Roehler)

A film with a provocative title. Agnes is, of course, a transsexual. The film opens with Agnes talking to a television interviewer, explaining her role in her family as well as the significance of her two older brothers. In fact, the story of this film is about the three brothers, their own lives, inadequacies (especially sexual) and their crossed paths, especially with their father.

The film was directed by Oskar Roehler, a director of provocative films. He has an excellent cast, Martin Weiss being persuasive as Agnes, carrying off very difficult scenes, portraying the transsexual meeting with his wife and son (very touchingly done) as well as in difficult relationships, discovering illness, wanting to be reunited with a black American musician whom he had met in New York during the time of the sex change. Once again, what could have been a rather sleazy and/or sensational sequence also becomes touching.

Moritz Bleibtreu (Run Lola Run, The Experiment) is a librarian with a sex addiction who actually goes to 12 step sex addiction program. The film shows the anguish he experiences in his own private life, in trying to relate to girls. It is only when he goes to a pornographic film studio and meets a porn star with whom he relates well on a personal level that he sees some future for himself.

By contrast Herbert Knaup is a grim politician who has alienated his sons and antagonised his long-suffering wife. He has problems of sexuality as well as of power and authority. His wife is portrayed by Katja Riemann (who had just won the award at the Venice Film Festival 2003 for best actress in Rosenstrasse).

The director declares that this picture of the three brothers is symbolic of Germany at the beginning of the 21st century, as society, as preoccupied with mundane, mercenary, ambitious attitudes and power struggles as well as sexual identity. In some ways it is bizarre – but it also has many moving moments.

YESTERDAY (South Africa, 2003, d. Darrell James Roodt)

Yesterday was produced by Home Box Office Films in association with South African companies including the Nelson Mandela Foundation. It was written and directed by Darrell James Roodt, the veteran South African director who made a number of films even under the apartheid rule but who emerged in the 1990s with such films on African themes as Serafina as well as a new version of Alan Paton's Cry the Beloved Country with James Earl Jones and Richard Harris. He had a brief stay in Hollywood making the minor crime comedy Fatherhood with Patrick Swayze.

This film is a focus on contemporary South Africa but with memories of the apartheid years. It is quite poignant in its presentation of a mother living in a Zulu village, walking all the way to the hospital with her daughter (whom she calls Beauty) trying to get a visit to the doctor but failing each week and having to return.

The surprise of the film – although it should not be a surprise – is that she is found to be HIV-positive. Her husband is away working in Johannesburg and, as with so many workers in South Africa, he has contracted the disease from a prostitute partner. He returns home to die, to the suspicion of the villagers except the kindhearted teacher who tries to explain the situation, especially to the women.

His is cared for by his wife who even builds her own house for him, kind of his own private hospital where she moves him and where he dies.

Yesterday is an important film insofar as it openly acknowledges the reality of AIDS and its widespread effect in South Africa.

The film shows the continued difficulties for black Africans, even after the demise of apartheid. There are the harsh traditions in the towns, the lack of water and hygiene, the lack of medical opportunities – but it finishes with the hope of solid education for the next generation.

Roodt is not always a subtle film-maker, relying on more direct techniques, unfussed, even sentimental. He would not be considered in any ways a stylish director – but the impact of his films comes especially from his content and from the strong performances he gets from his cast, especially Leleti Khumalo as the heroine whose name is symbolically, Yesterday.

SWIMMING UPSTREAM (Australia, 2002, d. Russell Mulcahy)

Swimming Upstream is the family autobiography of Tony Fingleton, a Queensland swimmer and backstroke champion, silver medal winner at the 1962 Commonwealth Games in Perth. However, he did not go on to an Olympic swimming career, preferring rather to accept a scholarship to Harvard. While the film is a sketch of his own early life and character, it is more a portrait of his parents.

On paper, Harry and Dora Fingleton sound like stereotypes. On screen, they come powerfully to life because of the intense screen presence of Geoffrey Rush and Judy Davis. Harry Fingleton is what we could call an 'ordinary bloke'. We first see him labouring on the Brisbane waterfront in the late 1950s, sometimes only casual work, sometimes laid off. He and Dora have five children, four boys and a girl. Home life seems to be ordinary. Dora is what people in the past called an 'ordinary housewife'. She cooks, she washes, she cleans. She has little time for anything else. She is a dowdy dresser, too busy to worry about her clothes or her appearance.

Harry seems your average quieter than louder Australian. He lives in the present although one of the destructive aspects of his character is the demanding dream he has of swimming success for his son, John.

One of the difficulties in understanding Harry is the story of his childhood. His mother drank, entertained a range of men at home with Harry there – one of her customers, a company executive, taunts Harry with this during a picket protest at the wharves. He was also a talented footballer but the Depression prevented him from playing for his country. These embarrassments and frustrations have eaten into him. He is a wife-basher and imposes his dreams on his sons. Harry junior (who has absorbed the bullying aspects of his father's character) is pushed as a football talent only to be dropped when Harry sees John's ability in the pool. He has an inbuilt contempt for Tony who is tormented by Harry junior, is inept at boxing and football and likes to play the piano. The word 'poofster' is aggressively bandied about. Harry can see Tony's swimming skills but bypasses them to focus on John, John's failure to dedicate himself to swimming means that he destroys his father's dream. This also means that we often see Harry angry, drunk, pushing his sons, attacking Dora, becoming caught up in his dream and acting over-emotionally.

Dora Fingleton is a good woman. She has loved Harry despite himself and herself. She knows that he is 'difficult' and makes allowances for his mood swings and brutal behaviour. She has been able, over the years, to keep him on an even keel for much of the time. But, as his sons grow up and he imposes his expectations on them, she is able to calm him less (though there is a fine sequence illustrating this when Harry is out of work, throws a tantrum and won't get out of bed for breakfast, and Dora throws the eggs all over him; he pursues her into the yard but the humour of the situation and his appearance get the better of them and the family all burst into laughter).

Dora has not been able to lead an outgoing life – though when her sons begin to swim competitively, she enjoys going to the races and cheering them on. Her life is the proverbial humdrum of housekeeping. She does not really rebel against it. In fact, though it is arduous, she does it well. She has managed the house well and brought up the children very well. She appreciates each of her children and is able to be a refuge for Tony whenever his father attacked him and, later, when he

grudgingly acknowledges Tony's swimming talents. Harry is at his worst when he cannot bring himself to watch Tony's race at the Commonwealth Games. Her confrontation of the drinkers in the pub is a reminder of her strength of character; her taking the cakes home from the fine restaurant for the kids is a reminder of her maternal love and care.

And this is how things were in those days. Not everywhere, of course. But, this was an expectation of life in the suburbs. The men were expected to dominate, be a man; the women were expected to be subservient, be a woman. Life in those days – when so much was about to change in the 1960s – was swimming upstream.

SHE HATE ME (US, 2004, d. Spike Lee)

“Oh boy!”

These are the final words in the screenplay of Spike Lee's *She Hate Me*. Audiences will resonate with them – but they are a vast understatement comment on what we have been through in the previous two and a quarter hours. The final line as the end credits conclude is ‘Mission Accomplished’. (At the end of the opening credits, which feature US bank notes, presidents and sketches of US scenes, comes a bank note with George Bush on it, Enron stamped beside his photo – it is a \$3.00 note!!).

Spike Lee has often been angry. Here he is upset and angry. Corporation deceit and lies is his initial target, especially when there is fraud concerning a vaccine for AIDS. He is angry at American politicians, especially Richard Nixon and includes a fantasy sequence where Frank Wills, the security guard who discovered the Watergate break-in, is humiliated and the main Watergate criminals boast of their successful post-Watergate celebrity and careers. Lee is also angry about the moral stances of the conservative Right, especially concerning Gay and Lesbian relationships. He is, as always, angry at the treatment of African-Americans by middle-class America. Quite an agenda for a movie.

Perhaps there is too much agenda. The expose of crooked corporate dealings is strong enough in itself. The other part of the plot concerns the sacked whistleblower (Anthony Mackie) and the pressure his former girlfriend (Kerry Washington) and her partner put on him to father children for a group of lesbians who are prepared to pay well for his services. In the background is the familiar story of his struggling and ageing parents. As these strands come together, Lee seems to be saying that the hypocrisies of publicly respectable executives who lie to make money and destroy any opposition in their path should be seen as morally despicable compared with the man who does accept money as a surrogate father but who opts to re-examine his life and values and accept responsibility for his actions and, finally, relish love and being a father.

This is one of those films where it is not helpful at all simply to ask what it is about. The topics might lead to anyone's ‘offensive’ list. Rather, it is a film that will not please everyone, will rankle with some moral viewpoints, but which can lead to endless profitable moral discussion. And it is pro-life – and then some!

Some of the acting is on the caricature side – well, so are some of the situations: from the animated sperm sequences to the encounters of the women with the hero, from the picture of the genial Mafioso (John Turturro, with Monica Bellucci) to the court case (with Brian Dennehy). Woody Harrelson and Ellen Barkin are the touch corporation chiefs.

She Hate Me is sometimes rough and ready, sometimes polished and moving, always provocative and stimulating concerning the state of the US and of contemporary morals.

CELLULAR (US, 2004, d. David R. Ellis)

An entertaining thriller for those who enjoy a bit of tension, some mystery and some peril. When a science teacher is abducted from her home without any reason given, she is confined to an attic where the phone is smashed. She skilfully connects a line and reaches a self-absorbed young man who has just been told off by his girlfriend. He promised to do something good during the day. Little did he realise what the chance phone call on his mobile phone would do to him – heroics that he never dreamed of.

Kim Basinger has to spend most of the film looking harassed and speaking desperately down the line. Chris Evans acquits himself very well with quick wit, action stunts and speed driving, generally outwitting the kidnappers. Jason Statham is menacing as the leader of the gang who are not what they seem. It is up to William H. Macy to bring some kind of calm and humour into the situation as well as to complete the investigation – not without some dangerous and menacing sequences. There is some comic relief as our hero tries to get his phone re-charged but is frustrated by a sale going on and lectures on customer courtesy as well as his hijacking (twice) of the expensive car of an obnoxious litigation lawyer.

Far-fetched, one hopes, but a well-made thriller while on screen.

MAMBO ITALIANO (Canada, 2003, d. Emile Gaudreault)

Playwright, Steve Galluccio, has opened out his play about Italians in Montreal. It is so heartfelt that one feels it is autobiographical, just like the TV series the hero writes about his family and home life. It is a feel-bad, feel-good comedy that draws on practically every caricature of Italian migrant life – and then some! As a small comedy about Italians, it is quite funny and keeps a smile on the audience's face for most of the time.

However, Angelo (Luke Kirby) feels that he has the worst of all worlds. He is Italian and gay. After finally moving out of the family home at the age of 27 (his next door neighbour has still not managed that and he is 69) and having his schoolfriend, now policeman, move in, he wants to tell his parents. You know what happens, and what everyone thinks, and the lengths they go to to reverse the situation. Despite the broad strokes, the humorously pastel sets, the tantrums and carry on, this is a very gentle comedy which makes its points about orientation without the camp culture, about feelings and family love, about the need to listen first without judging. (Actually Angelo fails this badly when he goes to work at the Gay Lifeline which had helped him; he gets the giggles and hangs up on people.)

By minimalising the sexual aspects of the story, the film can reach audiences who might otherwise be alarmed. It is a quiet yet humorous approach to understanding sons who are gay and are trying to cope and find their lives.

SKY CAPTAIN AND THE WORLD OF TOMORROW (US, 2004, d. Kerry Conran)

A top cast led by Jude Law, Gwynneth Paltrow and Angelina Jolie (plus a credit to long dead, Sir Laurence Olivier, for his image and his voice!). The other stars are the computergraphic experts who have created a strange comic-book world of a yesterday that never was (and have called it the world of tomorrow).

This is one of those old-fashioned Boys Own Adventures (Updated to include equal Girls Own Adventures) which are larger than life, have intrepid characters who indulge in derring-do to put the world to rights.

Jude Law is the Sky Captain who, for those who remember, could be a brother to Biggles of yore. Gwynneth Paltrow is the kind of His Girl Friday reporter who won't let go of a big story, especially when it looks like leading to the end of the world. Angelina Jolie is the stiff upper lip commander.

When robotic creatures appear in the skies at the end of the 1930s, we are transported into the world of the serials of those days, of Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers, and the kinds of mysterious mad scientists who operate from remote parts of the globe to further their experiments and to take over the world.

It is all visually striking and modernistic, but plot and character-wise, very oldfashioned.

SAW (US, 2004, d. James Wan)

By now the ads "See Saw" will have drawn audiences into cinemas. Having seen it without any knowledge or preparation, I was impressed. It is a psychological horror thriller, a touch gory at times, but which keeps the puzzle going well, has some obvious turns but still manages to trick its audience with unanticipated twists – including the very end. It is not for the fainthearted. But enthusiasts of this genre will be very pleased.

The star is Cary Elwes as a surgeon who finds himself chained in a basement along with an unknown young man. How will they get out? Will they get out? Who put them there? Who is playing sadistic mind games with them, especially with a saw that cannot make any dent on their chains?

Wondering who was playing the young man, I discovered that his name is Leigh Whannell. The final credits then revealed that he wrote the taut screenplay and the IMDb revealed that he is a young actor from Australia. He has done a creditable job of acting and writing.

It is a bit hard to say much else because one does not want to give away any major plot details. Suffice to say that Danny Glover appears as the investigating and obsessed detective.

WIMBLEDON (US/UK, 2004, d. Richard Loncraine)

This is a Saturday night out movie, a wishful thinking kind of movie where wildcard draws can win the title at Wimbledon and couples can fall in sex and love over the championship fortnight – and live happily ever after in a nuclear family doing good for the underprivileged in the US urban neighbourhoods. This is a mixture of the trite and the serious-minded, pretty pictures of London and ‘romantic’ behaviour.

What makes it more watchable than it deserves are the central performances by Paul Bettany and Kirsten Dunst. At 31, he is over the hill, described as a ‘journeyman’ player, but with dreams and ambitions that have never been achieved yet quite a sympathetic man. She is a vivacious champion with a killer instinct who needs to get away from the clutches of one of those terrible tennis fathers (in this case, Sam Neill).

The tennis is quite interesting, especially the final match, well edited and paced to make it look both impossible and credible. And with Chris Evert and John McEnroe, especially, doing commentary that sounds exactly like the real thing, it has the feel of the real thing.

So that is what life is like behind the scenes, the glitter and the paparazzi... As if!

SIGNIS REVIEWS AUGUST 2004/2

ALAMO, The
ANCHORMAN, THE LEGEND OF RON BURGUNDY
CHRONICLES OF RIDDICK, The
DODGEBALL, A TRUE UNDERDOG STORY
FACING WINDOW
HELLBOY
MY ARCHITECT
RAISING HELEN
STAGE BEAUTY
TERMINAL, The
VILLAGE, The

DODGEBALL, A TRUE UNDERDOG STORY (US, 2004, d. Rawson Marshall Thurber)

In one sense, this is quite an idiotic film, plot, characters, behaviour. But, it is also often quite funny in an endearing kind of way. Depends, of course, on your sense of humour.

If you have never heard of Dodgeball, then you have never read the magazine that one of the characters subscribes to, ‘Obscure Sports Monthly’. Perhaps, after this movie, somebody will start up dodgeball teams!

As the title indicates, this is the old, old, old story of a hopeless team that, against all odds and dastardly deeds of the opposition, wins the championship. Who are the hopeless team? Well, first you

need to know about White, the proud (better, ultra arrogant and full of himself) owner of a de luxe gym, with all the facilities, motivation videos (starring himself) and New Age training jargon (which he mixes up). He used to look like Jabba the Hut gone to seed, but now he is Narcissus in spandex. He covets, however, Average Joe's gym (to make a car park) where losers and oddballs seem to comprise the non-paying customers. Since they have to come up with \$50,000 in a month, what else can they do but enter the dodgeball championship?

Ben Stiller goes really over the top as White, a sometimes hilarious caricature of inane self-importance. By contrast, Vince Vaughan as Pete, owner of Average Joe's, seems positively laid back. White has musclemen bodyguards who become his team. Pete as derelict a bunch that you could find, although he gets the support of the foreclosure lawyer who is repelled by White's gauche advances.

The comedy is in the gallery of eccentric characters, the training for dodgeball by a wheelchair bound, rough mouthed Rip Torn (plenty of knockabout comedy here), the matches themselves and the commentary by Gary Cole and his platitudinous assistant.

A silly night out with a fair number of laughs.

RAISING HELEN (US, 2004, d. Garry Marshall)

If you are not a heart on sleeve movie buff, then you had better steer clear of Helen. If you are, then there are enough sitcom elements to bring a smile and a tear and the enjoyable presence of Kate Hudson and Joan Cusack.

Helen (Kate Hudson) is the youngest of three sisters, raised by her perfect mother-earth sister, Jenny (Joan Cusack), after their mother died. When their older sister and her husband are killed in a car crash, Helen is bequeathed the children (three of them). She is a very successful career woman in a modelling agency (run with tight lipped British definitely-not-heart-on-sleeve executive played by Helen Mirren – she would not be going to a movie complex to see Raising Helen). What is Helen to do?

Reminiscent of Kevin Smith's Jersey Girl, Raising Helen shows Helen trying to raise the children as best she can. This is where the sitcom elements come in: 15 year old infatuated with student DJ goes to motel, boy won't play basketball because that is what he did with his father, little girl is learning to tie her shoelaces (Unmarried with Children). To help Helen in the fortitude area, she is supported by the hunkish Lutheran pastor, principal of the local school as well as by poor Jenny who already has three children and is pregnant. John Corbett as Pastor Dan is a Lutheran equivalent of Bing Crosby going my way but unimpeded by a vow of celibacy. He is pretty wooden but Helen does fall for him.

Garry Marshall has directed some very popular sweet-toothed entertainments, especially Pretty Woman. Raising Helen, even though it does have situations that parents can easily identify with, is, perhaps, just too sweet.

THE ALAMO (US, 2004, d. John Lee Hancock)

The Alamo has an extraordinary status in American history, the last stand battle of a small group of men and women in the church near San Antonio, a stand against the overwhelming forces of the Mexican General Santa Anna to the death. Davy Crockett and Jim Bowie (of the knife fame) died during the siege. John Wayne starred as Crockett in a big-budget re-creation of the events in 1960. The film had the same title as the present version, The Alamo.

This Alamo did rather poorly at the American box-office. Is it the film itself? Is it the American spirit in 2003-2004 with the events of the war in Iraq and the aftermath? What image of American heroism was needed at this time?

First of all, the film is rather dark and not quite so heroic as forty years earlier. It also tries to look for the truth behind the legends and finds some feet of clay (or, rather, ordinary fallible human beings) and that did not sit well with the public who were caught up in the war against terrorism.

Since most people know the outcome, the film opens with the defeat and General Sam Houston on his knees. Back we go to the big dreams that Houston and other pioneers had for the opening up of Texas and for its being part of the Union (we are in the mid 1830s). Davy Crockett, from the Tennessee wild frontier and more latterly from Congress in Washington, responds to the call and arrives in San Antonio. General Santa Anna and his men make a surprise march through the winter and the siege of the Alamo begins.

There are tensions within the fort. The commander leaves, placing young and by the book Travis in charge. Jim Bowie and his roughneck followers are not impressed. Mistakes are made and the battle begins. Houston, who has a drinking problem, does not have the confidence of community leaders and is not there. He persuades them that he should raise a force.

There is a great deal of heroism in the fighting but the Americans are no match for the Mexicans, the small roughly clad fighters against the quite magnificently uniformed soldiers. Bowie dies of consumption. Crockett is executed. Houston eventually lures Santa Anna away and defeats him in an 18 minute fight with the Mexican signing away Texas in exchange for his life.

Billy Bob Thornton is the standout in the acting, really brining Crockett alive as a credible hunter, leader and genial gentleman. Jason Patric is Bowie and Dennis Quaid is Sam Houston.

ANCHORMAN, THE LEGEND OF RON BURGUNDY (US, 2004, d.

Senses of humour are notoriously different. One cultures hilarity is another culture's stone-faced incomprehension. This could be the fate of Anchorman. However, these first sentences are offered as an excuse and a defence for saying that I found it very funny – all the way through. In fact, I had to wipe my eyes so that I could read the sub-titles for the conversation between the dog and the Kodiak Bears during the climax!

Ron Burgundy was invented by Will Ferrell (who proved that a human elf over six feet tall could be engaging in Elf). He enlisted the talents of writer-director, Adam Carolla and developed this parody of a San Diego TV news anchorman of the 1970s, the days when anchormen were celebrities and the women did not have a chance. The film is a succession of funny sketches as we see a really not very bright Ron basking in his reputation, then dismayed when the networks employ a woman and, in a cruel fate as he absent-mindedly throws a burrito out his car window and the enraged cyclist that he hits boots his pet dog into the river in retaliation, misses his time – and she goes on instead and is successful. Christian Applegate enjoys herself as Ron's rival.

There are some very enjoyable turns by the supporting cast, especially from Paul Rudd and Steve Carrell (the TV announcer who fell victim to Jim Carrey in Bruce Almighty) and Fred Willard (the announcer in Best in Show). Audiences will want to be on the lookout for cameos from Vince Vaughan, Luke Wilson, Tim Robbins and Ben Stiller as rival anchormen. Jack Black is the irate dog-kicker.

The comedy tends to avoid the bodily function jokes that seem to be requisite for American satires. Rather, it is the situations, the verbal humour, sight gags and general genial spoof of the pretensions and macho assumptions of those days.

THE CHRONICLES OF RIDDICK (US, 2004, d. David Twohey)

Riddick is Vin Diesel, playing the character introduced in David Twohey's Mars actioner, Pitch Black. It is said that there are Vin Diesel fan clubs. The appeal eludes me. He is one of the most po-faced, unsmiling, uncharismatic screen presences – no touches of humour, no irony, no lightness.

The plot is akin to a Star Trek adventure but the audience needs to be practiced in remembering the names of distant planets and galaxies, especially when some of their names include numbers and they miss some of the action wondering which planet is being attacked and which one saved.

And Judi Dench is in it! She, Colm Feore as the archvillain who demands conversion to his somewhat obscure religious stances or brain-washed slavery or extinction, and Linus Roache all pronounce their

dialogue as if this really was an important chronicle. Vin Diesel and the mercenaries use dialogue that sounds like blunt, crass and cussing leftovers from *The Fast and The Furious* (and the director is to blame because he has written the screenplay).

The sets and action are impressive as are most of the effects, although just hiding behind a rock or in a cliff crevice on a planet surface called Crematoria (with temperatures in the hundreds) seems sufficient to stop being crisped.

It is more a descendant of episodic cliff-hanging old serials than the more recent space adventures – and this review has avoided the obvious ‘riddickulous’!

FACING WINDOW (LA FINESTRA AL FRONTE) (Italy, 2003, d. Ferzan Ozpetek)

Director Ferzan Ozpetek migrated from Turkey to Italy and has made all his films there, including *Hammam* and *Le Fate Ignoranti*. He incorporates themes of migration into all his films. He also includes themes of sexual identity, especially issues of homosexuality.

Facing Window is a very moving film, well worth seeing. It opens in Rome in 1943 with the German occupation and a murder which is not explained until the latter part of the film. We appreciate the identity of the killer when the action moves to 2002 but are not sure of his guilt or not. This gives an edge to the film.

The focus is on a young working-class couple with two children. She is an accountant in a chicken factory. He works in a trucking station on the night shift. They have two children. They take care of an elderly man in the street, find that he has lost his memory and bring him to their home. He changes their lives. The wife (Giovanna Mezzogiorno) is acerbic and critical. In her initially reluctant helping of the man, she discovers where her true values lie both in the work she wants to do and in her relationship with her husband and her attraction to the bank manager whom she sees out of the facing window. In a sequence where she looks across from the facing window at her own apartment, we see the emotional conflict between a new life and valuing what she has.

Massimo Girotti, veteran of more than 60 years in Italian films, brings great dignity to the role of the old man, a deep humanity that affects all those he contacts. It is through him that a quiet plea for judging people beyond their sexual orientation is made. This is a satisfying Italian drama.

THE VILLAGE (US, 2004, D. M Night Shyamalan)

Although it has been quite successful at the box-office, a number of reviewers and audiences have said that they were disappointed by this film. Perhaps, expectations were both wrong and too high. After *The Sixth Sense*, *Unbreakable* and *Signs*, Shyamalan is expected to always bring us a big, mysterious thriller with some shocks and twists. While *The Village* does have some shocks and a twist, it is more of a small film, almost what is called an ‘arthouse’ film, the kind of film that, if it were screened at a festival without audiences knowing who made it, would be received well.

What *The Village* is strong on is atmosphere and suggestion. Sometimes it is too quick on suggestion and the plot leaps ahead as if it had been cut down from a longer film. The 1897 look, tone and action is maintained. In fact, a village set was built in fields just outside Philadelphia to create authenticity. This evokes responses to such communities as the Amish. However, religion is not what motivates people. What motivates them is security from the outside world which has been cruel to them. The other motivation is fear, that outsiders will intrude and, even more important, that their children will not want to leave, not even want to go into the woods where ‘those we do not speak of’ live. Actually, the people are continually mentioning those they do not speak of. This is especially the case because of weird events and apparitions that create an atmosphere of fear.

The elders control the village and people’s lives, frequently meeting in council. William Hurt, as a kindly teacher, presides. His blind daughter (Bryce Dallas Howard) is attracted to the reticent Lucius Hunt (Joaquin Phoenix). She is also admired by what used to be called ‘the village idiot’ (Adrien Brody). When Lucius needs medicine, she is permitted to go to the outside world, ‘the towns’ to seem it. The over-literal mock the film by asking who would send a blind girl into the woods on such a

journey. Since, the events are meant to be looked at symbolically rather than realistically, it is evident that she is a special girl with special gifts to confront the evil.

How does the twist work in a realistic sense? In a symbolic sense? That is why you need to see *The Village* to work out.

[Controversy arose in the US as *The Village* opened. The Science fiction channel publicised their two hour documentary, *The Buried Secret of M. Night Shyamalan*, alleging that it would raise some secrets and scandals. They then apologised. What it really was was a pseudo-documentary, a serious mockumentary made by professional documentary-maker Nathanael Kahn – who recently made a fine tribute to his father, Louis Kahn, *My Architect*. This film runs for two hours, has lots of interviews, especially at the set of *The Village*, but it is all tongue-in-cheek, in a Shyamalan way, as if all his films were based on mysterious, psychic and out-of-life experiences of Shyamalan as a child. It is very clever and well worth seeing.]

MY ARCHITECT (US, 2003, d. Nathanael Kahn)

Many architecture critics consider Louis Kahn, a Jewish migrant from Estonia, to be the greatest American architect of the 20th century. There is plenty of evidence in this fine documentary to support the claim. His work is to be found in many American cities but the film reaches its climax with his designs for the government centre in Bangladesh.

Kahn seems to have been something of a workaholic genius. There is a great deal of footage of Kahn himself in the film.

However, he also had three children, one by his wife and one each by two of his associates. The director of this film is one of those children. He has set himself a quest: to try to find his father. This means that *My Architect* has a great deal to offer on American architecture. But it is also, the exploration of a character who did not reveal very much of his inner personal life but who obviously had a forceful influence on the women he loved and on his children.

Nathanael Kahn's gift as a documentary maker (as is very evident in his mockumentary on M. Night Shyamalan) is that most of his interviews are not just set studio pieces, formal interviews, guests sitting in a chair alongside the director and providing talking head material. He catches people on the move, in ordinary life-situations, carrying on a conversation so that the audience has a camera-eye view of the interviewee so that we feel that we know those being interviewed and this is all a perfectly natural discussion. Kahn is always present but is not intrusive. He is as much a subject of his films as the name in the title. He has the knack of involving us in his quest.

THE TERMINAL (US, 2004, d. Steven Spielberg)

For those who travel, two hours watching people working and waiting in an airport terminal may create some sense of déjà vu. The terminal here is JHK in New York.

On paper, the basic plot may seem far-fetched. However, it is given some plausibility as we follow the fate of Victor H, a visitor to the US who finds himself falling into an administrative crack that lasts for nine months. While he was in the air, there was a revolution in his eastern European nation which has led to all visas being declared invalid. The US has not recognised the interim government. As administered by officials who live by the book and the rules and are not strong on compassion. In fact, they wish he would make a break for it so that the 'unacceptable' visitor could be arrested by another authority.

It makes you wonder what on earth you would do in a similar situation. The regulations are against you. You have very limited language. You have very little money. People are suspicious.

Tom Hanks played Victor sympathetically, as might be expected. Stanley Tucci gives a strong performance as the airport boss, stubborn, sometimes wily, always concerned about his own position above all else. Catherine Zeta Jones is a friendly flight attendant.

The films dawdles sometimes. After all, two hours is quite a long time to stay in an airport at the best of times. But, the film grows on you and takes on something of a contemporary fairytale as Victor settles in at Gate 67 and befriends many of the staff, even acting as a matchmaker with the passport control officer who stamps his documents every day as 'unacceptable'.

Steven Spielberg's films are always touched with sentiment, easily to be dismissed as 'too American'. It is Spielberg raising some empathy for migrants and asylum seekers and their being victims of red tape. It is also Spielberg giving the Americans something feelgood at a difficult political time.

HELLBOY (US, 2004, d. Guillermo del Toro)

Guillermo del Toro (director of *Mimic* and *Blade 2* as well as the fine Spanish Civil War drama, *The Devil's Backbone*) became a fan of Mike Mignola's comic book, *Hellboy*. He lobbied for the job of directing and wrote the screenplay. Mignola himself (who acted as an art director on *Blade 2*) acts as producer, declaring that del Toro has given a striking visual interpretation of his character and events.

And it is a striking production, visually, full of exotic characters and locations, special effects and stunt work. *Hellboy*, apparently, came into this world through a portal in space in Scotland, 1944, in a ritual presided over by the Nazis, since Hitler had become involved for some years in the occult. American allies are able to disrupt the ceremonies (presided over by a revived Rasputin) and *Hellboy* grows up under the care of a kindly professor (John Hurt) becoming very American in attitudes, language and behaviour, a rather laid back daredevil who has chosen good instead of evil but has not really grown up and is spoilt and petulant. The professor has also collected a number of paranormal individuals, including a merman and a firestarter. Their exploits are a build-up to the final apocalyptic confrontation that should end the world. Plenty of action here.

Hellboy gives Ron Perlman a starring role. He is once again a variation of the Beast who is in love with the beauty (Selma Blair as the firestarter). Perlman creates an unusual character, a hero, monstrous looking but both childlike and childish – and a lot of deadpan humour. He has to face moral choices like any good hero, to give his life for the girl, to vindicate and, of course, to save the universe.

This is comic book heroics with a difference, plus a mish-mash of mythologies and Catholic imagery, and is above average for this kind of action thriller.

STAGE BEAUTY (UK, 2004. d. Richard Eyre)

The English Civil War of the 17th century, the protectorate of Oliver Cromwell and the subsequent restoration of the monarchy under Charles II have been the source of many films (*Cromwell*, *To Kill a King*, *Forever Amber*, *Restoration*). The focus of this film, as the title indicates, is the theatre. During the time of Cromwell's Puritanism, the theatres were closed for almost twenty years. However, actors trained in secret, waiting for the day of re-opening.

Through *Shakespeare in Love*, audiences remember that men took on all roles in the theatre, including the roles of women. At the time of Charles II, women were forbidden to act. From his experience of his mother's acting, from his time in exile in France where women were permitted on stage, and at the urging of Nell Gwynn, it is suggested, he revoked the regulation, reversing it so that only women could play women's roles. This had terrible repercussions on the actors who had for years trained themselves in women's gait, manners and attitudes.

Stage Beauty is the story of Edward Kynaston (Billy Crudup), mentioned by diarist Samuel Pepys as the most beautiful actor in London. At the opening we see him performing the role of Desdemona to Tom Wilkinson's Othello. His personal assistant Maria (Clare Danes) has ambitions to play Desdemona herself.

With a touch of *Restoration A Star is Born*, his career collapses as hers develops, with the patronage of the King (Rupert Everett) and Sir Charles Sedgely (Richard Griffiths). Clare Danes is charming as the would-be actress (a term that Kynaston has never heard of mocks in amazement). Billy Crudup acquits himself very well in a most difficult role. He persuades us that he has been trained to live to play women's roles, expert in flirtation as well. He also persuades us that this is a devastating crisis for him

and his career. As for his life, it raises questions of his sexual identity in a period that was characterised by its licentiousness.

Stage Beauty takes us willingly into the history of the English theatre (especially the final performance of the death of Desdemona) and makes us reflect on the manners, mores and morals of the period.

SIGNIS FILM REVIEWS AUGUST 2004/1

BIG BOUNCE, The
BOURNE SUPREMACY, The
CATWOMAN
CINDERELLA STORY, A
DIRTY DANCING 2: HAVANA NIGHTS
GARFIELD, THE MOVIE
HOME ON THE RANGE
I, ROBOT
KING ARTHUR
MAN ON FIRE
SPARTAN
STEPFORD WIVES, The
13 GOING ON 30
WELCOME TO MOOSEPORT
WHOLE TEN YARDS. The

THE WHOLE TEN YARDS (US, 2004, d. Howard Deutch)

With all the best will in the world, it is impossible not to say that this is a very silly film. There was some entertainment in *The Whole Nine Yards*, the tale of a fashionable but nervous dentist whose wife hires a killer to eliminate him – and who then finds that he actually lives next door to a hitman. Matthew Perry capitalised on his kind of jittery, awkward smiling persona from *Friends*. Bruce Willis was all crooked smiles.

Here they are again in a plot that twists and turns with very little signalling – and which has to be explained to the dentist (and to us) by the hitman at the end. It is to do with the father of the gangster that Willis killed in the first one, only now we find there was a kind of family relationship and the father, just out of jail, is not happy. The dentist's wife (formerly the hitman's wife) is abducted. The hitman's new wife, who was the killer hired in the first one to get rid of the dentist, wants to do a hit and wants to get pregnant. It may spoil the ending to know that everyone's wishes are fulfilled – with an extra \$280, 000,000 that none of them really need. It is all presented in a silly sitcom kind of way.

GARFIELD (US, 2004, d. Peter Hewitt)

Garfield is a cult comic strip cat. Having seen only a few strips, I had to review the film in itself and leave it to the Afficionados to decide whether the movie was faithful to the comic. What surprised me was how much geared to children's enjoyment and expectations the action was, leaving the voiceover humour for the adults. There is plenty of slapstick pratfalling as Garfield tests out whether he has nine lives or not. He gets into all kinds of scrapes despite being a model of complacent sloth!

Audiences have been spoiled in recent years with a good selection of excellent cats on screen. The very entertaining *Cats and Dogs* led the way. Nathan Lane's voicing of Snowball in both *Stuart Little* films was very funny along with his lowlife cat friends. Of course, Puss in Boots, voiced by Antonio Banderas like a fairytale Zorro, almost stole *Shrek 2*. Well, Garfield is not bad but would be a runner up in the Oscar for Best Cat. Bill Murray is the voice of Garfield, using that familiar sardonic tone without the amusing nervous urgency that Nathan Lane could mix with his funny lines as Snowball. Like Snowball, Garfield is rather large, overfed and expects the world, or at least his owner, to pamper him. When a dog comes home and seems to be stealing affections, well...

Breckin Meyer is the owner and Jennifer Love Hewitt is the vet he is in love with. Stephen Tobolowsky enjoys himself as a mean-spirited TV animal program host who abducts the new dog – who, despite himself, Garfield feels he has to rescued.

Only 80 minutes or so. Amusing but not a philosopher's cartoon.

I,ROBOT (US, 2004, d. Alex Proyas)

Isaac Asimov was one of the great science-fiction writing pioneers of the 20th century. He introduced robots before they were a fashionable topic for fiction and fantasy. He also introduced the three laws of robotics designed to safeguarded the humans who had engineered the robots and who now used them as servants.

This line of imagination has been fruitful in speculating about human nature and technology, about human intellect and feelings. Interesting films in this genre include Blade Runner, AI – Artificial Intelligence, Bicentennial Man and such entertainments as Forbidden Planet and The Stepford Wives.

Here, Asimov's stories are taken as the basis for an updated plot. The Chicago world of 2035 is sufficiently recognizable in its ordinariness, although it has the kind of building developments and technology centres that are quite imaginable. Robots are key figures and new line models are being continually improved in automated serving skills.

Will Smith plays a detective who has an antipathy towards the machines and their seemingly impeccable logic: he had been saved by a robot in a car drowning accident instead of the child he thought should have been saved. He is so edgy that he pursues a robot through the streets thinking he was a mugger when (we knew) that he was only getting medication for his owner. But this edginess means that he is the best contact that a frightened engineer can make to try to reverse a malevolent trend in the main computer which is turning the new robots against the humans. What follows is part detective work, part action thriller, part final confrontation with an army of computer-graphic rogue robots.

It is not as if the message were exactly new now. But, that is not the point. Humans need reminding of their pride in thinking that they can conquer all worlds and harness artificial intelligence for their own needs. The machines think that humans sometimes need protection from themselves and this logic leads them to apply violent methods 'for the humans' own good'.

It is always interesting to see again that, in a world which continually hails scientific advances, one of the roles of movies is to warn against dangers by telling the Frankenstein monster story over and over again in new guises.

THE BOURNE SUPREMACY (US, 2004, d. Paul Greengrass)

Robert Ludlum was, perhaps, the key popular American novelist of the Cold War, with Russian-US conspiracies as well as those of Neo-Nazis and the kinds of power-hungry megalomaniacs that are the villains of the James Bond stories. While Ludlum died in 2001, novels under his name are still appearing and the movie franchise from his Jason Bourne trilogy has proven very successful in this era of terrorism.

Jason Bourne was effectively introduced in 2002 in The Bourne Identity. He was an amnesiac with the instincts of a trained spy and killer. Which he was. However, we followed the exciting steps he took to discover who he was and how the world's intelligence agencies had used him. Now he is back because the agencies are using him as a fall guy to cover some secret Russian American collaboration in money deals in the early 1990s – and he wants to know who he is setting him. In fact, we first guess who it is and then know before he does. This means that while we are one step ahead of him as he travels from Goa to Naples to Berlin to Moscow, we are caught up in his use of his wits to get out of deadly situations as well as to expose and wreak vengeance on the villains.

And quite an exciting trip it is. In the hands of director Paul Greengrass (documentaries on the killing of British Stephen Lawrence as well as the award-winning Bloody Sunday), it is non-stop pulsating. The credits name two editors – and they must have had their work cut out since the film is so fast-

paced, so many of the edits lasting only a few seconds. There is so much hand-held camera work that the audience feels that it is right in there, trying to keep pace with Bourne. There is also a pulsating and pounding score and, in a big cinema, with the sound turned up, especially during one of the most hectic car chases you'll see, through the Moscow streets and tunnels, you can forgive yourself for feeling somewhat exhausted even though you have been simply sitting in your seat.

Matt Damon now successfully embodies Jason Bourne. Some of the original cast are back: Brian Cox, Chris Cooper (glimpsed in flashback), Franka Potente and Julia Styles. The best addition is Joan Allen as a CIA field commander who is determined to get Bourne and has to discover that he is not the enemy. A stylish and absorbing action thriller that will please conspiracy theorists. And Ludlum has provided the title for the next instalment, *The Bourne Ultimatum*.

SPARTAN (US, 2003, d. David Mamet)

This is a dark and frequently dark-looking film. It has to be. We are being taken inside the American Secret Service, that group of highly-trained men and women who guard the president and other VIPs. Some years ago, Clint Eastwood made an entertaining version of David Baldacci's *Absolute Power* where the Secret Service had to protect the President in his off-hours and in his off-behaviour, especially when they had to follow political advisor's orders to clean up messes and keep the lid tight on the truth, no matter what.

Things have not changed, in fiction-land at least. This time the focus is completely on the Secret Service, the rigid fidelity to their protective commissions, no matter what the moral or immoral context.

The film opens with a tough training and testing session supervised by Val Kilmer. It stays very tough, especially for Kilmer who is not an agent in command. Rather, he is like a Spartan of old, sent as a loner to work for the king, a loner who lives what we now call a spartan existence. He supervises but obeys orders. He can read people. He can interrogate physically and psychologically. He is tough and loyal, even when he has to find the daughter of the president who may have been inadvertently abducted by a white slave trade ring operating between the US and Dubai and the Middle East.

If this seems fascinating, you will want to see the whole film. Val Kilmer is at his best in this kind of role, especially when surface cracks appear and he has to question orders, feel moments of compassion for the victim, use his own initiative, especially against the sinister, all-knowing and controlling political minders and advisers.

What makes *Spartan* even more interesting is that it was written and directed by celebrated playwright, David Mamet. Mamet has written many dark screenplays (*The Untouchables*, *The Verdict*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*). He is also at home in a men's world, an official macho world that sees itself righteously as the custodian of good in the world when, in fact, there is corruption under the surface. More US conspiracies.

THE STEPFORD WIVES (US, 2004, d. Frank Oz)

In 1975, Bryan Forbes made a version of Ira Levin's novel, a blend of women's magazine pages and a horror film. Levin had already written of diabolical incarnations (*Rosemary's Baby*) and the cloning of Hitlers by Josef Mengele (*The Boys from Brazil*). *Stepford* was the ideal, American picture-perfect town, with picture perfect wives who had been transformed into robots to be the perfectly domesticated women and wives any fat-cat chauvinistic American male could want. This was ironic feminism in William Goldman's screenplay although some of the feminists took a fundamentalist, uncritically literal, interpretation of the film and missed its satire.

At the beginning of the 21st century, you can't do an exact remake. Feminism has moved on. Men are becoming more sensitive – but not to the extent that another version of *The Stepford Wives* would not go amiss. But, it is too late for horror surprises. And, after all, we live in a post-modern and flip one-liner world. Why not go for the comic elements, stay with the satire? And have Paul Rudnick write it? He is a master of camp humour with *Jeffrey* and *In and Out*. And have Frank Oz direct it? He was the voice of Miss Piggy so he knows more than a thing or two about pretentious putting on the glamour and he has directed many comedies (*Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*, *Housesitter*). And that is exactly what

has been done – to the ire of those who don't think it should be funny and of those who think it isn't funny enough.

There are certainly a lot of funny things in it. The opening television awards with the parody of the reality shows and the dollar signs in the executives' eyes set a satiric tone. When the sacked executive (Nicole Kidman, who does not have to be a real Stepford wife until the end of the film) and Matthew Broderick (definitely open to the possibility of robotising the wives) arrive in Stepford, they are greeted by town hostess, Glenn Close in a nicely-judged, almost over the top performance that deserves some kind of award. Who else should be there (but not Stepfordised and therefore able to make wisecracks) but Bette Midler in a welcome return to the screen? The sinister presence, all smiles and charm, is Christopher Walken. They have changed the ending a bit so that contemporary feminists may be momentarily wondering whether anything has changed!

THE BIG BOUNCE (US, 2004, d. George Armitage)

Elmore Leonard is one of my favourite crime-writers. He has a skill in communicating heroism in characters who could be considered deadbeat. He creates kookie supporting characters. And, he writes with great deadpan wit. I can't speak for him here, but I would be very surprised if he liked or even approved of this version of one of his earliest novels. It was actually filmed in the late 60s with Ryan O'Neal but did not set the box-office alight. Nor this time. The ingredients are there, the sketch of the characters, Leonard-like situations on the edge of morality and the law. But the hard-boiled wit is missing, except perhaps in the performance of the always reliable Morgan Freeman.

The central character is played by Owen Wilson who has been very amusing in a lot of films. Here he makes you realise that he is giving the same drawly, seemingly lame-brain, good-natured but narcissistic performance that he gave in *Shanghai Noon*, *Shanghai Knights*, *Starsky and Hutch*, *Around the World in Eighty Days*, *I Spy* and *Meet the Parents*, that this is one and only Owen Wilson performance.

The supporting cast looks good on paper, Gary Sinise, Bebe Neuwirth, Charlie Sheen, Willie Nelson, Harry Dean Stanton, Vinnie Jones, but they really haven't got much to do.

Little bounce and not so big either. Better to look at director George Armitage's tough Florida thriller, *Miami Blues*, again.

DIRTY DANCING 2: HAVANA NIGHTS (US, 2004, d. Guy Ferland)

Sixteen years between the very popular original and the sequel does not seem to be a good sign. This one is just a time passer. Set in the Havana casinos in the late 50s, just before Castro's revolution and the ousting of Batista, it is the story of a poor young man who has a talent for dancing but works in the grounds of a big hotel. He comes across a young American going to school in Havana while her father works in a local company. Her mother had been a professional dancer but is now very protective of her daughter.

If a screenwriting class were given this basic scenario and told to do a treatment in half an hour, what would they come up with? The boy is poor, his brother a revolutionary desperate to avenge his father; he gets sacked. The girl has a date with the son of the company owner who drunkenly comes on to her and she resists, helped by the poor boy who then teaches her some Latin American dance moves. They secretly enter the New Year's Eve competition. They practice a lot – and are helped by Patrick Swayze looking older than he did in the sequel set decades later. The competition is held, the revolution is successful – but do they win? And that is, in fact, more or less what happens.

Diego Luna made an international impact in *Y Tu Mama Tambien* and has appeared in *Frieda*, *Open Range* and *The Terminal*. British Romola Garai is the would-be dancer. It is a slight entertainment.

WELCOME TO MOOSEPORT (US, 2004, d. Donald Petrie)

A little comedy that is amusing but doesn't stay in the memory. It is a big screen vehicle for Ray Romano who has had such popular and award-winning success on television with *Everybody Loves Raymond*. Everybody loves his character in *Mooseport*, Handy Harrison, a plumber. He is the

proverbial nice but reticent guy, not as self-confident as he should be, reluctant to propose to his long-time girlfriend (Maura Tierney). He looks as if he should have been in a Frank Capra movie of fifty or more years ago.

Into the nice and quiet town of Mooseport comes the former American president, the only president ever to get a divorced in office. He is going to retire – well, he is going to play golf and go on a lucrative lecture tour to pay the ex-first lady's alimony. And who is this heroic but two-timing president? Gene Hackman. Which makes one wonder what he would have been like as a Frank Capra villain instead of Edward Arnold. Perhaps Gene Hackman is too modern with his surface charm and his ability to be mean and dangerous underneath.

He is asked to stand as mayor (which might save him on alimony). But Handy has also been urged to stand. Twists, turns, busted romances, the noble thing – and a visit from Christine Baranski doing her comic turn as the wilful ex-first lady. Marcia Gay Harden represents loyalty to the President. Rip Torn is the political adviser who wants to take on Handy.

Since there is nothing very much ironic in the title but rather a genuine welcome, this all ends up sweetly and nicely.

MAN ON FIRE (US, 2004, d. Tony Scott)

In a 2004 interview, Denzel Washington affirmed that, after so many nice-guy roles, he would like to do some villains. He won an Oscar for his nasty turn in Training Day. He was verging on the criminal in Out of Time. Here he gets to be a bit of both, at least a drunken disillusioned government assassin who has to take a heroic stand.

Director Tony Scott worked with him in Crimson Tide. Now he gives him the chance to emerge from the confined world of a submarine to go to a violence-ridden Mexico to become a bodyguard. He is helped to get the job by his long-time associate and pal, Christopher Walken. And the job is to guard an eight year old girl, especially going to and from school because there are gangs involved in abductions as a means of raising quick millions.

Should he take on the job because his charge is the precocious Dakota Fanning who gives the impression that she could well look after herself? In fact, she looks as if she could grow up to be a mixture of Margaret Thatcher and Hilary Clinton. On the other hand, she acts as if she had reached that stage already (and see her or don't see her in Uptown Girls and The Cat in the Hat). Her parents are played by Marc Anthony and Australian Radha Mitchell.

It is not revealing anything significant in the plot to say that the little girl is abducted. After all, that is what we were expecting. However, the film is almost two and a half hours long and much of the first hour is spent in Denzel first not liking the little girl, not wanting to be her friend but then softening because of her neglectful father, helping her with her work, coaching her and definitely becoming her friend. He now has the motivation to go through the rest of the film tracking down a network of quite ruthless kidnappers (with a twist that those who know these films will expect). With his background as a killer and now off the bottle, he gives the kidnappers far worse a time than they were expecting. He is now on fire. And he has come to like the little girl so much that he is prepared to lay down his life for her.

Which means that this is quite a big-budget, long actioner with feelings that enables Denzel Washington to be both bad and good, his image intact. It is entertaining in its way but lacks some of the fire of its title.

CATWOMAN (US, 2004, d. Pitoff)

After her appearance in Die, Another Day, her Oscar for Monster's Ball and her being one of the stars of the two X Men movies, everything was possible for Halle Berry. She appeared in the psychological horror film, Gothika, which received a mixed response, and then went on to Catwoman, which did not get a mixed response. The response was generally negative.

Catwoman is a rather flashy show, directed by Pitoff, a Frenchman who was a set designer on the films of Jeunet and Caro, like *City of Lost Children*. He has a taste for the exotic. However, the screenplay is not really exotic. The credits remind us of the sacred images of cats, especially in ancient Egypt and we remember that this has been popular at least since *Cat People*, with many variations. However, the mythology is only alluded to and the real role of Catwoman is to right some wrongs, especially in the cosmetics company where she has worked as an artist. Her target is the owner, the arrogant and womanising boss (Lambert Wilson). We know, however, that she should beware of his wife (Sharon Stone), the past face of the company but whose face and character have literally hardened like marble because of the destructive chemicals in the product that is being heavily promoted.

When the cat takes over Halle, she can become just like Spiderman, confident, agile, saviour of the city. When she comes to, she is more like a glamorously diffident Peter Parker. She needs her friends (rather camp) for support as well as the detective who stumbles into her life (Benjamin Bratt). Since Spiderman is successful in portraying the psychological struggles of Peter Parker, there was no reason why Catwoman could not. But it doesn't, leaving a good-looking but rather flat story until the inevitable showdown between Sharon and Halle.

KING ARTHUR (US, 2004, d. Antoine Fuqua)

High hopes that this would one of the holiday spectaculars. It was not. This is not surprising as it is a very dark and dour film, not the kind of derring-do hijinks that one would want for a holiday break.

The screenplay was written by David Franzoni who wrote *Gladiator*. That was a rather literate epic, centering on the philosopher emperor, Marcus Aurelius, and the military statesman, Maximus. There are a number of literary allusions in *King Arthur*. Especially surprising are the several references to the monk, Pelagius (the theological enemy of St Augustine) and his teachings on human self-sufficiency over God's grace. There are also references to the Pope and Rome and one of the main protagonists is a bishop.

But that might not have been noticed by those wanting what older audiences used to call 'a good stoush'. They would have been looking for the battles. And, in that, they would not be disappointed. There is a particularly effective battle on the ice, between Arthur and five knights and Guinevere who is now a champion archer. (Many of the critics were quick to point out that Eisenstein, once upon a time, did this more effectively in *Alexander Nevsky*. But those who did not recognise Pelagius would not have made the Eisenstein connection either and not been bothered one way or the other. While on comparisons, some of the battles were *Braveheart*-like and I would guess that many of the audience would have made that connection.)

This is pre-Camelot Britain, so there is no trace of any singing or wondering what the simple folk do. Rather, Arthur and his knights are political hostages from Asia, forced by the Roman empire to fight for them for fifteen years. Arthur and his fellows have been fighting the local Britons, the Woads, so called because of their painting their faces for battle. Merlin is one of their leaders. When their time of service has expired, the knights are asked to go on one more mission. On their return, they encounter the marauding Saxons and join with the Woads to defeat them – thus giving Arthur a united kingdom.

This means that we are dealing with pre-imagination, pre-legend Arthur, a dark Arthur, one whom audiences would find it hard to warm to, little sympathy let alone empathy. The choice of the never-prone-to smile Clive Owen for Arthur reinforces the theme but it is his darkness and dourness that cloud the film. (He does have the trace of a smile at the end.) Ioann Gryffudd is Lancelot but there is nothing much of a triangle between Arthur and Guinevere and himself. Guinevere is the young and athletic Keira Knightly. The one who does make an impression, especially since he is indeed from Scandinavia, is Stellan Skarsgaard as the leader of the Saxons, a rough and tumble, violent lot.

Once one gets used to what *King Arthur* is as a film rather than what advertising and hopes led one to believe what it would be, it seems to improve.

13 GOING ON 30 (US, 2004, d. Gary Winick)

Here are some more mean girls. At school, they are particularly unpleasant to Jenna, using her assignment plans, coming to her birthday party but then tricking her to hide in the cupboard waiting for the kiss from the boy she has a crush on. But, all she gets is a kiss from the best friend she takes for granted, the chubby Matt. No, that is not all, she gets her wish fulfilled, that she be 30.

She is big (just as once Tom Hanks was). She gets a terrible shock to find that she has become worse than any of the mean girls, has lost touch with Matt and seems to be one of the most disagreeable editors on the magazine she used to idolise at 13. While there are a few jokes about a gawky 13 year old in a 30 year old's body, the plot is more about how she can become a better person. Fortunately, she tracks down Matt who is really a very decent guy, although engaged to a super-energetic professional, and a very good photographer. We watch Jenna move from mean to amenable to sugar and spice.

Jennifer Garner is more used to being in action on television's *Alias*. She has a pleasing screen presence here, a Julia Roberts smile and some comic timing. Mark Ruffalo is the nice grown-up Matt. Fame has come to Andy Serkis after being Gollum and here he is as the supervising editor of the magazine.

The title probably describes the target audience for the film.

A CINDERELLA STORY (US, 2004, d. Mark Rosman)

There are several archetypal stories which are told over and over again, in different guises and adapted for different eras: the Frankenstein doctor and monster, for instance, or Beauty and the Beast. And, of course, Cinderella. This Cinderella lives in California, now, where, as the DJ announces, you are not judged by who you are but by what you wear.

Samantha – Sam - has a wonderful father, who reads his motherless daughter fairy stories. For her sake (there could be no other reason), he marries the impossible Fiona who has two impossible non-identical twin daughters. They loathe Sam so, when her father dies heroically in an earthquake and Fiona inherits his popular diner, it is slaving away in the diner for Sam while the ugly sisters have synchronised swimming lessons and cat-fight. Fiona, who is not the brightest bulb in California and who mistakes the fashion pages and cosmetic surgery for class, makes life difficult for Sam. Difficult, but not impossible, because she has an eccentric friend (who will be the mice equivalent taking her to the high school dance), is loved by those who work at the diner (where Regina King will be the godmother who gives her a dress) and who has a chat-room relationship with a Princeton charming, where she hopes to study.

The parallels are amusing, especially as these days she could not lose her slipper but certainly could drop her locked mobile phone. Actually, the potential prince has more than enough troubles of his own since he is just like those heroic jocks that Freddie Prinze has played, great at football but a secret poet within, with his job peer followers and tagged by the blonde cheerleader - who, with her little court are yet more mean girls,

Hillary Duff is lively and sweet as Sam. The music swells when Chad Michael Murray appears so you know he has to be the prince, despite appearances, though one warms to him. The most enjoyable part of the film is watching Jennifer Coolidge as Fiona, crass as they come but obviously relishing this opportunity to create a tanned and pastel screen monster-mother.

HOME ON THE RANGE (US, 2004, d. Will Finn, John Sanford)

With this film, Disney hand-drawn animation, which has prevailed for almost seventy years, comes to an end. Dreamworks and, especially Pixar Studios, have proved that computer animation is the present and the future.

What we have here is a rather old-fashioned story, with an old-fashioned look that is reminiscent of Clarabelle the Cow and of the Looney Tunes and their chases and slambang pratfalls.

It is the story of three cows who come from a dairy farm called A Little Patch of Heaven. Villains rustle cattle, want to buy out poor and helpless widows and give the west a bad name. We share the

adventures of the cows, as well as their trying to get on with one another. Maggie is an interloping show cow, so is voiced with her kind of panache by Roseanne Barr. The lady of the farm, called Mrs Calloway, sounds like M, Queen Elizabeth and Queen Victoria because she is voiced by Judi Dench. Amusing with her New Age psychological observations and explanations is Jennifer Tilly voicing Grace. So, there are all kinds of adventures, perils and bonding till the cows come home.

Perhaps the plot and action will seem old-fashioned to today's children. The adults can reminisce and enjoy the voices.

VANITY FAIR
VERA DRAKE
COLLATERAL
AE FOND KISS
DEAD MAN'S SHOES
TRAUMA
BIRTH
MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE
MERCHANT OF VENICE, The
FEMME DE GILLES, La
DELIVERY
BINJIP
ROI ET REINE
ZULU LOVE LETTER
LETTERS TO ALI
CRIMINAL, The
DEMOISELLE D'HONNEUR
TOUT UN HIVER SANS FEU
5x2
PALINDROMES
MYSTERIOUS SKIN
AGNES AND HIS BROTHERS
YESTERDAY
CAFÉ LUMIERE
CHIAVI DI CASA
LESS WORSE WORLD, A
STEAM BOY
HOME AT THE END OF THE WORLD, A
THREE ROOMS OF MELANCHOLIA
SAIMIR
EROS
AMORE RITROVATO, L'
LAND OF PLENTY
PROMISED LAND
LOVE SONG FOR BOBBY LONG, A
MAR ADENTRO
I CAN SEE IT IN YOUR EYES
THROW

VANITY FAIR (US/UK, 2004, d. Mira Nair)

Perhaps many people think that this film has connections with the popular magazine of the same name. Rather, the magazine takes us back to one of the great classic novels of 19th century English literature, William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. Thackeray, like Charles Dickens, was an expert purveyor of the three-volume novel, serialized in magazines and, so, having a double life as a best-seller. How well can such sizable novels be transferred to the screen? And why should we see such films?

First, a religious note: Thackeray took his title from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes, 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity...' His novel offers an illustration of the futility and destructiveness of greed and ambition – the same message as that in the Gospels, 'what does it profit to gain the whole world and lose one's soul?'

Second, a social note: Thackeray took his readers back into the first decades of the 19th century, the years of the Napoleonic Wars, culminating in his defeat at Waterloo. These were the years of Regency England, a time of great public elegance, a beginning of a sense of empire, a time of belief that, despite poverty and oppression, anything was possible.

How can film-makers put all of this into a film which lasts two hours and twenty minutes, especially when a version of *Vanity Fair* of seventy years ago, 'Becky Sharp', ran for less than ninety minutes?

The task was entrusted to several writers, amongst whom Julian Fellowes, the Oscar-winning writer of another vanity fair kind of story, *Gosford Park*. The director is the Indian, Mira Nair, probably best-known for her exuberant *Monsoon Wedding*. [The Indian connection is not accidental as Thackeray himself was born in Calcutta.]

And the film itself? It is one of those wonderful re-creations of a period that the British do so well. It is quite lavish in sets and costume design, a delight for the eye. It also has a particularly strong cast. American Reese Witherspoon is cast as one of literature's most lively and memorable characters, Becky Sharp. She comes across as a nicer person than in the novel but is quite convincingly English. James Purefoy is her gambler husband, Rawdon, and Rhys Ifans (playing against type) is the faithful Captain Dobbin. Audiences will delight in so many of the supporting characters: Eileen Atkins as Miss Crawley, Bob Hoskins as Pitt Crawley and Jim Broadbent as Mr Osbourne.

And, yes, the film contains the whole book. It may be only a sketch and outline sometimes, but it gets the spirit of the novel. Not only does the audience feel it has lived through these times, but it understands this portrait of a society in transition, of the strengths and failings of human nature. It is well worth a visit into this past.

VERA DRAKE (UK, 2004, D. Mike Leigh)

Vera Drake won the Golden Lion at the 61st Venice Film Festival. This British film won a further boost when Imelda Staunton was named as Best Actress.

Any comment on Vera Drake needs to highlight that the theme of the film is abortion.

When it screened halfway through the festival in Venice, headlines appeared: a film about abortion. The presumption seemed to be that "Vera Drake" was 'pro-abortion'. A potential scandal makes for ready copy. This continued in most of the reporting about the film and its awards.

Two factors contributed to a more intelligent discussion of the film. First was the film itself. Mike Leigh is a master film-maker. He has won awards in Cannes for "Naked" and his very moving, "Secrets and Lies". Other films include the Gilbert and Sullivan portrait, "Topsy Turvy" as well as the picture of very ordinary London life, "All or Nothing". Vera Drake is in the "All or Nothing" tradition.

Vera Drake is a fifty year old housewife in North London in 1950. She is generous to a fault. Nothing is too much trouble for her. And a cup of tea is always at hand for comfort. Everyone says she has a heart of gold. She is the proverbial good woman. We see that she is not only outgoing but is highly invigorated by meeting people and by being continually busy with her work. And she is decisive. No nonsense about her. She has her list of things to do and she does them. At once and without fuss. She is also fully immersed in her world. She gives all her attention and effort to the immediate hands-on jobs she takes on. She does everything for everybody else, always sensitive to their needs and always wanting to do nice things for them. She is a strong personality but does not grate or dominate. The first half of the film is a moving portrait of this woman whom Imelda Staunton's performance makes memorable.

Then, without any lead in we are shown how she also performs syringe abortions for

women and girls 'in need'. She has done this for twenty years or more. The way she sees these procedures is in the same way that she sees any kindness she does for anyone. Her family know nothing about this activity.

Mike Leigh's process for creating his screenplay is to give the actors some limited information about a situation (no overall knowledge of the plot) and let them improvise so that unforeseen reactions can emerge giving the scene more nuances and vitality. The final screenplay is a tight, written version that has emerged from the rehearsal period. This means that Leigh's screenplays can be powerful because they contain a variety of authentic personal responses as well as Leigh's own insightful final version.

This is to the fore in the second part of the film. When one girl suffers complications, hospital authorities inform the police and Vera is subject to questioning and arrest. The responses to Vera's activity are both negative (her son) and positive (her son-in-law) with her husband standing by her but finding it difficult to comprehend what his wife has been doing.

The second factor for discussion of *Vera Drake* was Mike Leigh's press conference in Venice. He was quick to point out that his films treat social issues but never provide unequivocal answers. He provides the equivalent of a case study (something like what seminarians explored in the past during their moral theology course). Leigh noted that, while we bring our own agenda to the story, we are invited to consider a wider range of perspectives. It is not simply, or simplistically, moral judgment by unnuanced application of moral principles. Leigh said that some audiences would view Vera as a saint, committed to assisting women; others would see her as a monster, destroying lives. [Most audiences hurry out as soon as final credits roll. For those who stay, they will see that Leigh dedicates his film to his parents, a doctor and a midwife.]

Imelda Staunton's performance as a stunned Vera in the second half of the film, after her arrest, equals the goodheartedness of the first half. However, she is in a state of shock, as the legal implications of her activity bear down on her. She has been completely altruistic (unlike her friend and contact who pockets a fee without Vera knowing), not taking a penny, never giving any thought to payment. Now she is interrogated, let out on bail, subject to suspicion by family and friends, required to go to court. She is asked to look at her activity objectively and rationally, something almost impossible for her. She has not been concerned with theory and principles at all. The reality of the here and now, the down to earth, is where she has been fully at home. Her suffering demands a sympathetic response from audiences in a way that someone involved in the same abortion activities but who was Thinking and/or Intuitive might not elicit because of their different approach to and understanding of abortion.

Vera Drake reminds us that moral issues can be discussed at a rational level of principles. This can give some objective clarity. But they also need to be illustrated by story and the complex dilemmas of daily living. No matter where we stand on an issue rationally, we also need compassion. This is the traditional Catholic teaching of hating the sin while loving the sinner. This is what Mike Leigh has offered with his portrait of *Vera Drake*.

COLLATERAL (US, 2004, d. Michael Mann)

When Tom Cruise's name appeared alongside that of Jamie Foxx on the posters for *Collateral*, there were some cynical remarks that Cruise's career was on a downward path. No longer sole billing above the title. Be the billing as it may, *Collateral* gives us a very strong Cruise performance – as is that of Jamie Foxx.

Collateral is a very satisfying thriller. The action sequences are well executed, though stretching credibility more than a little at times (the shootout in the club, the pursuit to and through the LA Subway). The dialogue is much more interesting than in most thrillers. Cruise, as the cold stone-killer, has a lot to say about life, about death, about executions and about the place of men and women in the grand scheme of things. Foxx, as the taxi driver with dreams of running his own perfect limousine service with a top clientele, has a lot to say about life and passengers, about ambitions and frustrations and about morality. *Collateral*, therefore, is an intelligent thriller.

Direction is by Michael Mann who these days is put on a pedestal by many critics. After all, he directed the first Hannibal Lecter film, *Manhunter*, back in the 1980s when he was producing *Miami Vice*. He has also directed *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Hear*, *The Insider* and *Ali*, not a bad record.

Shooting digitally, he brings Los Angeles to life, especially since the action time is from evening to dawn, a Los Angeles nightlife. The musical score is continually changing in style, from piano solos to jazz, to orchestrated accompaniment. *Collateral* is satisfying visually and aurally.

There are some memorable sequences: the visit to the Jazz Club and the reminiscences of the trumpeter who played once with Miles Davis, the interview with the gangster chief (Javier Bardem) where Foxx pretends to be Cruise and gradually rises to the occasion, outsmarting the gangsters, the finale in the train which fulfils a story Cruise tells about a dead man riding the subway for hours before anyone noticed he was dead.

Cruise, with his silvered hair, his dress suit and his guns, gives an effective performance, playing well off Foxx's warmly human interpretation of an LA taxi driver. The main focus is well supported by collateral benefits of screenplay and technique.

DEAD MAN'S SHOES (UK, 2004, d. Shane Meadows)

Until now Shane Meadows has been noted for small domestic dramas set in the British Midlands, *Twentyfour Seven*, *A Room for Romeo Brass* and *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands*. These films focus on children and youth, employment and tensions in families. In *Romeo Brass*, there was a very sinister character, especially in relationship to children, played by Paddy Considine. Paddy Considine's career has taken off with *Last Resort* and *In America*. He now comes back to work with Shane Meadows, not just as an actor, but as a co-writer of this sometimes frightening story.

It is a very difficult film to label. It opens with home movies of family and two young brothers. It moves to a domestic drama as the two brothers make contact with each other as the older, more protective brother (Considine) returns from military service. It then takes on a sense of menace as they track down a group of local yobbos who tormented the younger brother because he was mentally disabled and they enjoyed the bullying.

Now comes the blood and we realise that we are in for a frenzy of vengeance. Which we are. But, Meadows is not always predictable and there is more to the character of the younger brother than we first realise. The final victim for vengeance has something of a different story from the rest which gives the ending a different tone from predicted (but chilling nonetheless).

The older brother is obviously an avenging angel character but his character is mixed with some more kindly aspects. The posters speak of a film of redemption. There is very little redemption, if any, for the bullies. Is the brother, after his violence and bloodletting, redeemed?

Brief, taking place over a five day period with each day precisely introduced, with black and white flashbacks to the abuse of the young man, this is often an ugly film, but compelling as well.

AE FOND KISS (UK, 2004, d. Ken Loach)

For almost forty years, Ken Loach has devoted himself to films with passionate social concern. Not only is he still going strong, his reputation is higher than ever. During the last decade, he has won awards, critical acclaim and a larger following from the general public. His collaborator for the last seven or eight years has been a Scotsman, Paul Laverty, who spent some time in a seminary. This religious interest has been prominent in some of the films (like *Carla's Song*) and it is one of the key elements of *Ae Fond Kiss*.

'*Ae Fond Kiss*' is a quotation from the poet, Robert Burns. The two protagonists of this film are involved in more than a fond kiss. He is an earnest young man, a local DJ, who lives with his family, preparing for an arranged marriage. She is a music teacher at the school which his younger servant

attends. The crucial information, however, is this: he is the son of Pakistani migrants to Glasgow, strictly traditional and devoutly Muslim; she is a Catholic and her school is Catholic.

The romantic element is treated as might be expected, delightful little details (like moving her piano with his local friends) and a sudden holiday in Spain (where some of the production money came from). Much of it is routine with a touch of sentiment.

The drama arises when the family discovers the truth. Once again, a lot of this is what we might expect. The Pakistani parents are adamant. The prospective in-laws are shocked. The son is defiant. Where the film is of greater interest is in the Catholic response: the principal wanting to keep the teacher but the parish priest giving her a severe lecture on moral standards and examples for the children.

Matters come to a head when the Pakistani older sister finds that her boyfriend's family will not permit a marriage because of her brother's involvement with a non-Muslim. She makes a very strong case for self-sacrifice on the part of the couple, making a plea to both parties. However, we live in a very emotional world, where sympathies for those in love are usually stronger than relying on principles.

Ae Fond Kiss is not as good as the more recent films that Loach has made. Here Loach and Laverty offer us a story where the issues are clear but where the answers are very difficult.

TRAUMA (UK, 2004, d. Marc Evans)

When Marc Evans made a digital horror thriller, *My Little Eye*, two years ago, he was hailed as one of Britain's up-and-coming directors. *Trauma* is a bit more up-market, with a bigger budget. It is stylishly made – but it requires a great deal of concentration from audiences.

Colin Firth is Ben. He emerges from coma, hospitalised after being involved in a car accident where his wife has died. As he undergoes therapy (with an unseen psychiatrist) and tries to resume life by moving into an abandoned hospital area, he becomes more and more convinced that he is somehow involved in a murder investigation, the death of a singer for whom his wife was a featured dancer. He meets friends, attacks his wife's sister, makes friend with a nice neighbour (Mena Suvari) who takes him to a séance conducted by Brenda Fricker.

BIRTH (US, 2004, d. Jonathan Glazer)

Birth seems a very strange film. In fact, many people would call it silly. However, it has very good credentials. The screenplay was co-written by Bunuel's collaborator, Jean-Claude Carrière, with the director, Jonathan Glazer. Glazer had made a big impression with his brief and somewhat brutal British gangster thriller, *Sexy Beast*, with Ray Winston and Ben Kingsley in an Oscar-nominated performance.

Birth is a New York story. It begins with a death and transfers to a birth. For those who believe in reincarnation, it seems to be a rebirth. The difficulty is that the man who died was a middle-aged jogger. He is reincarnated in a young boy who, at ten years old, claims that he is the long-dead husband of widow, Nicole Kidman.

It depends on one's point of view whether the film is metaphysical or religious or simply psychological. From a metaphysical point of view, the plot seems impossible. From a reincarnational point of view, this kind of plot could even be plausible. From a psychological point of view, it offers a great number of difficulties. How does the boy have all the information – and how does he persuade the widow that he is genuine? Ultimately, the plot seems to be resolved on a psychological level.

Jonathan Glazer has a distinctive visual style, and he is in no hurry. The opening jogging credits sequence seems rather too long for its dramatic value. At other times, the camera stops and contemplates different characters. There is a striking scene as Nicole Kidman listens to an orchestra in concert and the camera seems to remain on her striking face for at least a minute.

The film has strong acting which carries it along in some way. Nicole Kidman, sporting a very brief, effectively different hairstyle, is the widow who becomes absorbed in the claims of the boy. This might seem impossible. However, she is caught up in the memories of her husband and so follows through investigating and believing the child. He is played by Cameron Bright who appeared in *Godsend* and in *The Butterfly Effect* (here rather more impassive and blank. In the other films rather sinister). Danny Huston plays Nicole's fiancé. Lauren Bacall is her mother – and Lauren Bacall has the most sardonic, realistic and down-to-earth lines in the whole film.

The supporting cast is interesting, Peter Stormare as the dead man's best friend, Anne Heche as Stormari's wife with a secret of her own.

The film is stylishly made – but the topic itself, even with reference to the title of the film, makes one wonder.

THE MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE (US, 2004, d. Jonathan Demme)

The *Manchurian Candidate* was originally a novel by celebrated writer, Richard Condon. It appeared at the end of the 50s, in the aftermath of the Korean War and America's hostility towards the Soviet Union and the countries behind the Iron Curtain, as well as an antipathy towards China. The film version was released in 1962, directed by John Frankenheimer and starring Frank Sinatra and Laurence Harvey with Angela Lansbury in a very chilling performance as Harvey's mother. However, events overtook the film with the assassination of J.F. Kennedy and the emergence of an era of conspiracy theories. The film was withdrawn from circulation and not released again until the late 1980s.

Jonathan Demme (*Silence of the Lambs*, *Philadelphia*) has decided to update the plot for his remake. (The previous year he had remade Stanley Donen's *Charade* as *The Trouble with Charlie*, starring Mark Wahlberg.)

The early 21st century, especially after the tragedy of September 11, 2001, as well as the Iraq War, offers a setting for a new version of *The Manchurian Candidate*. This time the focus is on brainwashing but not solely by an enemy (here, Arabs during the first Gulf War). The villains are in fact both politicians and the leaders of huge corporations. The film was released in 2004, the election year as well as the year of Fahrenheit 9/11, Michael Moore's expose of aspects of the Bush government, life in America and its paranoia as well as the influence of the corporations.

Frank Sinatra played the investigator, Marco, in the original version. Here he is played by Denzel Washington. In the original, Laurence Harvey was the soldier who was reputed to have led his group to safety – which, in fact, did not happen. This perception was the result of the brainwashing. Liev Schreiber is very good in the Harvey role as Raymond Shaw. However, the writers have changed the plot insofar as, originally, the son of the senator was the assassin. Here it is Marco. Now, Raymond Shaw, after the experience of the war, comes back to take his place in American politics, moving to a vice-presidential nomination and, with the possibility of an assassination, to be president himself.

In the background his mother is lurking. Angela Lansbury played the mother in the original film. This time it is Meryl Streep – playing the opposite of some of her kinder and more gentle roles. Just as in the first film, it is chilling when the audience realises that it is the mother who is controlling her son and ordering him to kill.

The film is rather long, pales at times in comparison with the exposes and the wild conspiracy theories that have prevailed in more recent times. However, it is a good example of stylish film-making and is well grounded in Richard Condon's novel.

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE (UK, 2004, d. Michael Radford)

The *Merchant of Venice* is one of Shakespeare's most popular plays both for performance in theatre as well as for study at school and university. It is surprising that it has not been filmed before except for television versions of theatrical productions.

The play has been adapted by its director, Michael Radford. Radford has a range of credits including the 1984 version of Orwell's 1984, *White Mischief* and the Italian tribute to Pablo Neruda and his

postman, *Il Postino*. The text has been pruned but the essentials are there. The film has also been opened out and uses many actual Venetian locations to enhance the action, the beauty, the historical sense of the film. In fact, most of the sequences look like the paintings of Titian or Tintoretto come to life.

The film also has the advantage of an unspoken prologue which dramatises the attitude of Christians towards Jews in Venice in the late 16th century. It takes its cue from many of the indications given in the text, especially in Shylock's speeches. The film vividly shows the merchants, the Rialto, their despising of the Jews, spitting on them, Antonio spitting on Shylock. It also has sequences in the synagogue with the Jews, especially Shylock, at prayer. An explanation is given about the attitudes towards the Jews at the time, the forbidding of the Jews to own any property and hence their having to depend on money-lending and usury.

The acting also carries the film well. Al Pacino, rather more quiet than some of his more strident performances, embodies Shylock. Some of his speeches, while passionate, tend in some moments towards the low-key, which is very effective. This is true of his famous speech, "If you prick us, do we not bleed..." as well as his speeches at the trial.

Jeremy Irons, of course, seems born to be the perennial martyr and brings great dignity and solemnity to the role of Antonio. The film acknowledges some of the speculation about the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio but highlights the fact that older men in Venetian society took on proteges and supported them rather than the indications of any kind of homosexual relationship. These clues are indicated in the film. Joseph Fiennes is very good as Bassanio but the surprise of the film is the American actress Lynn Collins who is a most persuasive Portia. Once again, the "quality of mercy" speech is played somewhat low-key.

The sequences of the caskets are well done, the genial arrogance of the Duke of Morocco, the foolishness of the Prince of Arragon and the romance of Bassanio.

The film is Shakespeare particularly well spoken, articulate, poetic – with strong performances and visuals to match.

LA FEMME DE GILLES (GILLE'S WIFE) (Belgium, 2004, d. Frederic Fonteyne)

Gilles' Wife is an intense drama of interpersonal relationships. It is set in the 1930s in a provincial French or Belgian town. The film lovingly re-creates the details of the look and life of the people and of the town itself. The film has an authentic feel and a sense of period.

The film was directed by Frederic Fonteyne. Fonteyne had achieved some acclaim with his 1999 film, *Un Liaison Pornographique*. It also was a story of powerful personal relationships. This time he has adapted a 1937 novel of the same name by Madeline Bourdouxhe.

The film focuses on Emmanuele Devos, the star of *Sur Mes Levres* as well as *Roi et Reine*. She has a commanding presence on-screen, a strong woman yet able to communicate vulnerability. Clovis Cornillac is Gilles.

The film seems to offer a picture of domestic life of the period, the hard work at the factory, the housewife at home, delightful twins. However, Gilles soon begins an affair with his wife's sister. So impassioned is he that he eventually tells his wife and makes her complicit in the affair. The portrait of the husband and his obsession seems particularly intense and almost exasperating for the audience. However, the response of the wife is also puzzling – making the audience ask whether it is better for a wife to erupt, condemn her husband, even oust him or, as happens here, bear the pain interiorly, try to help the husband get over his infatuation as far as possible.

It is extraordinary the length that Gilles' wife goes to in order to save the marriage. But it does take its toll on her and, as the film progresses and the behaviour of her husband becomes more erratic, seemingly repentant and then just as madly involved, it becomes too much for the wife. She kills herself – and one wonders whether the burden of such a time given to bearing the pain leads to this depression and death.

The film is interesting and entertaining in a particularly French way and demands reflection.

DELIVERY (Greece, 2004, d. Nikos Panayotopoulos)

Delivery is a film set in Athens, not in the beautiful city of tourism, not in the city of ancient monuments, but rather in the underside of the city highlighting the poorer neighbourhoods of Athens. This is the world of street people, of refugees, of people touched by some kind of madness.

A young man arrives by bus in Athens. It is not clear where he is from, whether he is Greek or whether he is Albanian as many suggest. He speaks very little. Yet he seems very much alive, wants to get work, has ambitions to be a motorcycle courier or a pizza delivery boy. After being treated in a kindly way by some people, he does get employment in a pizza restaurant. He is also befriended by an eccentric old man who attempts to sell bottles of water amid the traffic on the Athenian streets. He is able to board with him. His other relationship is with a young woman who works at the shop, who is involved with a Chinese gangster, and acts as a prostitute. Whether this man wants to save her, is in love with her is very difficult to know, especially when she suffers a breakdown and he takes her to hospital.

He himself becomes a victim of the streets, of the people that he listens to, of the younger people who mug and rob him. Again, he interiorises his rage so that at the end of the film it erupts irrationally and he kills a stranger. He is then seen, or his point of view is seen, rising over the city. Is he some kind of spirit, angel, avenger?

The film is grim in its look, in its content – but is a different angle on life in contemporary Greece.

BINJIP (THREE IRON, EMPTY HOUSE) (Korea, 2004, d. Kim Ki-duk)

Writer-director Kim Ki-Duk has become a favourite on the international cinema scene. Self-taught and proud of it, he tells a range of stories, often focusing on the violence inherent in Korean life, especially in Seoul and the cities. At other times, however, he can become quite lyrical, especially with his beautiful film Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter and Spring (2003). He has been represented at many film festivals, at Venice with The Isle, a film of sadomasochism as well as beauty. His gangster films include Bad Guy and Samaritan Girl.

This film was a complete surprise for audiences at the 2004 Venice Film Festival. The film delighted everyone and finished with the International Critics' Prize, a commendation from the SIGNIS jury, a winner of one of the Silver Lions as best director.

The film is rather beguiling, focusing on a young man who does not speak throughout the whole film. He seems to be well educated and has a very shrewd way of finding which houses are occupied or not, putting advertisements on the door locks and then occupying and squatting in houses where the ads have not been removed. However, he is absolutely obsessive and meticulous in making sure that everything is tidy, doing the washing, mending any mechanism that is not working. He cooks, cleans, watches television, listens to CDs – and then moves on to the next house.

In one house which he mistakenly thinks empty, he finds a woman who has been physically battered by her husband. He settles in and only later discovers her, running away but yet, in fascination, returning. She quietly responds to him and in fact goes with him to share in his squatting escapades. A relationship builds up between them, he offers her love and care, she becomes dependent on him. Their adventures are not always easy - a prize-fighter returns home suddenly and gives the hero quite a boxing.

When they occupy a house where they find an elderly dead man, the young man is arrested for murder. What happens afterwards is not always clear in terms of realism and fantasy. During his imprisonment what he does, especially tantalising the guards, could be construed as realistic. However, he may have died and what we see is his ghost or some kind of spirit. On his release he is able to wreak some vengeance on those who have persecuted him but goes back to the house and to the wife who is delighted and who is then able to become a more joyful person, even speaking a few words herself.

The film is symbolic, not only does the young man occupy the houses, he occupies some of the characters within them – moving from this physical world to aspects of spirituality and transcendence.

ROI ET REINE (KING AND QUEEN) (France, 2004, d. Arnaud Desplechin)

King and Queen is an ambitious drama of relationships. It was written and directed by Arnaud Desplechin, director of *Esther Kahn* and a number of French dramas.

The star of the film is Emmanuele Devos, the star of *Sur Mes Levres* as well as *Gilles' Wife*. She also appeared in *Esther Kahn* and several of Desplechin's earlier films. She dominates this film, an intense woman, facing herself, her father, her sister, her former husband and the meaning of her life. By way of contrast Mathieu Almaric is quite eccentric as the ex-husband. We first see him suffering from mental disturbance at home, resisting the attendants from the mental institution. His behaviour with a psychologist (Catherine Deneuve) is bizarre and he is confined to an institution. When he is released, his behaviour continues erratic, sometimes quite charming, especially with Emmanuele Devos's son whom she wants him to adopt as well as with his ageing parents. A scene with his father in his shop which is suddenly held up and the father surprising his son by being able to dispose of the guns of the would-be robbers deftly and quickly.

The film runs for two and a half hours, focusing on these two characters and their interactions.

What is important is the portrayal of the central character, Nora, and her relationship with her father. An academic, he has spoilt her. When she intends to marry again, she travels to prepare for the wedding but finds her father seriously ill and takes him to hospital. On his returning home, she has compassion on him because of his pain and administers an overdose of morphine. This is shocking for her sister who berates her - but she explains her loneliness in trying to cope with her life and with her father. The surprising aspect of the film and visually arresting is the appearance of her dead father, speaking a last letter to his daughter in which he condemns her, calls her selfish and hateful, loves her but also despises her. This becomes the catalyst for her final choices in terms of marriage, her future, her son and his being adopted by her ex-husband or not.

The material is long and this makes it more difficult to appreciate and to be intrigued. Nevertheless, the performances, especially of the two central characters, and of the father, mean that there is a great deal to reflect on in terms of surfaces, reality, love and hate, fidelity and commitment.

ZULU LOVE LETTER (South Africa, 2004, d. Ramadam Suleman)

The world has wondered what has happened in South Africa after the end of the apartheid regime. Has racial prejudice disappeared? What of those guilty of persecution and cruelty during the apartheid times? What of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and its effect on ordinary people?

This film tries to dramatise some of these issues and offer some answers. The focus is on a very strong woman, Thandeka, (a vibrant take-notice performance by Pamela Nombete Marimbe) a journalist who experiences her own writer's block and an emotional block in trying to deal with the events of the late 1990s as well as what happened to her during apartheid. The audience is invited to share her emotional journey, as she tries to make a solid relationship with her daughter who was born deaf after her mother had been battered during months of imprisonment. The young girl wants to relate to her mother but realises that her mother wants to save the world and has been less interested in relating lovingly to her. The journalist does take her daughter on some of the trips to find out the truth of what happened.

A particular concern is a young woman who accompanied her, who was a source for material and was arrested and killed by apartheid forces. Two white men and a black man who reappear during the film, are apprehensive about revelations to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and then try to kill murder the journalist. They succeed in killing her ex-husband and injuring her daughter. The final focus is on the mother of the young girl who was killed and as they persuade her to give evidence to the Commission.

The central character is very determined, alienating people and the audience at times, yet expressing some of the deep anguish of the period. By setting the film in modern times, amongst working

journalists, amongst the settlements outside Johannesburg as well as in the city itself and its outskirts, it seems particularly relevant.

LETTERS TO ALI (Australia, 2004, d. Clara Law)

Letters to Ali is a documentary made by Clara Law (Autumn Moon, Floating Life, Goddess of 1967) and her husband, cinematographer Eddie Fong.

The film begins with autobiographical material, showing how Clara Law and Eddie Fong migrated to Australia in the mid-90s and the effect of the new country on them, especially living in the suburbs, becoming Australian citizens and voting. The focus of the film, however, is social concern about refugees seeking political asylum in Australia and their being detained in such centres as Baxter and Port Hedland. Clara Law had read a letter by an activist in the Melbourne Age, contacted her, discovered that she was involved with her whole family in communicating with some of those in detention, especially a young boy from Afghanistan called Ali. He had been taken by the Taliban, his family had disappeared. He travelled by plane to Indonesia and then by boat and was picked up and taken to Port Hedland where he was kept in detention, sometimes isolation. Court hearings, especially concerning whether he was a minor or not, found against him, although after a long time he received a temporary permit to move to Adelaide.

The film shows a journey from Melbourne to Port Hedland. It highlights the personalities of each of the members of the family as well as of Clara Law and her husband. The journey is entertaining as a documentary, the group wending its way from Melbourne to Port Augusta, up through the Centre, through the Tanami Desert. It was the first time Clara Law had experienced any kind of camping.

The film also includes some interviews, some documentary footage from films and from the news, especially in protests outside the detention centres. No cameras are allowed inside Baxter or Port Hedland, so there was no footage of what it was like within the centres, merely the group going to the entrance and the security checks. However, the verbal commentary and the phone calls indicate how difficult it is, physically and psychologically, for so many people to experience such detention for so long.

One of the interviewees in the film is former Minister for Immigration, Ian McPhee, who explains the history of immigration to Australia and the different attitudes, especially in the 70s and early 80s. The end of the film brings an interview with Malcolm Fraser, more a statesman in his later years, speaking about justice and implicitly critical of the decisions of the Howard government and the inhumane treatment of those seeking asylum, whether they were to be permitted to remain in Australia or not.

The film is a contribution to Australian consciousness about its history, about the successive waves of migration, of the attitudes of those who migrate, settle in and are prejudiced against newcomers to the country. It is a plea for a reassessment of the conditions, the nature of security, the inhumane treatment and lack of civil rights of those interned.

CRIMINAL (US, 2004, d. Gregory Jacobs)

Criminal is a very entertaining piece of cinema. It is based on the Argentinian box-office success, Nine Queens. It keeps fairly close to the original screenplay, adapting it to contemporary Los Angeles, communicating character as well as the con trick in under ninety minutes.

The film was directed by Gregory Jacobs and co-written by him. Jacobs has acted as producer for the company headed by George Clooney and Steven Soderberg, including the episode by Soderberg in Eros.

The film boasts an excellent performance by the very versatile John C. Reilly (Magnolia, Chicago). Reilly had appeared in somewhat similar circumstances in Paul Thomas Anderson's Hard Eight, a story about a gambler and his apprentice. This time Reilly is the gambler, Diego Luna (And Your Mother Came Too, Frieda, Open Range, The Terminal) is the apprentice. The cast also includes Maggie Gyllenhaal as Reilly's sister, in charge of management at a swanky Los Angeles hotel. Scot, Peter Mullan (director of Orphans and The Magdalene Sisters as well as appearing in My Name is Joe) appears as a wealthy European businessman.

The focus of the film is the relationship between the master criminal and his apprentice, the apprentice with the touch of humanity and care about the victims, the master impervious and objective, even thinking that the victims were stupid to be conned by himself. When they get the opportunity for “the big one”, the young man, a Hispanic, becomes indispensable for the plan. However, a number of people become involved, each wanting their cut when a forgery of an American monetary document is sold to the European businessman.

If one knows the original, one can see the workings of the confidence trick taking place throughout. If one doesn't know the original film, the resolution will come as a surprise, especially of all those involved in the attempt to take down the criminal.

The film uses the Los Angeles settings, casinos, homes, streets as well as the luxury hotel to great effect. In fact, it is exemplary in covering its characterisations as well as its plot within such a brief running time.

DEMOISELLE D'HONEUR (THE BRIDESMAID) (France, 2004, d. Claude Chabrol)

The Bridesmaid is an adaptation of a Ruth Rendell novel by Claude Chabrol. Chabrol, always interested in crime stories, had adapted another Ruth Rendell story in the 1990s, *The Ceremony*.

This film is standard Chabrol. It focuses on a family, partly dysfunctional, partly loving. It also focuses on madness and crime, the bewilderment of people innocently caught up in this world of madness.

Chabrol has been making films since the late 50s, numerous films along these lines. This one is neither better nor worse than any of his others. Benoit Mangimel (who had appeared in Chabrol's *The Flowers of Evil*) is a young salesman who has to deal with his mother, a genial woman who loves cooking and pampering her son, a sister who is about to be married and a younger sister who is seemingly irresponsible. At his sister's wedding, he glimpses the bridesmaid whom he had heard about from his sister (Laura Smets) and is attracted to her. She expresses her love and her sense of destiny for him. As time goes on, we realise before he does that she is obsessive and that he is in some kind of danger. This, of course, is what happens, to his dismay and, sometimes, to his shock.

Laura Smets is interesting as the rather bewildering bridesmaid who lives a strange narcissistic life and who is revealed to be quite mad. By contrast, Aurore Clement is a picture of commonsense as the hero's mother, concerned about her daughters, wondering whether she should marry again.

Chabrol has always been able to offer civilised entertainments, particularly French entertainments with insight into the French middle class.

5 x 2 (CINQU FOIS DEUX: FIVE BY TWO) (France, 2004, d. Francois Ozon)

Since 1999, Francois Ozon has become a world-class director with a world-wide reputation. In 1999 he made a small film, *Criminal Lovers*, which was in competition in Venice. He followed that with his own French adaptation of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Water Drops on Burning Rocks*. In 2001 he made the striking psychological drama *Under the Sand* with Charlotte Rampling, following it with a musical starring eight of France's leading actresses including Catherine Deneuve, Danielle Darrieux, Emmanuele Beart, Isabelle Huppert, Ludovine Sagnier, and followed it with a different kind of film, *The Swimming Pool*, a murder mystery and psychological thriller with Charlotte Rampling and Ludovine Sagnier. With *5 x 2* he again changes course, although his focus is, as in most of his films, on his female characters.

One of the striking features of *5 x 2* is its structure. It begins at the end, so to speak, with divorce proceedings. As it moves backwards in time, it covers five significant moments in the lives of the two central characters.

This particular technique was used in the 1980s by playwright Harold Pinter in his play and the film version of *Betrayal*. It means then that the response of the audience is to the moment in hand on-screen knowing where it will lead while continually moving back to the beginning of the relationship.

Ozon is particularly well served in this film by his leading lady, Valeria Bruni-Tedeschi. Valeria Bruni-Tedeschi is one of France's most distinguished actresses and has appeared in films for most of the significant French directors. She also wrote and directed her own film in 2003, *It's Easier for a Camel*. The husband in the film is played by Stephane Freiss. The veteran couple Francoise Fabian and Michael Lonsdale appear as the heroine's parents.

The moments that the film focuses on are the divorce and its aftermath (a bizarre sexual encounter which highlights brutality and augurs badly for the future), a domestic scene of guests for dinner including the gay brother of the husband, the sequence of the birth of their child where the mother goes into labour and is supported by her parents (cantankerously arguing with each other) and the husband is not able to face up to the reality of the birth, the joy of the wedding sequence and her strange experience when the wife cannot sleep and wanders out to watch the guests, including her parents, still dancing and where she encounters an American who makes advances towards her and, finally, the beginning of the relationship where the couple meet on a resort beach and swim out at the end of the film towards...

While the structure has been used by Pinter, other directors are entitled to try their hand at this method and Ozon has been very successful.

TOUT EN HIVER SANS FEU (Switzerland, 2004, d. Greg Zglinski)

If one had asked the members of the jury SIGNIS during the Venice Film Festival, 2004, ten minutes into the film whether they thought it had a chance for any award, the response would have been a definite "No". It opens bleakly with Swiss mountains, Swiss snow, falling trees, workers in the forests and suggestions that it will be another one of those very serious portraits of isolated people and their problems.

In a way, this is still the case. However, the humanity of the writing and the direction soon come through and the audience is emotionally affected by the characters and their difficulties. There is nothing particularly new, just the way that the director has skilfully drawn his characters and drawn the audience into empathy with them.

At the opening of the film, a couple has suffered the tragic loss of their only daughter, five years old, in a fire in their barn which has also destroyed the herd and buildings of their farm outside the town. The wife is not coping at all and has to go into an institution and undergo therapy to recover some kind of equilibrium. The husband, a stoic man, tries to manage on the farm but is unable to pay his way and relies on an old school friend to get a job in a factory.

This is where the film moves in an unexpected direction. A number of those working and holding managing positions in the factory are Kosovan refugees. When the man hears the story of the Kosovans, especially that of the cook to whom he is attracted and her six year search for her presumably dead husband, some of his own problems become insignificant. While he is infatuated with this young woman and befriended by her rather genial brother and invited to Kosovan celebrations, he is still devoted to his wife and very much concerned about how she is coping. His wife is influenced by her rather bitter sister who is quite antagonistic to her sister's husband.

Not a great deal happens in terms of plot. There is an explanation of character, there is an insight into vulnerability, into strengths and weaknesses of human nature – and the possibility of some kind of mutual understanding and the possibilities for reconciliation. While there might not be much fire and heat during the winter, there is a great deal of humanity which offers some hope for warmth in the spring.

PALINDROMES (US, 2004, d. Todd Solondz)

Palindromes is another film from the bizarre imagination of writer-director Todd Solondz. In the mid-90s Solondz was introduced with *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, a portrait of a dysfunctional family and a young adolescent girl and her ambitions. He followed it with the excellent *Happiness*, a very demanding film with a whole range of themes, especially of a sexual nature. He also made *Storytelling*.

This film is not quite as good as the previous films. Perhaps it had a small budget and was made in something of a rush. However, it indicates enough of Solondz's themes to take its place in his canon of movies.

He uses the title of the film both for the names of some of the characters, especially his central character Aviva, but also for the structure of the film. It ends where it began – after a journey from the east coast of the United States into the Midwest and back again.

One of the interesting aspects of the film and Solondz's imagination is that he has a different actress to play Aviva in all the different sections of the film. It is a surprise to find at first that she is a young black child who then changes into a white teenager. However, the late-teenage Aviva is a very large black girl, with a very polite and sweet soft voice. At the end of the film, as a way of reviewing our understanding of Aviva, he shows a collage of each of the actresses who portrays her. (Of significance, one of the adult Avivas is a cameo by Jennifer Jason Leigh.)

The film is also structured in chapters with the names of various characters shown and illustrated with an exaggerated birthday card colour and look. These chapters are the steps on the journey of Aviva, especially with her desire to be pregnant, her attempts to achieve this with a rather sex-preoccupied young man, the pressure on her from her ambitious mother to have an abortion, the abortion and its consequences with her running away from home, finding refuge with Mama Sunshine and a whole household full of handicapped people. The film also highlights the issue of abortion – the pressure on the adolescent by a mother who had an abortion herself and takes this as the norm. It shows the abortion clinic with the protesters outside, it also shows the doctor and the staff performing the abortion – and the aftermath with Mama Sunshine's husband being a vigilante and hiring people to kill the doctor. The irony of this is that the killer is the same man, the driver who picked up Aviva on the way.

The film comes to some kind of resolution – especially with the desire of Aviva to have children, not knowing that, because of the abortion and the subsequent operation and the hysterectomy, she is unable to become pregnant. There is a good cast including Ellen Barkin as her dominant mother and Richard Masur as the father.

CAFÉ LUMIERE (Taiwan/Japan, 2004, d. Hou Hsiao-Hsien)

Café Lumiere was made by Taiwanese director Hou Hsiao-Hsien (Flowers of Shanghai, Millennium Mambo). Having made many films in Taiwan and examining Taiwanese society and history, he has now gone to Japan and has decided to make a tribute to the celebrated director Ozu (whose centenary of birth occurred in 2003).

The director takes themes dear to Ozu (Tokyo Story was the best-known of his films) and offers a portrait of a young Japanese woman, her relationship with a Taiwanese student, her friendship with a bookseller in Tokyo, her relationship with her parents. The cinematic style is borrowed from Ozu and is meant as a homage to him. There are long focuses on particular characters, a gentleness in presenting the action as well as the interpretation of character.

The film is entertaining in itself, a reminder of the skills of Ozu in presenting ordinary Japanese life and some of its transcendent dimensions. However, the film is ultimately quite slight in its characterisation while strong in its impact.

CHIAVI DI CASA (THE HOUSE KEYS) (Italy, 2004, d. Gianni Amelio)

This is a very moving film by Italian director Gianni Amelio (best known for the political thriller Open Doors, and for the humanity Ladri di Bambini and Lamerica).

Andrea Rossi, a disabled teenager, portrays Paolo, a young boy hurt during a difficult birth and growing up intelligent but disabled. His father, played by Kim Rossi Stuart, could not bear his presence after birth. At this juncture of his life and fifteen years later, he now wants to see his son again and renew (or, really begin) the relationship.

The film takes place mainly in Berlin where the couple go for hospital tests. The father wants to bond with his son but finds the tests very difficult as well as some of the behaviour of his son. He is helped by a parent who has been looking after a disabled daughter for twenty years. She is played by Charlotte Rampling in a most sympathetic performance.

The film concludes open-endedly – the father reconciled with his son, the son seeming to accept his father – but, in a crisis on a highway, the boy reverts to somewhat autistic behaviour, leaving his father weeping and the audience wondering how the relationship will continue.

STEAM BOY (Japan, 2004, d. Katsuhiro Otomo)

Steam Boy shows how Japanese animation has developed at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. Director Katsuhiro Otomo had previously done a lot of work with comic strips as well as animated features. He is best known for his 1988 feature, Akira.

Steam Boy is an extraordinarily ambitious project. The animation is vivid and detailed. The characters are well drawn, well developed psychologically. There are extraordinary action sequences including a runaway train and an abduction via a balloon. There is a huge battle between armed forces, ships and tanks, robotic soldiers at the London Exhibition of 1866.

The director was interested in the scientific background of the film, he and his team visiting England to study the science museums as well as the history of the development of steam engines in Britain. This is acknowledged in the inclusion of Robert Stevenson and his steam trains as part of the action. The film opens with a huge experimental plant in Alaska and a devastating accident. The action moves to England, with glimpses of Manchester (again in great detail of houses, streets and mills) and then moves to London itself and the Great Exhibition. The director was also interested in the scientific background, the possibilities of experiment both for serving people as well as for warfare and arms development. Instead of doing a science fiction feature set in the future, he decided that audiences would understand the development of science by his going back into this historical period. There are evil characters, mad scientists as well as good scientists – but the focus is on a young boy, Ray Steam, who does experiments on his own but wants to vindicate his father and grandfather. There are also sinister American interests in the background, especially in selling international arms.

The film was made in 2004 and released at the same time as another extraordinary Japanese animation feature, The Mysterious Castle of Hull.

EROS (US/Italy, 2004, d. Wong Kar Wai, Steven Soderbergh, Michelangelo Antonioni)

Eros is a compendium movie, consisting of three short stories. There is opening animation done by Lorenzo Mattotti, which recurs between the episodes. It is a focus on the themes of erotic relationships and love. There is also a theme song, by Caetano Veloso, entitled “Antonioni’s Love”, which is also sung before each story.

The best of the stories is the first, that by Wong Kah Wei (In the Mood for Love, 2006, Happy Together). It is a chamber piece, set in Hong Kong in 1963. It features Gong Li (the lead in so many of Zhang Yimou’s features of the 1990s, Raise the Red Lantern, The Story of Qiu Ju). She works with Chang Keng in this film and portrays a prostitute who has several wealthy patrons. He is her tailor. The film is set in lush hotel rooms as well as in the tailor’s workplace. The film develops the relationship between the two, her arrogance and dominance, her seductive use of the tailor for her own wishes, her downfall – as well as his growing obsession and continued fidelity to her. The film was photographed by Christopher Doyle, who photographed so many of Wong Kah Wei’s films as well as Philip Noyce’s Rabbit-Proof Fence and The Quiet American. The film is very moving, has excellent performances and an adult treatment of themes.

The second story is an amusing one by Steven Soderbergh (Sex, Lies and Videotape, Solaris, Ocean’s Eleven and Ocean’s Twelve). It is in both black and white and colour, the black and white section being a therapy session where executive Robert Downey Jr is talking about his dreams to therapist, Alan Arkin, who prefers to be looking at people outside the window and making paper planes to alert them to what he wants to communicate. There is a wry comedy in the characterisation of the two men

as well as their interaction - which is capped off by the revelation that Arkin also plays Downey's boss in the real life sequences and is the subject of humour with his false toupee.

The third story is by veteran Michelangelo Antonioni, so much admired in the 1960s with such films as *L'Avventura*, *La Notte*, *Blow Up*. This is a story of a brittle marriage – however, the stilted acting does not help audience sympathise with or understand the bickering couple. When they see a young woman riding on the beach on a horse, the husband is tempted and goes to her tower house and has a sexual encounter with her. She later lies on the beach and encounters the wife. The film is open in its depiction of sexuality and nudity – and, if Antonioni's name was not on the film, it could be mistaken for an exploitation film, a kind of soft-core porn short story by a dirty old man. It is a pity to see this as one of the last films by Antonioni, no matter how worthy his intentions of portraying a brittle marriage and of lust.

L'AMORE RETROVATO (Italy, 2004, d. Carlo Mazucci)

L'Amore Retrovato is a very old-fashioned kind of film. It is set in 1936, the time of fascism in Italy (although fascist pressure does not appear explicitly in the film except for the invasion of Abyssinia by Mussolini in 1936 and the men being called up for active service). Instead, the film focuses on ordinary people, relationships, an affair.

Stefano Accorsi, who was appearing in many Italian films at the beginning of the 21st century, is a banker who encounters a young woman with whom he had a relationship in the past. She responds tentatively, especially when he does not recognise her on the train, then gives herself fully to the affair. She is played by Maya Sansa (*Good Morning Night*) and has a very vibrant screen presence which means that audiences identify more with her than with Accorsi.

Audiences do not see Accorsi's wife and child until quite late in the film and then only from the point of view of the woman, sympathy being with the two having their affair. There are echoes of *Brief Encounter* with so much of their meeting happening at railway stations and on trains. The colour photography is quite lush, the Tuscan and Ligurian coast, the country towns. There is also an evocative atmosphere of the period – just before the outbreak of World War II. A postscript set in 1945 shows the devastation experienced during the war, the hunger and poverty, people travelling on trains in open cattle trucks, people about to try to rehabilitate themselves and their lives.

For those who do not like this kind of old-fashioned film, it is too much of a lush and sentimental romance. On the other hand, this means that it could well have great appeal to a popular audience.

A HOME AT THE END OF THE WORLD (US, 2004, d. Michael Mayers)

A Home at the End of the World is based on a novel by Michael Cunningham, best known for writing *The Hours*. He has adapted his novel for the screen.

The film is set in Cleveland, Ohio, in the late 60s and the early to mid-70s and then makes a transition to New York City in the 80s. It is a period of openness, drug experimentation, sexual freedom, even in cities in the Midwest.

The film focuses on an average family, living in Cleveland. However, it is touched by tragedies. The story is about two young boys. Erik Smith is very good as the young Bobby, who befriends the rather ordinary-looking, braces on teeth, Jonathan. They become friends, Bobby spending a lot of time at Jonathan's home, especially in the company of his mother, played by Sissy Spacek.

As time goes on, Jonathan goes to New York City to study while Bobby stays as a baker in Cleveland. Ultimately, he too has to go to New York City.

A particular theme of the film is sexuality, especially the relationship between the two boys. It might seem at first that it is simply sexual experimentation between the two. As it emerges, both have a homosexual orientation, Jonathan (Dallas Roberts) living the life of the gay culture of New York City and ultimately contracting AIDS (although this theme is quietly underplayed). Bobby (Colin Farrell) is not sure of his identity and is challenged when their flatmate Robin Wright Penn wants to have a child

by him. His experience is bisexual: loving the young woman, loving the child, but devoted to Jonathan.

The film is very sympathetic with its characters and has a very interesting performance by Colin Farrell, playing rather against type as a quiet and uncertain young man. (He went on to portray Alexander the Great after this film.) Robin Wright-Penn gives a vivacious performance as the eccentric young woman. Sissy Spacek is very sympathetic as the mother and has a number of wise contributions to make.

The film is modest, with a short running time, yet in many of its moments it is very touching.

THE THREE ROOMS OF MELANCHOLIA (Finland, 2004, d. Pirjo Honkasalo)

The Three Rooms of Melancholia is a documentary feature. It is spoken in Russian, Chechen, Arabic and Finnish. The director is Finnish, and has made a number of documentaries. She decided to go to Russia and Chechnya to film stories about the conflict between the republic trying to rebel and Russia.

Her first room of melancholia (Longing) is set in a school set up just outside St Petersburg. Established by President Putin, it is for young (very young) orphans who are to do military training. The focus is on discipline, a severe kind of life for young boys. Several of them are introduced by name and their backgrounds given. However, at the core of the story is the focus of the animosity of the orphans – and its being geared towards Chechnya and Chechen rebels.

The second room of melancholia is in Grozny itself and is filmed in black and white (Breathing). The scenes of devastation of apartment blocks, street by street, in Grozny are both dismaying and alarming. Western audiences know about the destruction in Chechnya but probably have not had the opportunity to spend some time actually contemplating the ruins, the consequent difficult way of life, the poverty of the survivors, their attitude towards the brutality of the Russian soldiers.

This is taken up in the third room of melancholia, set in the neighbouring small republic of Ingushetia (Remembering). The contrast between the rolling hills with the shepherds and the distant mountains of the Caucasus, form a contrast with the ruins of Grozny even though this is only four kilometres from the Chechen border. The film focuses on a woman, who had been an orphan herself, who now gathers together orphans in Grozny, brings them to a shelter and helps them find a new way of life. Since Chechnya is an Islamic republic, there is an emphasis on the mosque, on the men praying, on the role of religion for both men and women and, especially, in the training of the children.

The director has drawn on Scandinavian technical advice and help for her putting the film together. It screened at the Venice Film Festival during the very time when the Chechen rebels took the hostages at the school at Beslan with a death toll of over 300 people, including many of the children. It could not have been more topical.

PROMISED LAND (Israel, 2004, d. Amos Gitai)

Israeli director, Amos Gitai, has made a number of documentaries over the years. While he has a doctorate in architecture, he has chosen to focus in more recent years on film-making and has moved from documentaries to features and fiction.

He has shown life in contemporary Israel (Aldila), he has gone back to 1948 and shown the origins of the state of Israel as well as the plight of the Palestinians (Kedma). This time he has strong social criticism of Israel as well as the Palestinians and the various groups, like the Russian Mafia, who are manipulating refugees, especially in the exploitation of the white slave trade.

The film opens in the Sinai Desert, the Bedouin conducting a group of women refugees to Israel (and reminding the audiences that with all the races and empires that have come and gone, they are still there). What is alarming in the desert is a sudden auction, taking place in the dark, where the exploiters arrive, brutally examine the women and bid for them. French actress Anne Parillaud is frightening as the woman conducting the auction. It is one of those shocking sequences that will remain in the mind and memory, that women can do this kind of thing to one another. In the background are the Russian criminals who are going to supply Israeli brothels with these women.

In a transition to the resort town of Eilat, the women are further humiliated, stripped naked and hosed like cattle. They are then dressed, made up – with another significant cameo by German actress Hanna Schygulla. At this time there are some moments of tenderness, especially for some of the women who are frightened and regret their choices.

The film then takes a journey to Haifa where several of the women are placed for work in the hotel Promised Land (with its deceptive biblical overtones and the title for the film). Here the interest of the film is in an English woman as well as a woman from Estonia – with evocative memories of a choir singing in an Estonian Orthodox church, the psalms of blessings on Israel. The young woman is played by Diana Bespechni and the English woman by Rosamund Pike (*Die Another Day*, *Pride and Prejudice*). It is only by an act of terrorism, a bomb exploding near the hotel, that the two women are able to escape.

The film is made with much hand-held camera work, often in the dark, resembling the techniques of so many of the contemporary reality television programs. It is a draining experience, often ugly – but an alert to this kind of evil in the contemporary world.

SAIMIR (Italy, 2004, d. Francesco Munzi)

While Saimir tells a familiar enough story, especially about the difficulties for political refugees, it is done with a sense of urgency and humanity. The refugees are from Albania, travelling by night to the east coast of Italy. It shows the Albanian communities established in some of the Italian towns, their banding together for support, their clubs, the young gangs who specialise in burglary of homes as well as other crooked deals. It does not paint a sympathetic picture of so many of the refugees – wanting to be involved in crime or forced into it. It also presumes on the background of eastern Europe where, for so many decades, people took stealing for granted in order to be able to better themselves or to survive.

The film focuses on a young lad, Saimir (Mischel Manoku) who assists his father Edmund (Xhevdet Feri, a classical Albanian theatre actor). They receive the refugees, help distribute them. No questions are asked and money is taken. The father, meanwhile, wants to marry an Italian woman but his son resents this because of the memory of his own mother.

Saimir is assimilating into Italy, is attracted to a young girl at the beach, goes out with her but frightens her by showing her the place where stolen goods are stashed and offering her an expensive necklace. She runs away, he goes to the school and shouts abuse at her – later realising that his behaviour is unacceptable. When he sees a young teenager being brought into the country as a prostitute, he reacts angrily and is bashed. His father tries to rescue him – leaving his wedding celebration to save his son. It is too late. The boy wants to take some revenge on all those who are destroying his life and perpetrating this evil. He reports them to the police.

The film is one of many films of the early 21st century about migrants from eastern Europe. Italy itself produced Gianni Amelio's *Lamerica* in 1994, highlighting the problems of refugees. Ten years later Saimir is continuing the story.

LAND OF PLENTY (US, 2004, d. Wim Wenders)

German director Wim Wenders has had a varied career for almost forty years. Beginning in his native Germany, he made a number of small-budget black and white features. He also made a version of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* as well as an epic road movie, *Kings of the Road*. He then went more up-market with *The American Friend* and moved to the United States and made such films as *Hammett*. He reached his peak in the mid-80s with the award-winning *Paris Texas* as well as the popular cult film, *Wings of Desire*. His career during the 90s was mixed, both in Europe and in the United States. Here is something of a return to his earlier form.

The film was made in sixteen days plus a five-days' trip across the United States. It is a response to the atmosphere in the United States after September 11, 2001. The film has two central characters: one a Vietnam veteran who probably experienced poisoning, has come home convinced that America won in Vietnam, is paranoid about terrorists and works as a security guard. He has also cut himself off from his family. The other character is his niece, daughter of missionaries who worked in Africa, who is

returning home to the United States after ten years, having worked in Israel and with the Palestinians. She is a devout Christian, not afraid to pray openly. She works in a refuge in Los Angeles, Bread of Life, allegedly in the hunger capital of the United States.

The film shows a drive-by killing of a man from Pakistan whom the security officer suspects of being a terrorist but who is known to the young girl who seeks out his brother and finds out the very ordinary truth about this vagrant man on the streets.

The film then shows the challenge between people of faith in human nature, faith in God and those who are caught up in the paranoia of the war on terrorism.

John Diehl, veteran of many films, is excellent as the security officer. Michelle Williams is the young woman. There is a good supporting cast. The film is interestingly shot, digital camera work, the contemporary musical score, finishing with a Leonard Cohen song.

The film was released in the same year as Michael Moore's Fahrenheit 911. It was the year for the election of the American president – and these films contributed to American consciousness about what had happened during the years of the George W. Bush administration.

A LOVE SONG FOR BOBBY LONG (US, 2004, d. Shainee Gabel)

This is one of those films that audiences would like to be better than it seems. It will possibly be remembered for John Travolta's white hair and his portrayal of an alcoholic former literary professor.

The film is set in New Orleans, initially showing a shuffling Travolta going to a funeral. It intercuts with Scarlett Johansson as a young woman living in Florida. The funeral is that of her mother. When she comes to New Orleans and meets Bobby Long (Travolta) and the other flatmate, Gabriel Macht, in her mother's house, there is a set-up for conflict.

As might be expected, after the attempts made by the men to get rid of her, they take an interest in her studies, enable her to go to school, and bonds are created between them. The film is quite genial in its way although Travolta's character originally displays quite some meanmindedness towards the young girl.

There are constant references to the works of Flannery O'Connor, especially *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, and it would seem that the characters are meant to be the same kind of fringe characters as in O'Connor's novel. There is a whole lot of drinking, a whole lot of music as these characters and their friends on the edge of society get together to eat, tell stories, play music, celebrate. However, there is a tragic background to the whole story which is gradually revealed, the beginning of Bobby Long's downfall from being a celebrated professor to an alcoholic bum.

There is a surprise at the end (perhaps not so surprising) with some delayed feelgood sentiment.

MAR ADENTRO (Spain, 2004, d. Alejandro Amenabar)

Spanish director Alejandro Amenabar is well known for his successful films, *Open Your Eyes* (remade in the US by Cameron Crowe as *Vanilla Sky*) and the Nicole Kidman vehicle, *The Others*.

This time he has written and directed a film based on a true story, an accident in 1968 where a young man dived into a shallow pool, broke his neck and lived for the next twenty-eight years as a quadriplegic. His name was Ramon San Pedro and his autobiography was published along with his poetry.

The film is also a case of special pleading for assisted suicide. It focuses on an association for assisted suicide, its hiring of lawyers to build a case to present to the Spanish courts. However, the application is rejected and assisted suicide remains an offence and those who are involved in any way are considered criminals.

The film boasts an extraordinary performance by Javier Bardem. In his mid-thirties, he is required to act age fifty-five for most of the film, elderly, thinning hair, lying in his bed as a quadriplegic.

However, he is able to bring the character to life, show the vitality of the man (despite his continued assertion that he wants to die). There are some flashbacks to the accident as well as a beautiful fantasy sequence where he gets out of bed and flies over the Spanish countryside to the music of "Nessun Dorma".

The film is classic in its style, beautifully photographed, beautiful location scenery. It is also populated by a gallery of characters who would be at home in a 19th century novel: the victim himself, the middle-class lawyer suffering from a degenerative disease who takes on his case, a Mother Earth type of woman who works at the local cannery, wants to do good, becomes his friend, bringing her children and who, eventually, assists him in his death. He has been cared for for many years by a most patient sister-in-law, a portrait of a good woman, and his older brother who strongly disapproves of his wanting to take his life. There is also the son of the family, still at school, a kind of surrogate son to the quadriplegic. There is also Ramon's father with whom the young man clashes.

This is a beautiful, classical and often lyrical film to watch. It can be seen as a case study. However, the tone is often propaganda-like in its presentation of the plea for legislation to be changed and the emotional reasons for assisting someone incapacitated to die. This is quite clear in a final scene where Ramon, the quadriplegic, drinks cyanide and dies. In the process of taking the drink, he speaks to a video to explain once again what he is doing and why. He has spent 28 years as a quadriplegic, entirely dependent on others. He still has vitality and has a strong capacity for friendship and encouraging others to life. However, he feels that this quadriplegic kind of life lacks dignity. This, of course, is debatable but cannot be simplistically dismissed because we do not agree with it. The film's screenplay, in fact, provides characters who do not agree with the assisted suicide, especially his brother.

Journalistic headlines which proclaimed that the subject of the film was euthanasia were not entirely accurate. *Mar Adentro* is not concerned with euthanasia explicitly. Its focus is on 'assisted suicide', which is not the same thing. Moral discussion is never effective when it is merely based on headlines which may or may not be correct.

There are two responses to material with which we do not agree on moral terms. One is polemic which merely repeats strongly the views that are already held. The other is dialogue, a listening to an opposing point of view with respect to see what further light is thrown on the issue in order to find some meeting of hearts and minds.

Javier Bardem won the Best Actor award at the 2004 Venice Film Festival.

I CAN SEE IT IN YOUR EYES (Italy, 2004, d. Valia Santella)

I Can See It In Your Eyes is a brief Italian drama, centred on a very dominating mother, her rather repressed daughter and her granddaughter. The film is very much a woman's film and is directed by first-time director Valia Santella.

The film offers a portrait of a singer who dominates her family, is extraordinarily self-centred. She is played by veteran Italian actress Stefania Sandrelli who has appeared toplining Italian films since the early 60s. She is perfectly convincing in the role. By contrast Teresa Saponangelo offers a more modest screen presence. The catalyst for further interaction between mother and daughter is when the mother takes the little girl, who also suffers from asthma and is in danger of an attack, on what she sees as a liberating trip, telling her not to worry about illness and being pampered by her mother.

When the girl has an attack, it is an opportunity for the mother to come to some kind of realisation of her impact in the family, the aftermath of an operation on her throat which could destroy her singing career, accepting her daughter.

While the performances are strong, the material is that of a television movie.

A LESS WORSE WORLD (Argentina, 2004, d. Alejandro Agresti)

This is an Argentinian film directed by Alejandro Agresti, a director who spends much of his time in Europe but has a strong eye for life in Argentina. His films include Secret Wedding, Wind With The Gone, Valentin.

While the film is set at the beginning of the 21st century, it evokes memories of the Time of the Generals as well as of the Falklands War. A woman who thought her husband had died, discovered that he is still alive and has never seen his daughter. She and her two daughters travel south from Buenos Aires to find the father. In the meantime, in the aftermath of the war where he disappeared, he has set up a life as a baker in the provincial town, well liked by everyone.

The film evokes the atmosphere of the towns of Argentina, life in the towns and on the road. It also is a fine character study of the central characters as well as of a number of supporting people. The film also highlights the tensions between mother and daughter, the daughter angry with her mother's overprotectiveness, not having felt the need for a father and discovering that she had one, trying to reconcile with him.

The dialogue offers a great deal of reflection on the nature of family but also invites its audiences to reflect on the long-term consequences of a war like that with Britain on the Falklands, the effect on the soldiers and their subsequent lives and the repercussions for families.

THROW, LET IT GO DOWN (Hong Kong, 2004, d. Johnny To)

This is a Johnny To film, To being a veteran director from the Hong Kong industry with a range of films like the martial arts myths of the Heroic Three to the police thriller Like Breaking News.

This is a martial arts film, focusing on a hero who is about to go blind but who wants to defeat any opponent in combat before he loses his sight. The other central character is a former champion who is a gambler, a victim of people manipulating his life and turning him into an alcoholic. The third character is a young woman, a very irritating and self-centred young woman who wants a job as a singer in a nightclub with the aim of going to Japan to appear in the movies. The lives of the three intertwine, especially in connection with another martial arts champion who is also linked with the gangster world of Hong Kong.

The film is a character study, highlighting the interactions between the three central characters. The martial arts fights are presented with vitality – and to the accompaniment of some Chinese songs.

Not as easily accessible for western audiences as other films from Hong Kong and other films by Johnny To.

MYSTERIOUS SKIN (US, 2004, d. Gregg Araki)

Mysterious Skin is a surprising film from writer-director, Gregg Araki. For more than a decade he produced many B-budget films like Splendour, Nowhere, The Doom Generation, The Living End. His films were noted for sexual themes, drug taking. He also had a homosexual focus in many of his stories. They were rough, full of coarse language, rough and ready in both form and content.

With Mysterious Skin, he has adapted a novel by Scott Heim which appeared in 1995. Its focus is on paedophilia, the sexual abuse of young boys. The novel came out in 1995 when charges were beginning to surface in various organisations, especially the churches.

This film focuses on families and the paedophile is the baseball coach. The setting is the late 1980s, early 1990s.

The film is strong in its portrayal of sexual abuse. However, Araki keeps a balance between the prurient and showing the dramatic and dire impact of sexual abuse. While some audiences may find it disturbing, it is a necessary disturbance, learning to understand the reality of paedophilia, the psychology of the abuser, the long-lasting effects of the experience on the abused.

The film focuses on two very different boys. As teenagers they are portrayed by Joseph Gordon Levitt and by Brady Corbett. Levitt portrays a young hustler. Corbett portrays an introverted young man who

has blocked out the abuse and begins to think that the missing hours of his life were caused by his being abducted by aliens. By the end of the film, when the two adolescents come together, they go to the house where the abuse took place and the hustler explains to the other boy what actually happened. This is a harrowing experience as the young man realises what has happened to him, the memories come back. This is the moment when the film ends, leaving the future for the two boys and a sense of wonder and anticipation as well as alarm for the audience.

The film also has a good supporting cast with Michelle Trachtenberg (Harriet the Spy, television's Buffy the Vampire Slayer) as the best friend of the hustler. Jeff Licon is a good friend to both of the boys. Bill Sage does well in the unenviable role of the coach. Elizabeth Shue appears as the mother of the hustler while Lisa Long and Chris Malkey are the parents of the disturbed boy. Billy Drago and Richard Riehle appear as clients of the hustler.

After a long apprenticeship in his own almost private kind of films, Araki has made a significant contribution to American movies and to an exploration of serious themes.

PS (US, 2004, d. Dylan Kidd)

Dylan Kidd made a strong impression with his first feature, Roger Dodger with Campbell Scott. It was a portrait of a callous young man, ambitious, careless in his relationships, guiding his nephew through a night on the town in New York City. This film is quite different and was adapted from the novel with its co-writer, Helen Schulman.

The film is a New York story, much of it being set at Columbia University in the Arts Department. Laura Linney is on-screen most of the time as the administrator of admissions to the department. Linney has proved to be an excellent actress during the late 90s and the early decade of the 21st century with such films as Primal Fear, The Truman Show, House of Mirth and, especially, her role in You Can Count on Me.

She can portray strong and she can portray vulnerable. The cast is strong with Gabriel Byrne playing her estranged husband. When she gets an application from a young student calling himself F. Scott Feinstadt, she recalls a relationship she had twenty years earlier with a young man of that name – who went on to have a relationship with her best friend and was killed in a car accident. She has vague feelings that this student might be the same man come back. However, the film does not pursue this ghostly line at any length, just suggesting it as a possibility.

Topher Grace (The Mona Lisa Smile) is the young man and matches the acting with Laura Linney. Marcia Gay Harden is her best friend, Paul Rudd is her ex-addict brother, Lois Smith her mother.

The film focuses on a lonely professional woman, still loving her husband, shocked to find that he is a sex addict, a moving scene where he reveals this to his wife. In her loneliness, she dwells on the memories of the past and clutches at a relationship with the young man. Ultimately, it can go nowhere and she is in danger of alienating the student who has great potential as an artist. She speaks with her mother, with her brother, with her husband, with her best friend – and from that advice she is able to make some decisions as to what her future must be.

The film is direct in its presentation, does not raise suspense about the sexual relationship, introducing it almost immediately – with the result that the audience has to think about what it means rather than anticipating when it will come to be. This is more mature writing and direction and offers more serious food for reflection about commitment, fidelity and love.

AGNES AND HIS BROTHERS (Germany, 2004, d. Oskar Roehler)

A film with a provocative title. Agnes is, of course, a transsexual. The film opens with Agnes talking to a television interviewer and explains her role in her family as well as the significance of her two older brothers. In fact, the story of this film is about the three brothers, their own lives, inadequacies (especially sexual) and their crossed paths, especially with their father.

The film was directed by Oskar Roehler, a director of provocative films. He has an excellent cast, Martin Weiss being persuasive as Agnes, carrying off very difficult scenes, portraying the transsexual

meeting with his wife and son (very touchingly done) as well as in difficult relationships, discovering illness, wanting to be reunited with a black American musician whom he had met in New York during the time of the sex change. Once again, what could have been a rather sleazy and/or sensational sequence also becomes touching.

Moritz Bleibtreu (Run Lola Run, The Experiment) is a librarian with sex addiction who actually goes to sex addiction programs. The film shows the anguish that he experiences in his own private life, in trying to relate to girls. It is only when he goes to a pornographic film studio and meets a porn star with whom he relates well on a personal level that he sees some future for himself.

By contrast Herbert Knaup is a grim politician who has alienated his sons and antagonised his long-suffering wife. He has problems of sexuality as well as of power and authority. His wife is portrayed by Katja Riemann (who had just won the award at the Venice Film Festival 2003 for best actress in Rosenstrasse).

The director declares that this picture of the three brothers is symbolic of Germany at the beginning of the 21st century, as society, as preoccupied with mundane, mercenary, ambitious and power struggles as well as sexual identity. In some ways it is bizarre – but it also has many moving moments.

YESTERDAY (South Africa, 2003, d. Darrell Roodt)

Yesterday was produced by Home Box Office Films in association with South African companies including the Nelson Mandela Foundation. It was written and directed by Darrell James Roodt, the veteran South African director who made a number of films even under the apartheid rule but who emerged in the 1990s with such films on African themes as Serafina as well as a new version of Alan Paton's Cry the Beloved Country with James Earl Jones and Richard Harris. He had a brief stay in Hollywood making the minor crime comedy Fatherhood with Patrick Swayze.

This film is a focus on contemporary South Africa but with memories of the apartheid years. It is quite poignant in its presentation of a mother living in a Zulu village, walking all the way to the hospital with her daughter (whom she calls Beauty) trying to get a visit to the doctor but failing each week and having to return.

The surprise of the film – although it should not be a surprise – is that she is found to be HIV-positive. Her husband is away working in Johannesburg and, as with so many workers in South Africa, he has contracted the disease from a prostitute partner. He returns home to die, to the suspicion of the villagers except the kindhearted teacher who tries to explain the situation, especially to the women. He is cared for by his wife who even builds her own house for him, kind of his own private hospital where she moves him and where he dies.

The film shows the continued difficulties for black Africans, even after the demise of apartheid. There are the harsh traditions in the towns, the lack of water and hygiene, the lack of medical opportunities – but it finishes with the hope of solid education for the next generation.

Roodt is not always a subtle film-maker, relying on more direct techniques, unfussed, even sentimental. He would not be considered in any way a stylish director – but the impact of his films comes especially from his content and from the strong performances he gets from his cast, especially Leleti Khumalo as the heroine whose name is symbolically, Yesterday.

SIGNIS FILM REVIEWS

October 2004

ALFIE

ALIEN VS PREDATOR

BOBBY JONES – STROKE OF GENIUS

BRIDE & PREJUDICE
 CELLULAR
 CLEARING, The
 COFFEE AND CIGARETTES
 CORPORATION, The
 EXORCIST: THE BEGINNING
 FAKERS
 FINDING NEVERLAND
 GRUDGE, The (US)
 HERO
 I AM DAVID
 INSIDE I'M DANCING
 JU-ON (THE GRUDGE)
 LAYER CAKE
 MAMBO ITALIANO
 PRINCESS DIARIES 2: ROYAL ENGAGEMENT
 SAVED!
 SAW
 SHARK TALE
 SKY CAPTAIN AND THE WORLD OF TOMORROW
 TRIPLE AGENT
 WHITE CHICKS
 WIMBLEDON

FINDING NEVERLAND (US, 2004, d. Marc Foster)

Any film that fosters creativity and imagination is worthy of praise. Finding Neverland does this – and more. Peter Pan has been a favourite for over a hundred years – in the theatre and on the screen. Disney did animation versions in 1953 and 2002. Steven Spielberg used the basic outline for ET and for his version of midlife crisis and rediscovering the inner child, Hook. P.J.Hogan celebrated the centenary of J.M.Barrie's play with a lavish Peter Pan (2003).

But, who was J.M.Barrie? Finding Neverland offers us a portrait of the playwright, dramatises his friendship with the Llewellyn-Davies children which gave him the inspiration for his play and, finally, shows some glimpses of the performance of the play. The film is the more unexpected since director Marc Forster's previous work included the small-budget film about pregnancy, Everything Put Together, and the grim, Monster's Ball.

The setting is 1903. It is meticulously re-created, giving great visual pleasure to those who enjoy period dramas. The cast is impeccable. Johnny Depp has proven himself one of the best screen presences today (from Edward Scissorhands to Pirates of the Caribbean). With Scots accent, quiet bearing and an empathy for children, his Barrie is something of a lonely figure who retreats into his imagination when life is too difficult but who has to help his friend Sylvia Llewellyn-Davies to face the reality of her terminal illness. Kate Winslet is at her best as Sylvia, a grieving widow, devoted but harassed mother with a platonic devotion to Barrie.

The film also boasts a strong supporting cast. Julie Christie is now a grande dame of the screen as Sylvia's possessive and domineering mother. Dustin Hoffman is Barrie's theatrical entrepreneur and Radha Mitchell (who had starred in Everything Put Together) is dignified as Barrie's estranged wife. Freddie Highmore (Two Brothers, Five Children and It) has the pivotal role of the sceptical boy, Peter, who is resolutely realistic and has to discover the power of imagination.

A major theme of Finding Neverland is that of making the distinction between fantasy and reality. Fantasy can be a wonderful and necessary refuge. It helps the Llewellyn-Davies children cope and grow. It enables Barrie not to give in or give up. But, he has to face the reality of his glacial marriage and accept his responsibility for this as well as help Sylvia not to pretend that her illness is not serious.

While Peter Pan never grew up – and Barrie remarks that children should not go to bed because they will only wake up a day older – Barrie knew that we all must.

FAKERS (UK, 2004, d. Richard Janes)

At only 86 minutes, this is a brief confidence trick caper set in contemporary London.

After an elaborate prologue in Sicily 1911, with a romantic artist pursued by the vengeful husband of his voluptuous model, Fakers opens with a vigorous animated credits sequence that finally introduces us to Nick, a genial young man about town (Matthew Rhys) who has fallen foul of a dramatically psychopathic gangster (Art Malik) who can switch instantly from orders for bashings to semi-sophisticated discussions about art theory. Nick is in debt to the tune of 50.000 pounds with four days to raise it.

The plot consists mainly of persuading London gallery owners that some sketches, copies of the aforesaid Sicilian artist's lost masterpiece, are genuine so that he can sell them and pay off his debt. He is helped by the nice copyist (Tom Chambers) and his tough-as-nails sister (Kate Ashford). Things go right and things go wrong – but you know a happy ending is somewhere there (in Sicily) but not until a nice twist at the end concerning the artist.

Pleasantly inconsequential.

I AM DAVID (US, 2004, d. Paul Feig)

During the 1960s, Anne Holm's novel sold millions of copies and was read widely by children. The producers of this film remembered it and wanted to bring it to the screen forty years later. It has received a number of awards at festivals and has been screened for a number of NGOs, especially those concerned with refugees.

This is a refugee story for children, a blend of optimism as well as wariness about trusting people. The treatment is very straightforward, rather unsophisticated and easy to damn with faint praise by saying that it worthy. Accepting this worthiness, one must say that at times it is quite a moving little film.

The setting is 1952 in a Bulgarian gulag. David has been separated from his politically active parents and interned in the hard labour camp. The film opens with his escape from the prison. It then continues his journey to Greece, by boat to Italy, through Italy to Switzerland on his way to Denmark with a sealed envelope which will reveal the truth about him.

There are flashbacks to the harshness of the camp, working in the quarries, executions for stealing soap. David's friend in the camp, a bespectacled, self-sacrificing prisoner, Johannes, is played by Jim Caviezel. Joan Plowright plays a familiar role as an elderly artist who befriends and saves David. David himself is played with grim determination to survive by young British actor, Ben Tibber.

Because he meets with success, it could seem that the world is full of kind people eager to help this mysterious young refugee. However, it is not always easy. In fact, there are a lot of unfriendly people out there. But, this is a picture of the indomitable human spirit, aimed at a younger audience and their parents.

THE PRINCESS DIARIES 2: ROYAL ENGAGEMENT (US, 2004, d. Garry Marshall)

The original Princess Diaries was an unexpected hit, an American nod in the direction of European royalty and pomp, contrasting with the more easy-going American lifestyle. This time it is European royalty and pomp all the way. It has been very successful at the American box-office so it is clear that there are many people out there who like it. Most likely young girls who dream about such things, and their parents.

It is an easy target for grizzled old reviewers – and, indeed, they took their pot-shots. Here are some more: the first part is like going out shopping for dresses at Harrods with the girls and, the whole thing

is all like eating icing for two hours while walking through a pageantry theme park. Of course, if you enjoy this, then, by all means, go and see it.

You will find Anne Hathaway, pretty but still often gawky, trying to become a queen and become engaged in thirty days. Julie Andrews is there to assist and even sings a recitatif song – which makes the botched operation on her throat all the sadder. Hector Elizondo is there to provide some humour and romance for Julie.

The potential suitors are an unsuitable lot (although Prince William is on the list but unreachable) and Princess Mia has to settle for a stiff upper lip Englishman. Lurking in the background is the seeming local cad who could assume the throne if she does not marry. Wonder who she marries!!

SAVED! (US, 2004, d.

After the success of *The Passion*, some publicists rushed articles to the press about religious films being popular again and headlined *Saved!* Either they had not seen it or they had their tongues firmly in their cheeks. Yes, the film is about Christianity. No, the film is light years away from *The Passion* – except that most of the characters in *Saved!* would have been the first to buy tickets. It is about Born Again Christians.

Actually, the film is really *Mean Girls* all over again in Born Again clothing. It targets the more righteous than thou kind of Christians, parodies their behaviour and makes quite a few satiric digs at the double standards of many professing believers who justify whatever they do, (good deed or bad whim) by attributing it to Jesus. To that extent, the film can serve as a bit of an examination of conscience concerning authentic faith and charity.

Jena Malone is the devout student who misinterprets what Jesus would want her to do to help her gay friend and finds herself becoming disillusioned, especially with her prom queen friend, Mandy Moore, who is ruthlessly religious. Add devout friends, pious teachers, Martin Donovan as the cheery pastor and Mary Louise Parker as Jena's mother and you have a mixture of comedy, critique and some serious questioning of what it is to be a true Christian.

THE CORPORATION (US, 2004, d. Mark Achbar, Jennifer Abbott)

2004 was the year of documentaries making their way to the box-office lists. Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* made over \$100,000,000 in the US alone. He appears again in this successful film, a two and a half hour look at globalisation and the evils of large corporations. In fact, Moore has the last word and leaves audiences with many questions about business ethics and the lack of ethics in today's world.

Despite its length, the film is never dull. Author, Joel Bakan wrote *The Corporation: the Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power* and his screenplay is based on this book.

Since, in law, corporations can be spoken of as persons, Bakan consulted psychiatrists to examine the psychological profile of corporations. He used the diagnostic criteria of the World Health Organisation as well as DSM IV, a standard tool for this profiling. The following description was the result: "It is self-interested, inherently amoral, callous and deceitful, it breaches social and legal standards to get its way, it does not suffer from guilt, yet it can mimic the human qualities of empathy, caring and altruism."

Probably this is more or less what we might have expected. The film then goes on to illustrate this very powerfully – plenty of challenging interviews from both sides (including Noah Chomsky and Milton Friedman), several case studies where some corporation officials blatantly spoke according to the diagnostics (the reps of Initiative Media who create needs, especially in children, where media manipulation and sackings for outspokenness occurred (Fox TV), where issues of environmental destruction clashed with 'good business'. An exception is Ray Anderson, CEO of the large carpet manufacturer, Interface, who experienced something of a conversion during the 90s and is attempting to put in place more eco-friendly business practice.

Quite a number of lecturers from prestigious business schools are questioned about corporations. The result is that audiences receive quite an effective and always interesting grounding in some of the major issues concerning corporations – and will be on the alert in future.

THE CLEARING (US, 2004, d. Jan Pieter Brugge)

With Robert Redford, Helen Mirren and Willem Dafoe as the stars, audiences will be expecting something high-powered from this film. That would be a mistake. In fact, this is a brief, rather low-key abduction thriller that puts its emphasis on psychological responses rather than on violence and action.

The film shows the day beginning for these three people. The businessman gets ready for work. His wife does her exercises and prepares for a quiet day. The abductor looks at himself in the mirror and goes to put his plan into action.

In many ways, it is all rather easily done. The abductor quietly holds a gun and persuades the businessman to leave his vehicle. They go into the woods, talking to one another (the businessman has been responsible for the abductor losing his job), aiming for a clearing where the businessman will be held to ransom. In the meantime, the wife rather calmly reports her husband missing, the FBI move in and follow procedures. Her children come (and there is one blood pressure moment when the son (Alessandro Nivola) loses his temper with the agent. But his mother soon apologises.

It is all very civilised rather than bullets flying all over the place. The film relies more on menace and uncertainty. It is the opposite of the Tarantino-trend.

WHITE CHICKS (US, 2004, d. Keenen Ivory Wayans)

White chicks are really the target for this broad (very broad) comedy. The arrogantly wealthy shop-till-you-drop crowd whose ambition is to be seen as socialites at in-parties, are mocked rather mercilessly.

This is a Wayans Brothers (Living Color) enterprise. Two FBI agents (Shawn Wayans and Marlon Wayans) have been too quick on the draw and are assigned guard duty to two obnoxious white chick sisters. To foil a kidnapping plot, the only thing they can do (but there must be other ways!) is to disguise themselves as the two sisters. One immediate drawback is that the girls are white and the agents are black. They do it and find themselves having to play being just two of the girls. Of course, they solve the mystery and foil the plots while falling foul of wives and girlfriends.

The film gives the American black audience a chance to hoot at the white chicks. White chicks themselves might not find it so funny as most of them turn out to be mean girls.

BOBBY JONES – STROKE OF GENIUS (US, 2004, d. Rowdy Herrington)

It depends whether you have heard of Bobby Jones. Americans and golf aficionados will tell you that he is still the only American to have won the golfing Grand Slam – and that he did this in the late 1920s. So, the title is a play on words on his skill as a champion golfer.

The film tells us that Bobby Jones never became a professional. The screenplay has him tell a journalist urging him on to million dollar sponsorships that amateur comes from the Latin word for 'to love' and that anyone who turns professional does not love the game. Jones studied law and retired from golf after his successes, bought the land in Augusta, Georgia, and set up the course as well as the Masters Tournament. He also served as a major in World War II. Bobby Jones seems to have been, despite early eruptions of bad temper on the course and a strong-willed decision not to indulge in these displays, a very good man, a truly decent American hero.

Which means that there was not too much dramatic conflict in his life, except to win his wife, win his health, win his games. Which also means that the film veers more towards hagiography than towards gripping drama (except for his grip on the clubs and his powerful 'genius' strokes).

The hagiography is more evident when we see that the adult Jones is played by Jim Caviezel, no stranger to goodness. Claire Forlani is his loving wife who, for a time, is not supportive of his golfing

career. Jeremy Northam is pumped up as a kind of villain, but he is really only a self-satisfied professional golfer, who does have one outburst, but who proves himself a decent chap as well. (This is a surprise because director and co-writer Rowdy Herrington is best known for some action and bear-em-up thrillers like Road House, Striking Distance, Stickup).

This is one of those films which declares itself based on a true story and an inspirational film, a worthy film about a good man and a dignified and skilful sport.

CELLULAR (US, 2004, d. David R. Ellis)

A very entertaining thriller. It is also a thriller that could not have happened twenty years ago. It depends on the developing technology of the mobile phone, the Americans love for their cell phones.

When a science teacher is abducted from her house as her housekeeper is killed, she is kept in a loft where the criminals destroy the phone. But... She is able to fix the phone and call out. The young man who answers is one of those self-absorbed Californian beach guys who deceives himself into thinking he is God's gift to women. They don't see it that way at all. However, as he goes through his day, disbelieving the fantastic story the teacher tells him, then trying to enlist police help, then indulging himself in some rough and tumble, having to hold up a store to get batteries for his cell phone (but leaves the money), tricking the criminals at LAX, warning the wrong man, falling from a roof, hiacking a car (twice) from a supercilious lawyer who deserves it, then involved in the final shootout, he does prove that he is God's gift to the woman he has saved as well as her husband and son. That is not the complete synopsis. In fact, there are several important twists along the way that keep audience attention until the end.

Kim Basinger is the teacher and has to experience physical pain as well as the desperation of trying to persuade the young man to help her and then keep him on the line. Chris Evans does a decent job as the surprised action hero. A bonus is William H. Macy as a policeman about to retire whose conscientiousness breaks the case open.

The action takes place over one day. What a day!

COFFEE AND CIGARETTES (US, 2003, d. Jim Jarmusch)

Coffee and cigarettes are acquired tastes. This film is an acquired taste. Coffee and cigarettes are addictive. This film is not quite so addictive. In fact, it is a mixum-gatherum of vignettes, little episodes where actors have conversations over coffee and cigarettes – and something of a relief when, in one of the longer stories, Brits Alfred Molina and Steve Coogan, have cups of tea.

Director, Jim Jarmusch, is well-noted for idiosyncratic films, more personalised films that tell offbeat stories (Stranger than Paradise, Night on Earth, Dead Man, Ghost Dog). He started to film these conversations in 1986, one with Roberto Benigni and Steven Wright, when he was making Down By Law. He continued during the 1990s and added some specifically in recent years because he wanted to work with the actors. This is the case with two of the best episodes. Cate Blanchett as herself (or her Public Relations image self) has a coffee and cigarettes meeting with her cousin from Sydney. Cate Blanchett can immerse herself in any role and she plays the cousin in black wig, daggy clothes and flat accent. We have the opportunity of seeing her act with herself, but they still seem like two quite different actresses. The other one is the Molina-Coogan story which mocks Hollywood and celebrity.

There are other stories with Bill Murray, Spike Lee's brother and sister, Cinque and Joie and Jarmusch regular, Tom Waits, comparing reputations with Iggy Pop.

Coffee and cigarettes is principally for Jarmusch fans, a chance to check his oddball perspectives and sense of humour.

SAW (US, 2004, d. James Wan)

This is your above average slasher thriller. Some have reviewed it as weak and absurd. Others have slotted it for future cult films. The latter seems more likely.

Two men regain consciousness in the dark of a dank basement. They are handcuffed and chained. Gradually, they find light, messages, a saw and realise they are being set up for death by a mysterious, seemingly all-knowing avenger. What will happen? Well, as they say, that's for you to find out.

Danny Glover is a detective assigned to investigating a series of killings. Injured by the killer and off the force, he gets involved in surveillance and is about to solve the mystery when...

Cary Elwes is one of the men in the basement. He plays a surgeon whose wife and child are threatened and who tries to use his wits to get out of the predicament. The younger photographer with whom he is imprisoned is played by Leigh Whannel who turns out (in real life) to be a 26 year old Australian from Melbourne who had appeared in a couple of films, including *Matrix Reloaded*. Whannel also wrote the screenplay from his own story. There should be big things in store for him in the movie world.

In the meantime, just sit back and, well, not relax.

SHARK TALE (US, 2004, d. Bibi Bergeron, Vicky Jenson)

This is one of those films where you wish you could review more enthusiastically, but can't. Having seen it with an audience of children, I am conscious that they did not laugh very much and the littlies were restless. While there is plenty of colour and movement on the screen, the tale is really geared for grown-ups, as is the smart dialogue and the movie references and parodies. This means that it is quite entertaining, but (as many of the children said, it is not *Finding Nemo*).

The idea of having a sub-marine New York City, complete with shops, TV, traffic and the Mafia (the sharks) is an amusing one. Much of the enjoyment comes from life in the sea being a parody of land life. With the Mafia, there is a plot of standover tactics by the Don (Robert de Niro), his younger son being unable to be a killer (Jack Black) and a hero fish who is believed to be a shark killer, fosters the legend and enjoys the celebrity (Will Smith) much to the disgust of his girlfriend (Renee Zellweger). Martin Scorsese voices his agent and Angelina Jolie is the fish fatale. You will notice Peter Falk's voice as well as a consigliere.

All this is very clever, especially with the animation figures looking like Smith, Scorsese and de Niro. But, it is more of a pastime than a classic animation film.

TRIPLE AGENT (France, 2004, d. Eric Rohmer)

The title, *Triple Agent*, does not sit well with the name of the director, Eric Rohmer. Rohmer made this film when he was 82-83, an accomplished work. However, Rohmer has been an academic, a critic and editor, a maker of cinema moral fables for forty years. His films are elegant, literate, beautifully designed, sometimes didactic. Those who do not care for them dismiss them as visual radio.

Rohmer's fans need not fear. *Triple Agent* may have overtones of a Hitchcock film of the 1930s (when this film is set) and Rohmer wrote a book on Hitchcock, but it is as elegant and literary as all the rest of his films. One knows what to expect.

Rohmer himself lived through the period he depicts on screen, the late 1930s. To immerse audiences in the period, he uses newsreel footage from the time throughout the film. The situation in Paris prior to the outbreak of the war meant precarious government, possible alliances with Hitler and the Nazis or, the opposite, alliances with Stalin and the Soviet Union. Paris was filled with refugees from the Russian Revolution twenty years earlier. These White Russians stayed together, even keeping their military structures in the hope that Stalin would be overcome.

The central characters of this film, 'based on a true story', are an Russian military official and his loving wife, a Greek who met him when he was recuperating from battle injuries in Greece. They live a pleasantly social life, have friends and entertain, but he is always busy, making journeys to Brussels and Berlin. Where are his allegiances? To the White Russians, to France – or to counter-espionage with the Nazis, or with the Communists to defeat the Nazis? He confides part of this life and work to his wife but then becomes involved in a plot with tragic consequences.

Even though Rohmer is exploring the world of espionage, his treatment is quietly emotional and intelligent.

SKY CAPTAIN AND THE WORLD OF TOMORROW

This is the brainchild of director, Kerry Conran, who also wrote the screenplay and is an expert in special effects.

Since Star Wars, especially, we have become accustomed to comic book adventures. With Indiana Jones, especially, we have become accustomed to the storytelling so popular at the Saturday matinees of the 1930s and 1940s: Impossible plots, mad scientists bent on world supremacy, weird science – machines, robots and weapons, plucky reporter heroine, intrepid ace pilot and a lurking femme fatale.

What if this kind of over-the-top story were filmed with big stars and a big budget for top of the range computergraphics? Here it is.

Of course, back in the 1930s and 1940s, a madman did attempt to take over the world. It was a time of air aces. There were war correspondents. There were spies. There were technological developments in weaponry, culminating in the atomic bomb. Who said these plots are really over the top?

Anyway, this is a sit back and relax big adventure movie. Giant vehicles and robots loom over New York City. Scientists disappear only to have the voice of a missing scientist reveal himself as the arch-villain (with the technological help of images and voice of the later Sir Laurence Olivier). Jude Law is the Sky Captain, a master of derring-do. Gwyneth Paltrow is the plucky journalist. Angelina Jolie is a warrior with an eye-patch. Giovanni Ribisi and Michael Gambon are also around.

It is an opportunity to rediscover the Gung Ho spirit of the old serials.

WIMBLEDON (UK/US, 2004, d. Richard Loncraine)

The magic name for the centre of world tennis. Wimbledon, the movie, is less magical.

On the one hand, it has its tennis story where an ageing player (at 30) (Paul Bettany) draws a wild card and plays in what is to be his final tournament. One knows that it is not a matter of will he win, but how will he overcome all the odds in order to win. Wimbledon has been a haven for temperamental American tennis players (in fact, John McEnroe plays himself, along with Chris Evert, as a commentator and reminds us of this tennis-rage phenomenon), so we have an aggressive player (Kirsten Dunst) along with her dominating manager father (Sam Neill in an unrewarding role). There are also assorted international players and British fans (who can enjoy the film as a substitute for Tim Henman's frequent but losing appearances at Wimbledon).

On the other hand, the film is a romance where hero and heroine fall in lust and then in love with emotional repercussions for their prospects of winning.

Wimbledon is glossy stuff with attractive picture post card scenes of London and the British countryside. It is also a bit trite in its romantic storytelling, except in the surprising (and hopeful) final few moments of the film.

ALFIE (US 2004, d. Charles Shyer)

Critics do not complain when a play is performed by different casts over the years. They say it gives the opportunity for audiences to experience different interpretations of the play and characters. They are not so tolerant for film remakes, usually branding them as 'unnecessary'. This has happened quickly with Alfie. One of the problems is that as critics grow older, they hallow their past. This means that Michael Caine has become Alfie in their imaginations and no one can take his place.

Well, Jude Law has taken his place in a remake, unnecessary or not. The film has been updated from the swinging 60s to the present and Alfie transported from London to New York.

Alfie is still a self-absorbed cad with a hedonistic attitude towards life, assuming that the world owes him a living just for being there. His assessment of women is a mental and emotional version of harassment, to say the least. However, he is a gentler presence than Michael Caine was: cocky but not quite so cocky, tough but not quite so tough, chauvinist but not quite so chauvinist. Michael Caine was bewildered and partly regretful when Burt Bacharach's song, 'what's it all about, Alfie?' came up at the end. Jude Law is more gobsmacked by what he has done and what he has learned.

This means that, unnecessary or not, the remake is reinterpreting Alfie for these times.

Significant is the difference in the abortion issue. Denholm Elliot's abortionist was a sinister figure and Vivien Merchant's pregnant, middle-aged woman was a figure of pathos, a victim of Alfie and the abortionist. This time the character is much more permissive but also betraying her boyfriend. The audience is not taken inside the abortion clinic. When she comes out and Alfie asks how she is, she replies, 'Empty' and Alfie laments the son he will never see. However, there is an unexpected twist late in the film, reinforcing Alfie's lament.

Marisa Tomei is sympathetic as the single mother that Alfie loves deep down – but, again, too late. Susan Sarandon does a glamorous variation on the Shelley Winters' older woman in the original.

This means that the new Alfie is not as sharp as the original, but Jude Law, especially in his frequent confessions from screen to audience, taking us into his confidence, makes him a contemporary searcher who might be able to accept some demanding answers to 'what's it all about?'

ALIEN VS PREDATOR (US, 2004, d. Paul Anderson)

To be fair, I was ready for a dose of CGI combat effects. The previous preview I had seen was *Princess Diaries 2*, chockful of sweetness and light. Neither *Alien* nor *Predator* in their previous screen incarnations were sweet and they did not flourish in the light. So, this horror-action concoction did not seem too bad as this kind of thing goes. Some of the plot was pinched from *The X Files Movie* – with effects thrown in from director Anderson's previous exercise in cinema horror, *Resident Evil* (plus his *Event Horizon* and *Mortal Kombat*). Most of the characters were straight out of central casting: tough neo-Ripley heroine, nerdy academic expert, ambitious businessman, no-nonsense henchman and a group of bodyguards who were disposable once the aliens and the predator went into action.

The Antarctic has become a cinema breeding ground for alien landings and alien wars. Who knows what is buried deep under the ice-cap? This time it is a huge construction, complete with sacrificial chambers. But, as the posters say, this is not our war. *Alien* and *Predator* are using the humans for bait. Again, as the posters say, 'whoever wins, we lose'.

If we could have Jason vs Freddy some years ago, there is no reason why other popular science fantasy villains can not eyeball each other, except that the aliens (like Jason) are really one-note creatures, killing machines. Freddy Krueger has some edge (knife-edge) and *Predator* has some decency in helping out the neo-Ripley. Well, maybe that's giving away the ending, but it's only dedicated fans who will venture in to see this mortal combat.

EXORCIST: THE BEGINNING (US, 2004, d. Renny Harlin)

What! Another *Exorcist*. We have had three already. The original was the real thing and combined the moral issues of diabolical possession in contemporary non-religious society with horror conventions. The second was more like this one, taking audiences off into exotic archeological digs and even more exotic mythologies to background the devil's presence. The third (directed by author, William Peter Blatty himself) was more of a thriller postscript which revealed that poor Fr Karras had survived the satanic attacks and was confined in an institution to undergo more attacks.

Now we have 'The Beginning' a back story about Fr Merrin that Max Von Sydow would never have dreamed of when he was preparing to be Fr Merrin thirty years ago or more.

Exorcist fans have been on tenterhooks for the last two years. John Frankenheimer died before he could direct the film. Of all people, Paul Schrader (*Taxi Driver*, *Mishima*, *Auto Focus*) was hired and off everyone went to Morocco. Producer James Robinson apparently was not pleased. Schrader's

version was too intellectual or some such excuse. It is suggested that it was not gory enough. Back everyone went to Morocco where action director Renny Harlin (*Die Hard 2*, *Cliffhanger*, *Long Kiss Goodnight*) re-shot, it is said, 90% of the film. (Schrader's version is promised on DVD, an interesting precedent: not just a director's cut, not just an alternate ending, but an alternate film.)

And the result. Not bad as this kind of thing goes. Most of it is more like *Exorcist 2*. After a mysterious prologue with evil priests, the dead strewn on a battlefield with thousands crucified upside down 1500 years ago, we are in 1949, in Cairo, Nairobi and the a desert mountain dig where a mysterious church is being excavated. Of course, it is a diabolical centre. And the devil causes havoc amongst the tribespeople (especially with pompous, ultra-loyal-to-his-majesty British troops), takes possession of various people – but there is an effectively surprising switch at the end when the real exorcisms start.

The greatest shock is that Fr Merrin has lost his faith and is haunted because of his being forced to comply with occupying troops in their brutal murder of war hostages. Another Swede, Stellan Skarsgård, is this middle-aged Mr Merrin. Serious and intense, he gives some credibility to the proceedings.

For a while, it is all religious hokum (and a need for better technical advice on things Catholic), especially with a young priest sent from the Vatican to check whether a legend is true, that this is the spot where, after he rebelled against God, Lucifer fell to earth!! Towards the end of the film, as Mr Merrin is on his way to becoming Fr Merrin again, there is a feel of the original in the exorcism sequences (which spare us the headspinning and the bile).

Harlin has made a straightforward religious/horror film.

MAMBO ITALIANO (Canada, 2003, d. Emile Gaudreault)

This is a surprisingly enjoyable family comedy, straight out of Canada. Straight is not entirely accurate because one of the key themes is that of being straight or gay. The film-makers especially screenwriter, Steve Galluccio who has adapted his play, have opted for gentle humanism and comedy in their plea for understanding and tolerance rather than serious drama or polemical propaganda. Any audience who sees the film and has someone in their family or knows someone struggling with the issue of 'coming out' may feel more comfortable and less threatened watching this film. And, given this is still an issue, this is important.

Luke Kirby is Angelo, a nice Italian boy who lives at home, dominated by his parents. He confides in the audience about his orientation and about what it was like to grow up and be the target of everyone's jokes and bullying. When he meets his close schoolfriend again, he moves out of home and into an apartment with his partner.

The humour of the film is not camp. Rather, it is simply a variation on the Italian stereotypes who expect macho behaviour in men and a sooner-than-later wedding to a nice Italian girl. While the film plays on stereotypes, it is not nasty. Rather, it presumes that the audience will enjoy going through the familiar motions, all rather stylised and heightened, in a different situation. And that is what happens. It makes you laugh. It makes you think.

LAYER CAKE (UK, 2004, d. Matthew Vaughan)

Matthew Vaughan was the producer of the tongue-in-cheek gangster films, *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* and *Snatch*. The anticipation was that *Layer Cake* would be a similar knockabout gangster actioner with some razzle-dazzle stylistic touches. No, on all counts. Rather, it is a smooth and well-crafted production with a script that has its satiric moments but is ultimately a rather serious show.

Daniel Craig immediately introduces us to himself. He is the self-made drug dealer, a man about town, who is ambitious for the fine things of life, has a cover as an estate agent, the completely modern amoral man who has made his pile and is about to leave the business prosperously. He seems to be offering the handbook for the successful, respectable criminal. And we tend to believe him.

But, life is not like that, especially amongst British gangsters. The crime world is a layer cake and you had better remember which layer you belong to. There are the local bosses, nouveau riche types who bring their working class manners and violence to their new place in society. Kenneth Cranham is expert at playing this kind of role and is very persuasive here. There are the lower class idiots who presume that they belong to higher levels, do deals, act precipitately and violently, get everyone entangled in their mess and are quickly dead. Jamie Foreman portrays one of these.

Then there are the local equivalents of the consigliere who are in the background, do a quiet killing or two, act as brokers in drug deals and who live in unobtrusive comfort. Colm Meaney portrays one of these. At the top are the successfully ruthless who outwit everyone else, no matter layer they come from, and survive. And this is Michael Gambon.

Put it all together, plus some emotional complications which play havoc with plans, and you have Layer Cake, one of the best British gangster films.

INSIDE I'M DANCING (Ireland, 2004, d. Damian O'Donnell)

For a while you might think you are in the middle of a Dublin Cuckoo's Nest presided over by Brenda Fricker. She is benign, perhaps too patronisingly so, but strict in the running of her institution. However, is not a mental institution, it is a home for the physically handicapped, especially those with cerebral palsy or other paralysing conditions.

In comes Rory (James McAvoy) who sees his mission in life to be the local Randle Patrick McMurphy. Not slow with a wisecrack or a rebellious sneer, he befriends Michael (Steven Robertson) who is affected by cerebral palsy. Rory is one of the few people who can understand Michael's difficult speech.

Rory makes attempts to get approval for living outside and, with Michael's help, achieves this. Most of the film is about how they manage and don't manage, people's reactions to them, their attempts to live as normal or ordinary a life as possible. Much works out. Much does not. They employ supermarket worker, Siobhan (Romola Garai), to look after them, both becoming emotionally dependent on her as well, unwilling to realise that she has a life of her own.

There is a great deal of pathos, especially as the film ends, but director O'Donnell (who was able to bring to life the British Pakistani family in East is East) gets strong performances that avoid the too-easily mawkish aspects of the plot.

For a sometimes grim subject, this film is upbeat and hopeful.

HERO (China, 2002, d. Zhang Yimou)

For some reason, Miramax held up the western release of this exciting martial arts spectacle for two years. When it was released in the US, it opened with a take of \$17,000,000 and was top of the box-office charts for two weeks. One can see why.

During the 1990s, Zhang Yimou made a series of powerful dramas with Gong Li: Raise the Red Lantern, Ju Dou, The Story of Qiu Ju, To Live. As a cinematographer, he makes films that are very beautiful to look at.

After a series of low-key dramas (Not One Less, The Road Home), he has moved into the Crouching Tiger genre with Hero.

The plot is complicated at first until one realises that one is getting different versions of the same story (with colour codings to indicate this). In fact, the plot is fairly straightforward and concerns a warrior who has destroyed the enemies of a despot king who fears assassination. In telling the tales of his exploits against these enemies, the director shows us extraordinary feats with extraordinary camerawork and editing. In fact they are quite exhilarating, especially the flights of arrows.

Zhang Yimou then went on to make *The House of Flying Daggers*, which has far less plot but that does not matter as it is even more exquisite in its choreography of an elaborate and athletic palace dance and in the battles on the tops of the bamboo trees.

JU-ON (THE GRUDGE) (Japan, 2003, d. Takashi Shimizu)

In recent years Japan has produced a succession of horror films that have been popular at home and have travelled well. The best known are *The Ring* films which have also been remade by Hollywood. Others include *Chaos*, *Deep Water* and *Into the Mirror*. *Ju-On* was originally a commission made for video by student director, Takashi Shimizu. He then made a sequel, then this version for the cinema screen.

Ju-On is big on scares but is not always easy to follow. That does not seem to matter too much for Japanese sensibilities. The plot is presented in jigsaw pieces, making demands on the audience to work out what has happened in a mysterious house, who are the dead, who are the ghosts and why are they acting in this vengeful way. A verbal prologue explains that when someone dies with rage, that anger lives on and is destructive.

The rage lives on in the murderous behaviour of the ghosts, especially a mother and child. It is visualised as a murky black shadow that haunts and terrifies the victims. This means that the film has an eerie atmosphere, some shocks and screams and an immersion (especially for a non-Japanese audience) in a strange world of spirits and curses.

THE GRUDGE (US, 2004, d. Takashi Shimizu)

Sometimes a foreign director is invited to Hollywood to remake his film in English with an American audience specifically in mind. This happened to Dutch George Sluizer for *The Vanishing* and Danish Ole Bornedal for *Nighwatch*. The films are then highly criticised for not being as good as the original. Now Takashi Shimizu has remade *The Grudge*. He was permitted to film in Japan with a Japanese crew. However, the screenplay was adapted for American sensibilities and the central roles taken by Americans. And it was inevitable that everyone would say that something was lost in translation.

Lost is not exactly the right word. The film retains the feel and look of Japan and its world of spirits and violent vengeance. The actors playing the ghost mother and child repeat their roles (and they had played them in the video movie as well as the Japanese cinema version). The screenplay relies on the Japanese atmosphere and how sympathetic Americans respond to it and are then terrorised by it.

As with the original, the plot is not easy to follow as there are several time shifts that are not 'realistic'. As with the original, there are plenty of shocks and screams heightened by more expensive special effects. *The Grudge* looks good and is well crafted. Since it a horror show it does not have to be a dramatic masterpiece but has to create a sense of eeriness about people becoming victims to the fury of the ghosts in the haunted house.

A group of young actors led by Sarah Michelle Geller have to spend a lot of time being terrified. Veterans Bill Pullman and Grace Zabriskie bring experience to the enterprise – which, on its profitable release for Halloween 2004, seems to have worked particularly well on audiences wanting a scare.

BRIDE & PREJUDICE (UK, 2004, d. Gurinder Chadha)

Well, here's a cheerful how d'you do!

Gurinder Chadha has made two British films with Indian themes, *Bhaji on the Beach* and *Bend it Like Beckham*. She also made the interesting Thanksgiving multi-racial film in the US, *What's Cooking*. Why not follow the lead of Mira Nair who has done Bollywood with *Monsoon Wedding* and followed it with a version of a British classic, *Vanity Fair*? Better still, why not combine Bollywood style with an updating of a classic novel? Jane Austen meets India.

It works very well indeed. For those who want to see Bollywood colour, costumes, décor and, of course, many songs and dances, there all here at the drop of a hat and cane. They are quite lavish. The setting is Amritsar with a holiday on the beachfront in Goa.

For those who are wondering whether Jane Austen can transcend the 19th century (well, Emma really did in *Clueless*), they can be reassured. *Bride & Prejudice* keeps very close to the original plot, even keeping some of the names, especially Mr Darcy (now a prejudiced American played by New Zealander, Martin Henderson (*The Ring*, *Torque*)) and the villain, Wickham.

The Bennets are now the Bakhshis, Mr Bakshi is still henpecked by a loud and vulgar Mrs Bakhshi but is supportive of his daughters, Lalita and Jaya (for Elizabeth and Jane). There is also the snobbish Miss Bingley and her brother, Balraj. The eccentric suitor, Mr Collins, is now Mr Kholi who has absorbed American culture – at its most blatantly American.

One of the features of Bollywood films is that they are set in an unreal affluent world that gives no indication of poverty or hunger. They are truly escapist. And the characters here can also escape for visits to London and to California – which will make British and American audiences just that bit more comfortable watching what might be for some an exotic confection.

Jane Austen understood human nature in the microcosms where her novels are set. This understanding has made a very entertaining transition to India.

BEING JULIA
BEYOND THE SEA
BLADE
BRIDGET JONES AND THE EDGE OF REASON
CALLAS FOREVER
CHRISTMAS WITH THE KRANKS
FORGOTTEN, The
I HEART HUCKABEES
LADIES IN LAVENDER
LEVITY
LOS ANGELES PLAYS ITSELF
INCREDIBLES, The
MY HOUSE IN UMBRIA
NAPOLEON DYNAMITE
NINTH DAY, The (DER NEUNTE TAG)
PHANTOM OF THE OPERA, The
SHAOLIN SOCCER
SURVIVING CHRISTMAS

SIGNIS FILM REVIEWS

NOVEMBER 2004

BEING JULIA (Canada/Hungary, 2004, d. Istvan Szabo)

In the early 1980s, Hungarian director, Istvan Szabo, won an Oscar for Best Foreign Language film for *Mephisto*. It was a serious drama about an actor who sold his soul to the devil, like Faust. His devil was the Third Reich where he became a theatre celebrity. Twenty years later, Szabo has returned to the theatre and theatrics but this time it is the London West End in the late 1930s. This is a much more brittle, even superficial world than that of Nazi Germany. It is the world of prima donnas, backstabbing, ambitions and bitchiness. It is the world of Noel Coward. The source of this film is a novella, *Theatre*, by W. Somerset Maugham.

The film offers a tour-de-force opportunity for Annette Bening to strut both stage and screen, being the grande dame and delivering lines that remind movie buffs of Bette Davis in *All About Eve*, which portrayed prima donnas, backstabbing, ambitions and bitchiness in the American theatre. Annette Bening takes full advantage of the role, playing with a convincing English accent, showing the vulnerability of a star in middle age, completely self-absorbed, desperate for something to keep her vitality. She has been the protégé of a long dead impresario who appears to her, counselling, warning,

applauding, reminding her that the theatre is her real world and 'what civilians call the real world is only fantasy'.

Other people revolve around her: her theatre manager husband (Jeremy Irons), her doting business partner (Miriam Margolyes), her maid (Juliet Stevenson), an admirer (Bruce Greenwood), her son and other actors. However, she becomes involved in an affair with a young, snobbish American (Shaun Evans) and is transformed. We all know that this will be a bittersweet romance. Ultimately it is more bitter for the young man and the aspiring actress he falls in love with (Lucy Punch). Julia's idea of sweetness is revenge. If we thought that Julia was in any way down and out, the finale is a triumph of theatrical bitchiness.

This kind of entertainment is often amusing to watch and to listen to, very clever, very smart. But to meet these people off stage...?

SHAOLIN SOCCER (Hong Kong, 2001, d. Stephen Chow)

A slapstick comedy for the undemanding audience – or for those who love seeing soccer at any time, any place.

Stephen Chow, no mean athlete (although helped by special effects) wrote and directed this film as well as starring in it. He has given us a Shaolin version of the often seen story of the dud team with a demanding coach (think Bad News Bears, The Mighty Ducks, Dodgeball) who, despite absolute incompetence – let alone no physical prowess – turn into the victorious team.

One of the advantages of this comedy is that it comes after Crouching Dragon and The Matrix and employs a lot – a lot – of these tricks to show the former Shaolin monks in techniques and tactics that literally blow the opposition apart.

There is a modest little love story in the background.

CALLAS FOREVER (Italy, 2002, d. Franco Zeffirelli)

Maria Callas died in 1977 at the age of 53. She had achieved worldwide fame as one of the great divas of the 20th century. This film creates a fictional story about the last months of her life.

Franco Zeffirelli is entitled to make a film about his great friend. For many years he resisted but finally found a way of paying tribute to her and to her singing. For those who admire Callas, it is an opportunity to reflect on her life and her career. (Zeffirelli generally avoids the time she spent as the companion of Aristotle Onassis, leaving it to photographs, some passing comments and an opinion about Jackie Kennedy.)

Whenever Fanny Ardant is on screen, the film comes alive. She gives what is often called a mesmerising performance. She had played Maria Callas on stage in Terence McNally's widely seen play, Master Class. Ardant looks like Callas, is able to portray the grande dame aspects of her life while revealing some vulnerability beneath the spoilt brat behaviour and the tantrums.

The screenplay suggests that Callas had become a recluse in Paris but was persuaded to come out of retirement to sing Carmen on video, lip-synching with recordings made years earlier. This gives the audience the possibility of seeing Ardant do Callas do Carmen. These sequences are vivid, powerful, reminding us that Zeffirelli has a strong reputation also as an opera director (including film versions of La Traviata and Otello).

Jeremy Irons is an entrepreneur who once managed Callas but is now promoting concerts by a guitar-smashing, audience insulting rock group. The superfluous sub-plot of his relationship with an artist is not particularly interesting or persuasive (or well acted by Jay Rodan as the artist). Joan Plowright is a journalist.

At the time of making the film, Zeffirelli was in his late 70s, a director who had achieved success in theatre, film and television. Perhaps his style is too ornate, flowery with the touches of camp to make his more recent films universally popular.

I HEART HUCKABEES (US, 2004, d. David O. Russell)

A reasonable question to ask after viewing this oddball movie would be: is this an intelligent, neo-philosophical, absurdist exercise in relevant post-Gen X visual and verbal gymnastics or, simply, a clever hoax?

When we look at the three films from director, Russell, let alone his tongue-in-cheek aggro interviews, we find a very, very mixed bag – but, on the whole, quite irreverent in tone and theme, from incestuous relationships to quests for parental identities to mockery of American involvement in the first Gulf War. When asked for a succinct indicator of the theme of Huckabees, we can answer ‘Existential detective investigation’.

Jonathan Schwarzmann is an angst-ridden ecologist who is being ousted from his foundation by members dissatisfied with his erratic leadership, poetry recitations and the process of his being stalked so that the detectives (Dustin Hoffman and Lily Tomlin) can examine his life and explain the metaphysical implications of the coincidences he notices. They are cosmic interconnectedness. More complications inducing increased angst include a friendship with an anti-fossil fuel campaigner/fireman (Mark Wahlberg), a smooth up-and-coming executive of the Huckabees chain (Jude Law) who is embracing environmental issues as a business promotion – and there is his glamorous girlfriend (Naomi Watts) who is the sex-object star of Huckabees commercials. A rival fate-and-doom existential detective author from France (Isabelle Huppert) also arrives to his intellectual, emotional and sexual confusion.

It is all explored rather than solved, with a screenplay which may be smart dialogue or obfuscating verbiage which may mean something or very little. The hoax option is still a strong possibility.

PS, An IMDb comment calls it ‘an epistemological tour of reality’ – wish I had thought of that!

THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA (US, 2004, d. Joel Schumacher)

The Phantom premiered in the London West End in its Lloyd Webber incarnation in October 1986. 80,000,000 tickets sold worldwide these past 18 years and still playing, the author-composer has decided it is the right time for the screen version.

While many reviewers are unshakably convinced that 80,000,000 people are not only wrong but disgracefully wrong and incapable of recognising trash and derivative music. If, at this stage of this review, you find yourself agreeing with the reviewers, don’t read on. This lavish and loud version is not for you.

If, on the other hand, you find your indignation rising against these alleged arbiters of taste, the film is definitely for you.

At a minimum, it is an opportunity for those who have not been able to afford theatre tickets or who have not been near a theatre where The Phantom was playing to see and hear what the enthusiasm was all about. Again, it provides a very colourful and tuneful memento for those who loved their theatrical experience.

One reviewer who bristles at the mention of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s name, concedes that the film’s plot is still strong enough without the music and that the look of the film is outstanding. It certainly is a ‘visual-feast’ production. The press notes use the word ‘sumptuous’. We can add ‘lush’ and ‘lavish’. The 1870s Paris settings mean that the visual style is a kind of baroque-gothic-gallic, pre-raphaelite-rococo. Something striking for everyone.

A new framework has been introduced: an auction of Opera House mementos in 1919, filmed in black and white – with a return to 1919 at different stages of the film.

We spend a lot of time in the Opera House, its glittering auditorium (and the chandelier), the vast backstage area, the opulent foyer (for the beautifully-staged Masquerade) and the vast caverns,

staircases, channels and rooms that constitute the world of the Phantom. The film opens out the play and includes a carriage ride, a chase by horse, visits to the cemetery, even a sword fight.

Several of the characters have been given back stories (including flashbacks to the Phantom's childhood). Raoul's presence has been increased. In fact, the plot of the film (which Lloyd Webber has co-written with director Schumacher) is more coherent than the play.

As regards the songs and music, we either like them or not. They are all here with full orchestra and reprises.

As regards the performances, Emmy Rossum is a charming Christine. However, Gerard Butler may disappoint many audiences as the Phantom. He is not a dominating screen presence (Patrick Wilson as Raoul comes across more forcibly) which lessens the drama. Again, one of the difficulties of seeing him close-up is that the final revelation of his disfigurement is not particularly startling or frightening.

On the other hand, the supporting cast, mainly British, give the film some substance: Miranda Richardson as the ballet mistress who knows the secret of the Phantom, Simon Callow and Ciaran Hinds as the bourgeois owners of the Opera House and Minnie Driver well over the top (director Schumacher advised her that no one pays to see 'under the top') as the haughty diva, Carlotta.

Most fans should enjoy it.

BLADE TRINITY (US, 2004, d. David Goyer)

Short review: brutal and crass.

Longer review: brutal and crass with its body count and pretty coarse language.

The film is photographed well, many images quite striking. It continues the comic book crusade of Blade the hybrid human/vampire against the vampire plague. The first two films were frequently (and literally) dark. This one is set more in the daylight. The primordial vampire, born millennia ago in Sumeria, and living through the centuries, including his time as Dracula (and now referred to in dog Latin as *hominus nocturnum*) is resurrected by the current vampires so that he will help them to be able to walk in daylight. Blade is still battling and joins a kind of vigilante amateurs in a welter of slaughter. Not quite a body count in the usual sense - as each vampire explodes electrically.

Wesley Snipes remains stern and surly as Blade. Parker Posey (usually in independent films) enjoys herself in ludicrous hamming and Ryan Reynolds offers some deadpan humour, Jessica Biel some glamour. David Goyer wrote all three Blade films and directs this one. They were all quite brutal (that is, violence which is callous and ugly).

BEYOND THE SEA (US, 2004, d. Kevin Spacey)

While this film is about singer-entertainer, Bobby Darin, the first comments should focus on Kevin Spacey. He has co-written and directed this biopic and tribute to Darin. He places Darin-centre screen. However, his performance and direction, his singing and his dancing are of top order. Nobody has doubted his talent (think of his Oscars alone for *The Usual Suspects* and *American Beauty*). But, *Beyond the Sea* crams in two hours of Spacey skills for audience pleasure and admiration.

The screenplay is cleverly contrived. It has Darin himself re-living his life with his boyhood self (William Ullrich) as a counter-conscience. However, there is a line, reprised right at the end, that memories are like moonbeams and we can do with them what we will.

Darin was born in 1936, a sickly child whose mother taught him to find strength in music and imbued him with the ambition to outclass Frank Sinatra. He died after heart surgery in 1973. He had become a teen idol, a popular crooner, a film star with an Oscar nomination (Capain Newman MD), Grammy award winner, had married Sandra Dee and had a son. But his career was during the changing 1960s and his style went out of fashion. He devoted himself to politics and finished by writing anti-war songs. As this film is released, had he lived, he would only have been 68.

Spacey sings many of Darin's songs. He has studied Darin's voice, delivery, contact techniques with audiences and his orchestrations. It is a very careful rendering of Darin's music. The screenplay, as it moves from memory to memory (and some fantasy) uses the songs to illustrate situations and themes. Spacey also capitalises on the political themes of American involvement in Vietnam as a parallel to the involvement in Iraq.

Kate Bosworth gives a convincing interpretation of Sandra Dee, already a film star but only sixteen when she met and married Darin. The film shows his emotional wooing of her but does not shy away from the expected marital troubles, careers and pressures of being on the road and Dee's loneliness and drinking.

Spacey has assembled a topnotch supporting cast. Brenda Blethyn shows oomph and verve as Darin's mother while Caroline Aaron brings a certain monstrosity as well as pathos to his sister, Nina. Bob Hoskins is at his best as his brother-in-law and John Goodman is John Goodman as his manager (who served as adviser to the film). Greta Scacchi outdoes Bette Davis or Angela Lansbury as a domineering mother.

While Bobby Darin's music may seem too 1960s for modern tastes, *Beyond the Sea* will be nostalgic for many. And Kevin Spacey is worth seeing and hearing.

THE INCREDIBLES (US, 2004. d. Brad Bird)

It's almost too late to say that Pixar Studios have done it again. Every reviewer seems to have said it. Of course, they are right. Who thought it was impossible to top the *Toy Story* movies or *A Bug's Life* or *Monsters Inc* or *Finding Nemo*? Probably *Finding Nemo* reaches a wider audience, especially of littlies, but there is no denying that *The Incredibles* is an extraordinary tour-de-force of animation genius and wizardry.

There is obviously an audience for this type of heroic action adventure that involves the whole family. The *Spy Kids* stories proved that. *Thunderbirds* (which this story resembles) tried to do it.

The Incredibles, despite the fact that it runs for two hours, seems to keep the attention of the young audience. After all, they are watching a family, not just any old family, but a family of superheroes who are trying to blend in, to be normal, but then have to rescue the world from a young mad scientist (voiced by Jason Lee but looking and sounding like a more manic Jack Black). There is plenty for adults to enjoy. Not just the action, which animation has enabled to be more flexible and derring-do than *Spiderman*), but also the parody of ordinary living, the satire on science fiction and a good deal of humour.

Speaking of humour, actor Craig T. Nelson has never given the impression of being a comedian. He is usually a reliable hero (TV's *Coach*) or a solid leader or a solid villain. But he voices Mr Incredible with fine comic timing, pride and modesty and some nice romantic touches. Mr Incredible is extremely likable. Holly Hunter is recognizably welcome as Mrs Incredible (nee Elastogirl). Samuel L. Jackson voices their superhero friend.

One can only say again just how fluid, colourful, fast-paced and seemingly effortless the animation is that has created such an action-packed and amusing entertainment. It is a tribute to writer-director, Brad Bird.

MY HOUSE IN UMBRIA (US, 2004, d. Richard Loncraine)

Adapted from a novella by William Trevor, this is a very civilised entertainment, the kind they pick for Royal Command Performances. It is an interesting drama for adults, especially for those who are not as young as they used to be.

The plot is generally unpredictable except at the end (and why not?). What looks like another Maggie Smith performance as an agreeable/disagreeable eccentric marooned in Italy (after all, she did it in *Tea With Mussolini* and *A Room with a View*), turns out to be a pleasing sojourn in Umbria with more than

a little edge. And Maggie Smith as Mrs Delahunty does it perfectly. Who else can make a line like 'the brash technology of the 21st century' sound so haughtily off-putting?

Not knowing anything of the plot, I was pleased to discover it and so will merely mention that circumstances bring an unexpected group of people to the house in Umbria. They include Ronny Barker as a retired general – and his presence makes us regret his absence from the screen for so long. Timothy Spall is the factotum of the house. Chris Cooper (Adaptation, Seabiscuit, October Sky) is the American professor who finds it very difficult to cope with Mrs Delahunty. Giancarlo Giannini is a police investigator. Plays a traumatised young American girl and is a German journalist.

The film is not just a return to the past. Its themes, including terrorism, are quite contemporary. It has a satisfying blend of the old and the new.

Audiences who have been to Umbria will be making resolutions to return as soon as they can.

THE FORGOTTEN (US, 2004, d. Joseph Ruben)

Anyone seeing Julianne Moore's name as the star of this film might be expecting a strong drama about relationships. Actually, it is that, but it is more of a thriller, a chase thriller, with mysterious otherworldly elements that are usually the realm of science fiction and fantasy. Julianne Moore brings it dramatic intensity and class. An interesting supporting cast included Dominic West as a bereaved father, Anthony Edwards as her husband, Gary Sinise as her psychiatrist, Linus Roache as a mysterious stranger and Alfre Woodard as a police investigator.

These ingredients are in the hands of director Joseph Ruben who, for twenty years, has produced a series of smaller, intense thrillers including Dreamscape, The Stepfather, Sleeping With the Enemy, The Good Son. What is interesting about this film is that most of it seems like a terrestrial abduction case with authorities denying the crime and husband and psychiatrist diagnosing a psychotic creation of a child by a distraught mother. The extraterrestrial elements and effects are kept to a minimum – that makes it all that just bit more plausible. Julianne Moore is quite convincing as a mother mourning her child killed in a plane crash and who can't let go of him.

For those who like to jump out of their seats now and again, this film made me jump four times, especially an unexpected crash (excellent pieces of editing).

As with many of Joseph Ruben's film, it is of modest ambition and budget, but very successful in its genre.

LADIES IN LAVENDER (UK, 2004, d. Charles Dance)

Ladies in Lavender is set in the late 1930s and, in many ways, it could have been made at that time. Little surprise that it was the Royal Command Performance film for 2004.

Charles Dance, in his first writing and directing work, has adapted a novella about two older sisters living on the coast of Cornwall. He has been well served by his locations, the wild cliffs and beaches with both calm and pounding storms, and by the recreation of an English village of the times with its enclosed way of life. He has also been well served by his cast. The two sisters are played with the expected insight and intensity by Judi Dench and Maggie Smith. Daniel Bruehl (Goodbye Lenin, The Edukators) plays a mysterious young Pole who has been washed up on the beach and whom the sisters take care of, bringing out the maternal in them both, but rousing feelings in the sheltered spinster (Judi Dench) that she had never experienced. David Warner is the local doctor. Miriam Margolyes steals her scenes as the down-to-earth servant and Natascha McElhone is the elegant painter visiting the village.

Daniel Bruehl is charming as the young man and soon has everyone, including the audience, under his spell. This is enhanced when it emerges that he is a talented violinist (his playing dubbed by Joshua Bell).

Realistically, it is all a bit implausible – his rescuers do not really try to find out who the stranger is or what his background is, although the doctor is not above suggesting he is a spy because he speaks

German – and the ending is like a fairytale. But, for those who can suspend this disbelief and who appreciate the strong leading actresses, this excursion into lavender-land is pleasing old-fashioned (quite old-fashioned) entertainment.

BRIDGET JONES AND THE EDGE OF REASON (UK, 2004. d. Beeban Kidron)

Bridget Jones is an acquired taste – or a not-acquired taste. With the popularity of Helen Fielding's newspaper columns and her novels, Bridget Jones's Diary was a runaway cinema hit, especially for its target audiences, all those Bridget Jones's out there. And why would they not like some more. And here it is.

The novels not being on my list of intended reading, I rely on commentators who say that this film does not follow the novel as closely as the first film did. Be that as it may, it is very much like the first film except that the element of surprise has gone and Bridget has to do some awkward tricks to gain our attention (like sy diving on life TV into a pig sty or, more extreme, getting arrested in Bangkok for being an (unwitting) drug courier). Again she is just that bit older and is moving from the swinging phase of her life to something more like stability. She is no revolutionary, really, what she wants is love sweet love.

Love is in the form of Colin Firth who is once again a somewhat stolid Mr Darcy, even though he smiles more in this film and has another fight with Hugh Grant, falling into a fountain (twice). But this is the Colin Firth performance so who can complain. Shazza and all the friends are back, drinking, gossiping, interfering when they should be encouraging. We see too little of Bridget's parents (Jim Broadbent and Gemma Jones, although it is they who bring the warmth of love and tradition to the ending).

I am afraid I liked Hugh Grant. He is just as much the absolute cad, vain, preening, seductive (and not just in theory), with a byline in funny, bitchy one-liners. Things brightened up when he came on screen.

Renee Zellweger does her best as Bridget Jones and reminds us of her versatility (Chicago, Cold Mountain) as an actress. And, for many, like me, she will be Bridget Jones.

CHRISTMAS WITH THE KRANKS (US, 2004, d. Joe Roth)

The first surprise was that this film is based on a John Grisham story, Skipping Christmas. The second surprise is the film itself. I badly misread the cues in the screenplay in the first part of the film. When the Kranks see off their daughter to Peru to work for the Peace Corps and decide that they will go on a cruise at Christmas by themselves and save money by not having Christmas parties or gifts or house decorations, it seemed to me a very good idea. It was a blow against the commercialisation of Christmas. It was a protest against gaudy festoons and the clichés of 'the festive season'. How wrong could I be? Totally.

Tim Allen (looking severe for most of the film until a final private generous gesture that gave some decency to the story) and Jamie Lee Curtis (looking flustered, pratfalling and trying to cope with her daughter's fist Christmas away from home) are the Kranks. They immediately get the cold shoulder treatment at work and in the street. Apparently, with their decision to forego this kind of Christmas, they are the most self-centred, self-absorbed, un-community-minded, most derelict of civic sense, insidious destroyers of the American way of life. In fact, the Yuletide gruppenfuhrer of their street (Dan Aykroyd) leads the denunciations with a self-satisfied, eyebrow-raised expression of disbelief at this blatant expression of suburban treason. His stormtroopers begin to harass the Kranks. They are sorely tried but stick to their decision. No decorations, no Frosty the 7-foot Snowman on their roof, no lights.

Suddenly, their daughter announces she is coming home for Christmas and you have the fastest re-wind of attitudes in cinema history. They buy desperately, they borrow decorations and a Christmas tree from neighbours (their previous refusal to buy their usual tree is greeted with as much shock as if they had publicly announced they did not believe in God or the Stars and Stripes), Frosty comes out of the cellar – and everybody (who had until five seconds earlier were loathing the Kranks) pitches in to help out. Even Santa turns up to celebrate.

In thirty years time, cinema historians could be examining the sub-text of Christmas with the Kranks, seeing it as an allegory of G.W.Bush's America. Family values are supreme, enterprise is to be rewarded, all decent people appreciate Christmas - even though, with the separation of Church and State, there is absolutely no reference at all to Jesus or the Nativity, it is a completely secular Christmas of good cheer. The production notes tell us that director Joe Roth wanted to explore the 'mythology of Christmas' - but this is all he could come up with. It is Christmas without Christ. And if you don't follow what the all-American majority demand, you are pariahs. The review in London's Metro newspaper ended smartly, "Conform, all be faithful".

SURVIVING CHRISTMAS (US, 2004, d. Mike Mitchell)

Released just before Christmas with the Kranks, this festive season comedy seems far, far superior to the Kranks. Although the Christmas mythology, 'Christmas without Christ', is always in evidence, there is one scene with a crib, so, at least, somebody remembered the event on which the celebration is based.

Ben Affleck is the star and 2003-2004 were the years to berate Affleck just for being on the screen. Yes, he is often wooden. Yes, he has accepted roles that made too many demands on him that he could not meet (he definitely could not have won Pearl Harbor), but roles like this suit him best and he does quite a reasonable job here. He is a poor little rich boy who has no one to celebrate Christmas with. He visits his family home, finds what he thinks is a nice family and suggests that he stay with them for Christmas (and sweetens the suggestion with an offer of \$250,000 payment).

The comedy (strained at times) concerns his fitting in too well and not fitting in. James Gandolfini seems to be enjoying himself as the tough guy Dad as does Catherine O'Hara as Mum. It is Christina Applegate as the acerbic daughter who starts to spoil the arrangement. You know how it is going to end - after all, it is a Christmas show. It is the puzzle of how they get there, along with some funny sequences, that provides the entertainment. A Christmas timepasser.

NAPOLEON DYNAMITE (US, 2004, d. Jared Hess)

With a title like that, it has to be offbeat. It is.

Setting is Idaho and, I am afraid, the film is not conducive to buying tickets to visit that state. It seems flat and endless, with the usual small town, high school and shops, a bit like Anywheresville. Maybe, that's the kind of setting for a guy like Napoleon.

Napoleon (Jon Heder) is a nerd, a geek or whatever the current word is for a tall, moppy red-headed, bespectacled gangly and gawky adolescent with a penchant for saying the wrong or obnoxious thing. He has a (very) short bespectacled brother who eventually experiences a makeover during his girlfriend's visit - she is tall, black, sexy and from Detroit. He has a semi-sleazy salesman uncle.

He is looked down on by the jocks, despised by the beauty queens and, generally, seems to have nothing to offer. However, he grows on us and we really do hope that he will get on well with the nice girl who thinks he is wonderful (she does not judge just on appearances!) and find his way in life. And he makes every effort so that his Hispanic classmate will win the school student presidency.

This has 'cult film' all over it - and it seems already to be headed that way with box-office beyond expectations. It is small-budget (with the boom making frequent appearances at the top of the frame) with child star Tina Majorino the only name member of the cast.

Not necessary viewing but the film has a certain ditzzy charm that is sometimes quite beguiling.

LOS ANGELES PLAYS ITSELF (US, 2003, d. Thom Andersen)

Don't make the mistake I did with the IMDb website. I did what Thom Andersen is sternly advising us not to do in this documentary, call Los Angeles LA. If you search for this film using LA, you will find a 1972 gay pornographic movie of this title. This is not that film. Look for 'Los Angeles'.

What Thom Andersen has done is to collect an enormous number of movie clips from the 1930s to the 1990s and do something of an audiovisual masterclass on how Los Angeles has been interpreted in the movies and the repercussions for its own self-consciousness as well as for its reputation in the US and beyond.

The film lasts three hours plus an intermission (he wants it to seem as if you are getting a double feature program). One is in admiration of the work done in collecting, editing and structuring the film. For movie buffs it is quite exciting to see the clips – and make a list of those films one has not seen.

However...

Andersen's narration is not spoken by him. The voiceover he has chosen is almost monotone, rather expressionless, one might call it po-voiced. And the opinions (as in any lecture or class) need some challenge, disagreement or clarifying. In fact, the opinions expressed in the first two parts of the film were not persuasive. Sometimes they were platitudinous – and contemptuous of other opinions (especially Woody Allen's very funny comments in *Annie Hall*). At other times, they were portentous, seeming to be oracles – whereas they were simply opinions favourable to LA (oops, Los Angeles) by someone who loves the city and feels it is being underestimated. There is a lot of criticism of change, especially in architecture (and some helpful information about financial deals and profits) but they did seem to be over-extended laments for the past.

Andersen offers us a range of scenes of Los Angeles as background for stories in movies. Then he deals with Los Angeles as a character in many movies. His last part, Los Angeles as the subject of movies is far more interesting and his theoretical explorations more attention grabbing. Of course, Chinatown and *LA Confidential* are to the fore, as is *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. He calls these stories the secret history of Los Angeles, the kind of secret history that we relish because it takes us behind the scenes to a murky moral world. He points out, with shots of newspapers of the times in which the films were set, that this was much more out in the open and that the story of the exploration and exploitation of Los Angeles is even more interesting.

THE NINTH DAY/ DER NEUNTE TAG (Luxembourg/Germany, 2004, d. Volker Schlöndorff)

This film statement is not about a controversial film. Rather, *The Ninth day* concerns OCIC (the former Organisation Catholique du Cinema Internationale) and SIGNIS (the present World Catholic Association for Communication).

It is based on a short memoir written by Fr Jean Bernard at the end of World War II, after his release from Dachau. At the outbreak of war, the OCIC Secretariat in Brussels was occupied by the Germans. Jean Bernard was the secretary general. Abbe Brohee, the president, remained during the war years as chaplain to a convent outside the city. He died in 1946. Jean Bernard had returned to his native Luxembourg. However, he was arrested at the French border and sent to Dachau. OCIC was targeted by the Germans as it had not spoken out in favour of the occupying forces and Jean Bernard had written articles which were interpreted as critical of the regime.

After the war, Jean Bernard went to Switzerland to recuperate but was back in Brussels by 1946 preparing for a congress. He became president of OCIC in 1947 and remained in that position until 1972. During his presidency, OCIC began its jury work at world film festivals, in Venice in 1948, Cannes in 1952, Berlin in 1954. During the 1950s, juries were established in Spain and in Latin America. There was also an annual Grand Prix. Winners of this award included *La Strada* (1954), *On the Waterfront* (1955), *The Prisoner* (1956).

Jean Bernard contributed to church thinking on media at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and in subsequent years. He also steered OCIC through difficult times when there was strong questioning of its decisions, a prize to Pasolini's *Teorema* in Venice, 1969, and to John Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy* in Berlin, 1970. After his retirement he returned to Luxembourg and worked for Catholic media. He also hosted several OCIC meetings there. He died in 1994.

Jean Bernard never revealed the reason for the nine day leave he was given from Dachau in January 1942. The screenplay for the film, *The Ninth Day*, speculates and creates a plausible fiction. In the film, Bernard is called Henri Kremer (played by Ulrich Matthes). He comes from a respectable family,

his brother an industrialist working for the regime. Kremer has been told by a young SS officer (August Diehl) to visit the Archbishop (who has retreated to his home, refusing to collaborate) and persuade him to support the occupying administration and save the Catholic Church, promising that in the post-war Reich the Church would play a significant role. The varying opinions about the role of Pius XII are discussed. If Kremer does not return by the ninth day, the priests in Dachau will be executed.

Distinguished German director, Volker Schlöndorff, has made an intelligent drama that raises the principal issues of the war in Europe: Aryan supremacy, the extermination of the Jews, occupying forces and government, collaboration and resistance, torture and executions, the role of religion and the Catholic Church. The young SS officer (who is revealed to have been a seminarian and ordained deacon but who opted for the Reich to better the world) argues that Jesus went beyond Judaism and that this was the vision of Judas, that his 'betrayal' of Jesus and his own past was a heroic action. Kremer returns to Dachau.

Audiences have seen concentration camp films for many decades. Schlöndorff, however, brings a forcefully grim style to his sequences, including the crucifixion and crowning with barbs of a Polish priest. He also highlights the moral integrity of the prisoners, especially Kremer's acknowledging to himself on his return that he is in the place where he should be, where God wanted him to be.

LEVITY (US, 2003, d. Ed Solomon)

Levity is certainly not a film of levity. Perhaps it could well have been called Gravity. It was written and directed by Ed Solomon, a screenwriter in Hollywood whose films include Men in Black. Levity could not be more opposite to entertainment than Men in Black.

Billy Bob Thornton, in very serious mode, plays a convict released from jail after nineteen years' sentence for killing a boy. He has faced a photo of the boy every day in his cell and is determined to change his life and make reparation to the mother of the boy. Receiving a strange phone call, he encounters an enigmatic Preacher played by Morgan Freeman. This Preacher is the catalyst for Billy Bob Thornton's change of heart, working for charity, rediscovering some kind of God-language.

The other people he encounters are principally a rich young girl who comes to the soup kitchen, is a drug addict, and whom he helps to restore to her family. She is played by Kirsten Dunst. The other central character is the mother of the murdered boy, whom he follows. He becomes friends with her and only then revealing the truth. The mother is played by Holly Hunter. With such a strong ensemble cast and with serious writing by Solomon, this is a very serious look at human nature, good and evil, the possibility of forgiveness, atonement, reconciliation.

TRIPLE CHRONICLES

Triple Chronicles is a film critical of war. It comprises three short stories, each about 35 minutes long. They each have different directors.

The first episode, Little Dreams, is a fantasy, a critique of war, especially developing an attitude towards war and warmongering in the minds of children. A man locks up his shop, is suddenly found to be in an artificial court, presided over by a long-haired judge, defended by a large man, the image of himself. As the proceedings go on, it emerges that as a child he coveted a plane that a toyshop seller would not allow him to buy. His tantrums at home drive his father and mother berserk and they attempt to buy the plane. As he grows up, he becomes a cowardly soldier, involved in all the action of war but in fact also hiding and wanting to be transferred to a distant post. Into this fantasy are put scenes of dictators like Hitler and Mussolini, war sequences of World War II as well as of the Iraq war. Finally, the judge is found to be another version of the man on trial - and we then see him locking his shop and dying.

THE SACRED FOOTSTEPS

The Sacred Footsteps is a film that would play well only in Iran itself or in countries who understood the social and religious conditions that it portrays. It would be too difficult for a western audience.

The film focuses on a young man who is about to go on a pilgrimage to a shrine. He has been doing odd jobs in the village where he has grown up, assists the expert who is leading excavations of an old site, expecting to find a temple. During his stay at the shrine, he has a dream and is directed by an outstretched arm to return to the village to try to discover who his parents were.

In the village, the people help on the site of the excavations, run shops, carry out their ordinary lives. However, they are often cantankerous with each other, shouting and yelling. They are particularly severe towards a young boy whom they chase and beat.

After looking at a portrait of the particular people, especially the middle-aged and older men and their own disputes about shop-owning and lawsuits, it emerges in flashbacks that the young man's mother had been killed by the townspeople. She had been pregnant, one of the women had taken the baby and brought it up with her own child, their playing as brother and sister. There was speculation as to who was the father or who had had relationships with the woman. However, it seems that she was married or linked to an artist who had decorated the shrine and who was now dead. None of this had been told to the young man.

He had fallen in love with the girl who was supposed to be his sister, she is about to be married to another man. The small boy overhears the discussions about the truth and finally reveals it to the young man, the townspeople admit what had happened. He attends the ceremony of the marriage between his stepsister and the young man, finally holding a branch of lamps and moving with it in ceremonial ritual signifying that he was of age, accepted, and reconciled with the villagers. However, next morning the boy sees on the wall of his hut a drawing which indicates that he himself has gone on a long journey.

The film uses many Iranian religious rituals, ceremonies as well as folklore and speculation about moral law in Islam.

THE RAGE IN PLACID LAKE

This is what many commentators like to call a quirky little Australian comedy. It is humorous, has eccentric characters, eccentric interactions.

The focus is on a young man, Placid Lake, who decides that the important thing for him to do in his life is to be conventional. The film, therefore, is one of the generation gap, insofar as his parents are still living a way-out kind of life, interested in their professions, certainly advocating social protest against all authority. The comedy is in Placid trying to find his way, surfacing his resentment against his parents as well as the parents trying to deal with this seemingly recalcitrant son. The parents are played by Gary McDonald, echoes of his Norman Gunston character, and British actress Miranda Richardson. Placid himself is played by Ben Lee. Rose Byrne appears as his love interest and support.

The film is directed and written by first-time director Tony McNamara. It appeared in 2003, somewhat after the vogue for quirky comedies and in a year that was not an outstanding one in the Australian film industry. It therefore stood out as a film of better quality than average in this year.

THE AGRONOMIST

The Agronomist is a striking documentary made by feature film director and Oscar winner, Jonathan Demme (Silence of the Lambs, Married to the Mob, Philadelphia, Beloved). Demme also made a number of documentaries, especially the musical concert, Stop Making Sense. He has strong experience to make this documentary both worthwhile as a document and to give it narrative dynamism.

The film is a portrait of Haiti from the 20s to the beginning of the 21st century. It shows the extraordinary changes, socially and politically over that period, especially through the media. The focus is on Jean Dominique, who was a pioneer of film-making and of radio broadcasting in Haiti. The portrait is also of his wife Michelle Montas. Demme had met them when they were in exile in New York City in 1991, proposed a portrait documentary, continued to film Dominique over a period of ten years until his death in

2000. Demme was also able to get a great range of documentary footage from the past as well as more contemporary footage.

The film is exciting in its portrait of Dominique who was a very lively character with significant points of view about politics. The Agronomist is a striking documentary made by feature film director and Oscar winner, Jonathan Demme (Silence of the Lambs, Married to the Mob, Philadelphia, Beloved). Demme also made a number of documentaries, especially the musical concert, Stop Making Sense. He has strong experience to make this documentary both worthwhile as a document and to give it narrative dynamism.

The film is a portrait of Haiti from the 20s to the beginning of the 21st century. It shows the extraordinary changes, socially and politically over that period, especially through the media. The focus is on Jean Dominique, who was a pioneer of film-making and of radio broadcasting in Haiti. The portrait is also of his wife Michelle Montas. Demme had met them when they were in exile in New York City in 1991, proposed a portrait documentary, continued to film Dominique over a period of ten years until his death in 2000. Demme was also able to get a great range of documentary footage from the past as well as more contemporary footage.

The film is exciting in its portrait of Dominique who was a very lively character with significant points of view on

SILENCE BETWEEN TWO THOUGHTS

Silence Between Two Thoughts is the work of Babak Payami, the Afghan-born director of such films as The Secret Ballot. This film was made in Afghanistan and Iran but, during 2003, the footage was confiscated by the Iranian government. Payami put together material from his final cut as well as material that he had prepared for editing in order to show the film, in incomplete form, at festivals around the world so that audiences would see the film and understand something of the religious and secular tensions in Iran.

The setting is Afghanistan, a village where a local group is in charge, violently, the leader relying on the Koran for his domination of the village people and appointing a man to be the executioner of those who did not conform. A crisis looms when the woman he is about to shoot is understood to be a virgin and therefore cannot be executed. The solution is for him to marry her and then execute her. This is a challenge to his own simple-minded and single-minded beliefs, allowing the woman some freedom, even allowing her to go on a women's pilgrimage to a shrine. This puts him at a disadvantage with the people turning against him and the leader denouncing him.

The film ends with a confrontation between the man and the people, his values in confusion. At the opening, in a very long single-shot opening scene which focuses on him shooting people and then circles around him to show his being on guard in the village, he undergoes a journey from fanaticism if not to resolution at least to a questioning of what was happening. The director says that the silence between two thoughts refers to the moment when an individual or a whole society wakes up from the nightmare of blind conviction. The director states that he is very strong against religious fanaticism - especially with relationship to the Taliban in Afghanistan.

BRIGHT FUTURE

Bright Future is a strange film, an eerie atmosphere, a parable about evil in society. It focuses on two young men, one a very mysterious and eccentric young man, locked in his own world, the other his co-worker who turns out to be the more evil of the two. The latter has a pet jellyfish which is potentially poisonous.

The jellyfish serves as an image of the two young men, both of them poisonous and destroying those they come in contact with. When their boss at work is killed by the jellyfish, its owner is taken to prison and dies. The central young man inherits the jellyfish but loses it, it enters into the waters of Tokyo and becomes destructive while multiplying. The jellyfish can be destructive as well as being a creature of beauty which can make its way to the sea.

The film is a strange psychological drama, a comment on Japanese society and the potential for destruction as well as being a reflection on evil.

THE MAGIC GLOVES

The Magic Gloves is set in Buenos Aires, in a poorer part of the city, where things have gone downhill. In fact, the writer-director is creating a microcosm of a world going downhill where everybody is less than might seem on the surface.

The focus is on Alejandro, a taxi driver who breaks up with his girlfriend who is prone to put on weight, take drugs and take it off and is emotionally unstable (but who becomes friendly with the man who walks dogs and then with a Canadian involved in film-making). He encounters a producer of CDs (impossible rock music) and his wife as well as the brother, a porn star who has migrated to Canada. He also meets up with a flight attendant who is actually a travel agent for local cheap flights. The film shows their interactions.

In fact, the film also shows how they do not really succeed in what they do. This is symbolised by an investment in what are called magic gloves which are going to protect people in the wintry cold of Argentina. However, the cold in Buenos Aires is unseasonal and does not stay. They lose their money. Alejandro finishes up driving buses for a company having lost his own car - which he keeps pursuing throughout the countryside.

The film doesn't end, it just seems to stop. However, on the way we are treated to a gallery of characters and made to reflect on Argentinian society and what it has experienced in terms of prosperity and failure of prosperity.

LILY'S STORY

Lily's Story is a Greek film on the film industry. It works on three levels, focusing on a story in present-day Greece and then moving back into the memories of the central characters. The location photography is quite striking and extends from Greece through the Balkans to Italy. The star of the film is Italian actress Anna Galiena who brings a dignity and strength to the film.

LOVE IN THOUGHTS

Love in Thoughts is a story, based on fact, of young people in between-wars Germany, 1927. The focus is on a weekend where two friends discuss suicide and the weekend ends in a murder and a suicide.

The film was based on the story of Paul Krantz (played by Daniel Bruhl, the star of Goodbye Lenin). A poet, he wrote up the story of this seeming suicide pact (from which he withdrew because it was suicide merely in thought) and then went into exile. The film focuses on the friendship, the infatuation of the young man for his friend's sister, his relationship with her best friend.

The film recreates the period with costumes, décor, locations, music. The film is intense, shows the decadent side of German society, affluent society, between the wars - with the implication that his group of people would eventually vote for Hitler.

THE STORY OF THE WEEPING CAMEL (INGEN NUMSIL)

The Story of the Weeping Camel is a documentary drama photographed in Southern Mongolia. The director came from this part of the world and wanted to present the life of the nomads in the Gobi Desert. While he grew up in the city, his grandparents led the kind of life that is depicted in the film. The film

focuses on a family, their relationships, the different generations, the wisdom of the grandparents, the practicalities of the parents, the portrait of two young brothers and their very little sister. The film's details of life in the home, with the detail of the interiors of the tent home, are often quite funny and moving. The film focuses also on the camels, the grandfather beginning with a story about camels originally having antlers as a gift from God, lending them to the envious deer, who went off and never returned, leaving the camels perpetually staring into the distance. The film focuses on a very difficult birth by a camel, the mother's disdain for her young, the desperation of the young colt to feed from his mother. The family send the young boys into the town to bring a violinist to play a ritual musical soothing for the camel - which is effective. The film also shows the young boys interested in city life, in television - and the aftermath of the film with their setting up a satellite dish outside their tent. The film was the official Mongolian entry for the Oscar nominations for best foreign language film.

ROADS TO KOKTEBEL

Roads to Koktebel is a story of father and son, the father a widower, journeying with his son, aged eleven, to the Crimea from Moscow. They hitchhike, get casual work along the way, get on empty carriages in trains. The film shows the strong relationship between father and son, the son learning much from his educated father who has had a drinking problem. The father cares for the son.

The film focuses on the often drab and desolate landscapes through which they travel, the wintry look, the isolation and loneliness. They meet a number of people who help them but clash with an old man who persuades the father to return to drink. The journey ends in the Crimea, a sunlit sea resort, crowded streets, contemporary living where the boy has to ponder his future and his father comes to get him to shape the future.

The film is strong emotionally, the performance are very good. The film is a road and journey film but it also highlights the human dimensions of the story.

SUMMER IN THE GOLDEN VALLEY

Summer in the Golden Valley is a story of post-Balkan conflict Sarajevo. The title indicates a wonderful time and a wonderful place. However, the point of the title is quite ironic, the comment on Sarajevo and its seeming to be a derelict city, the aftermath of bombings, the aftermath on people's characters, struggling to survive. There is a motif of a plane flying over the city throughout the film, the flight attendant telling the people that they will soon be far away from this city. From the outside, the young hero indicates to his girlfriend and to the girl that he abducts how the plane glows in the sun but casts a shadow over the city.

The director made the film in his early thirties. His comments indicate that the 90s were not only a terrible time but left the next generation a legacy of destroyed cities, chaos and a loss of principle. His generation wants to forget about the past and make new beginnings. He was in his early thirties at the time he made this film.

The film focuses on a sixteen-year-old, a rather nondescript-looking boy who idles his time away, is grieved with the death of his father, finds that his father owed a huge debt and tries to find a way to pay it back, which includes being the pawn of a corrupt policeman and his participation, with his glue-sniffing friend, in an abduction. In many ways, the abduction goes wrong but enables him to repay the debt which, he discovers, was a fiction of the man who demanded it. Left to himself, he has the option to give up or to make new decisions. It is of interest that the central characters are Muslim - but, apart from the funeral, show little indication of the kind of devotion to religion that Muslims have in other cultures.

THE HEROIC TRIO

The Heroic Trio is part of the martial arts genres of the Hong Kong film industry, especially with the genre of the fighting women. The film has a strong star cast with the late Anita Mui as the wife of a policeman who, at night, becomes a kind of Wonder Woman (with Maggie Chung [Irma Vepp] as a bounty hunter and Michelle Yeoh [Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon] as a renegade in the power of a mad magician). The film moves from the fantasy world of the magician, with all kinds of magic powers, invisible capes, to the real world of Hong Kong and police investigation. The rather grim story is about babies being

abducted so that the mad magician can find a future King of China - and there are some gruesome scenes of the babies chomping on human flesh as they become power machines.

The film works very well, combining the two worlds - even in the magic world with a whole range of contemporary computers. There are martial arts flights, fights and choreography. Some consider this film and others like it as the Hong Kong version of Charlie's Angels.

JULY RHAPSODY

July Rhapsody is a human drama. It focuses on a middle-aged teacher, his dedication to his job, the attraction towards a student who pushes herself towards him, the alienation from his wife of twenty years, his relationship with his sons. The film is presented in a gentle manner, reflecting the rowdiness of schoolchildren and high school students at the beginning of the 21st century while also showing the quieter side of family life. Jackie Chung is excellent as the teacher, gradually allowing himself to be attracted by the student, with difficulties with his wife. These are explained only towards the end of the film and make a great deal of sense, the wife having had an abortion because she was pregnant to a married teacher in the past. She is now looking after him because he is dying. The film parallels the wife with the young girl and her flirtation with the teacher.

The film also has a great love for Chinese poetry, many quotations, references to the beauties of the Yangtze River.

While the film is quiet in tone, its emotions run deeper than the surface and there is a satisfying reconciliation with the husband and wife being more open and truthful to each other, honest with their children, the young girl making a decision to make her own life and break off with the teacher, realising what she had put him through.

Anita Mui was a famous Hong Kong star. This was her last film. Ann Hui is a veteran of the Hong Kong film industry with such diverse projects as Summer Snow, about Alzheimer's, and Ordinary Heroes which is a historical drama.

YOSSI AND JAEGER

Yossi and Jaeger is a brief Israeli film which raises questions about two issues, social and personal.

The social issue is that of the military, Israel's defence and defensiveness, especially with young recruits, especially with those doing National Service, both men and women. The film shows the outposts, their activities, the camaraderie, the pressures. It also shows the superiors, chain of command. It also shows the dangers and military action and death.

The personal issue is that of homosexuality, the two central characters are in a relationship, are soldiers, on the outpost, concealing the relationships, while trying to give it expression. The film shows the pressures of secrecy as well as military life on this kind of relationship.