

FILMS ON SCREEN, JANUARY, 2005

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This is a service of the SIGNIS Website, presenting reviews by Peter Malone of films that have been screening during the previous month.

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AFTER THE SUNSET (US, 2004, d. Brett Ratner)

Even Pierce Brosnan referred to After the Sunset as a popcorn movie. It has plenty of pop and plenty of corn.

After his James Bond films, Brosnan tries to do films that seems the antithesis of Bond. This is one of those caper stories. Despite his scruffy appearance, Brosnan is still, underneath, the suave well-spoken gentleman. Even if he is a famous jewel thief trying to live it down in the Caribbean, it doesn't matter. He is much the same.

Obviously, he is relaxing in this film. Salma Hayek is laying it on as a sex symbol and Woody Harrelson is laying it back as an FBI agent who is pursuing his quarry. Don Cheadle is a local nasty.

With plenty of panoramas of tropical islands, palm trees and sea sunsets, there is a diamond robbery, some chases, shootouts and double crosses. The innovative aspect is that Brosnan has the technology to trap people in cars and drive them by remote control.

Director, Brett Ratner, has shown he can direct a range of genres: Rush Hour, Family Man, the Hannibal Lecter drama, Red Dragon. It is all matinee stuff for the adult audience where film-makers and audiences are all on auto-pilot.

ALEXANDER (US, 2004, d. Oliver Stone)

In the wake of *Gladiator* and *Troy* comes this spectacular epic of the Macedonian world conqueror who has long been called The Great. Box office and critics have been initially unkind to the film. It is not an easy watch. For the uninitiated and the uninterested in Ancient History, it is a hard slog indeed.

That having been said, there is a great deal to admire about the film as well as to criticise.

All things considered, Alexander gives not only a portrait of the man and his exploits but gives a reasonable overview of the history and ethos of the period. (although when you think the film must be nearing Alexander's death, there is a caption, 8 years earlier, and a long and significant flashback is inserted which would have been better appreciated if it had been included much earlier in its proper chronological place).

The framework of the film is Ptolemy (one of Alexander's generals and his successor in Egypt) dictating his memoirs forty years later. This voiceover carries a lot of the narrative as well as giving explanations of who is who (which may still not be all that clear for audiences unfamiliar with the history). The voiceover also involves quite a bit of mythmaking as well, interpreting Alexander as great and eulogising him. This older Ptolemy is played by an erudite and articulate Anthony Hopkins.

Audiences will be wondering what Colin Farrell is like as Alexander. He is a touch 'diminutive' for a legend of such stature. Nevertheless he has a screen presence and quite skilfully portrays Alexander from 19 to 32, convincingly young, morose, immature but with potential, through the triumphs, especially the battle of Gaugamala, the expeditions beyond Babylon and his ageing and the toll this takes on him. He changes from ambitious boy to successful conqueror of the world (at 25) to a tragic figure whose flaws (his need for his father's approval and his tendency to forget his more democratic hopes for a united world and lapsing into despotic exercises of power and violence) mean that he does not provide for his succession and leaves a divided empire with squabbling generals.

Angelina Jolie suggests a Lady Macbeth figure as she plots, dotes on her son, despises her husband – and she carries this off very well. Val Kilmer (one eye gone and a boisterous lecher, moody with his son) is Philip of Macedon.

Jared Leto is too laid back as Hephaestion, the boyhood friend whom Alexander loves and trusts. Rosario Dawson has to be tempestuous as Roxanne.

The battle sequences, one in the desert with a (CGI) cast of thousands, the other with elephants in the jungles of India are impressively shot and edited with a score by Vangelis.

Since the film was co-written and directed by Oliver Stone, it is not a reticent production. Stone has long been interested in war and in the exercise of power (Platoon, JFK, Nixon). He gives his film an aura of Shakespearean tragedy, the fall of a great man because of his hubris and flaws. This means that Alexander is very ambitious, is crammed with incident and themes, which make it an unwieldy but thoughtful epic.

MEET THE FOCKERS (US, d. Jay Roach)

Of course, if you liked *Meet the Parents*, you will want to know what happens when Greg (Gaylord Focker) introduces his parents to his humourlessly intense future father-in-law, Jack Burns. Even if you come across this film first, you will be intrigued to know what is going to happen when uptight meets old-fashioned hippie lovelies.

This is American farce, with more than a touch of the lowbrow, and some critics have turned up their noses. What is Robert de Niro doing in films like this? Has his career come to an end? (This has been seriously asked by several reviewers.) And what on earth is Dustin Hoffman doing here, let alone Barbra Streisand? When you meet the Fockers, you realise that they are all enjoying themselves and communicating this fun to a willing audience. I, for one, had a smile on my face all the time – as well as having some good laughs. Lowbrow at times, but funny!

Last time, Robert de Niro had the showy part as the ex-CIA agent who applied his surveillance techniques and interrogation processes to his whole family, but especially to his prospective son-in-law whom he did not like at all. Ben Stiller was the fall guy and played it to the hilt. While they both are back doing a repeat performance, their comic timing and skills can be underestimated because when we meet the Fockers, they take over. Dustin Hoffman has done some great comedy turns, especially in Tootsie, and he is at his best here. As the ultra-sensitive, non-competitive, home parent who enjoys life, he is very funny. And Barbra Streisand as an old-time, updated sex therapist for the octogenarians of Florida, matches him well.

There is farce, double entendres and a whole lot of single entendres of the toilet variety, pratfalls, parody and satire on the uptightness of the American puritanical work ethic tradition. Blythe Danner and Teri Polo appear again as De Niro's wife and daughter and, just when you thought Owen Wilson was not going to join up with Ben Stiller yet again, he does! It should be added that a baby steals a lot of the scenes – so, there could be another Focker instalment.

OCEAN'S TWELVE (US. 2004. d. Steven Soderbergh)

It's more of the same. If you enjoyed Oceans Eleven, then why not the sequel?

All the crew are back again. After all, casino owner, Andy Garcia, who was robbed last time, wants his money back – with interest. How can they get the money when so many of them have spent a great deal of it? Another robbery, of course. However, this is not so meticulously planned as the first time. In fact, the screenplay leaves quite a number of holes until the end and I am not sure whether we could all accurately given an account of what happened chronologically if we were interviewed as we came out of the cinema.

The action takes place in more exotic locations than in Las Vegas. There are episodes in Amsterdam, northern Italy, Spain and the main action in Rome. It all looks postcard-attractive.

George Clooney leads the new rat pack with Brad Pitt as his loyal lieutenant (though not as funny as the first time). The funny bits are left to Matt Damon who plays shrewd dimwit very amusingly. Elliot Gould has some good lines too. Pity that Don Cheadle brought his faux London accent back.

There is glamour aplenty with Catherine Zeta Jones. There is glamour lacking with Julia Roberts who looks quite terribly gaunt. However, she has an enjoyable time as her character, Tess, has to facilitate the robbery by pretending to be - Julia Roberts on a visit to Rome. Good fun satirising the cult of celebrities, especially with Bruce Willis there as himself trying to chat up Julia/Tess. Vincent Cassell has a substantial role as their rival cat burglar.

And that's about it.

CLOSER (US, 2004, d. Mike Nichols)

Patrick Marber has adapted his award-winning play for the screen. However, it still seems very much a filmed play, relying on (very frank) dialogue, with much of the action happening off-screen and the time lapses between acts left for the audience to work out for themselves. It has been pointed out that director Mike Nichols' first film was Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf* almost forty years earlier. Closer has similar themes: sexuality, love, marriage, betrayal, cruelty.

This is a film about very unhappy people. They grope (often literally) for happiness which always seems to elude them. It is very hard to empathise with them even though we know that this is the kind of struggle and depression that many people experience.

The initial focus is on an obituary writer played by Jude Law. He meets a young American stripper (Natalie Portman) after she is knocked over by a car in a London street. In no time, he has written a novel based on her life and they are living together. When he is being photographed for the book's cover, he is attracted by the photographer (Julia Roberts). The fourth partner is a doctor (Clive Owen) who dallies in

internet sex chat rooms (a powerful sequence highlighting the impersonal deceit of such communication and its indulgent lechery), is set up to meet the photographer and lives with her.

The emotional immaturity of the characters takes its toll as they betray each other, the only one eliciting some sympathy being the stripper, who is the most honest of the four (and then not entirely).

The acting is to be admired. The dialogue is sparse, sometimes crude, sometimes incisive, sometimes cruel. In fact, it is a grim drama of suffering people whose torment is often of their own making.

WHITE NOISE (US, 2004, d. Geoffrey Sax)

The film opens with what may or may not be a quotation from Thomas Edison. He suggests that there may come a time when technology will be able to pick up messages from the other side. Ghosts and ectoplasm have had to do their bit (and have enlivened many a movie) but White Noise suggests that electronic phenomena, both audio and video (which show up on screens as those oscillating lines of white noise) are on the way to do the trick. At this moment, they are not exactly clear, which gives the film writer enough scenes of recording and enhancing sound to bump up the tension – and there are two jump out of chair scenes as well.

And, if you believe in this kind of messaging from the dead, you will believe anything, especially the alleged statistics offered at the beginning and end. Apparently, a high percentage of such messages are threats rather than friendly.

This is an ordinary and OK show with Michael Keaton grieving over his dead wife and becoming obsessed with the voices from the beyond, especially when he starts rescuing people from disasters that he sees before they happen thanks to his wife's intervention. One trouble is that all the people she warns about have been clients of the electronic channeller (Ian McNeice). One of them is a bereaved woman, Deborah Kara Unger.

Because the messages involve threats and physical danger, the film is something of a crime thriller as well – giving Michael Keaton plenty of opportunity to be anguished. It's the kind of plot popular in recent Japanese movies like *The Ring*, *The Grudge*, *Into the Mirror*, *Chaos*, *Deep Water*. Perhaps we can look forward this time to a Japanese remake.

THE AVIATOR (US, 2004, d. Martin Scorsese)

Golden Globe winner for Best Picture and a nod for Leonardo di Caprio as Best Actor, this is a Hollywood epic about one of the United States leading capitalist giants who led a glamorous life before mental illness got the better of him and he lived and died an eccentric recluse, Howard Hughes.

For those who know of Hughes only through his final years, this film may prove a very interesting surprise. It is really a tribute to him, an acknowledgement of his achievement in the field of aviation, an acknowledgement of his eccentric achievement in movies. It is also an affectionate tribute to him. Martin Scorsese's direction enhances John Logan's very sympathetic screenplay, giving something of a glow, especially to the 1920s and 1930s when Hughes was a hero and a glamorous playboy as well. The lighting for the 1940s approaches the light of day as Hughes's story has to face harsher realities.

Hughes was also known as a womaniser, especially with Hollywood film stars. This is all in the film – although again he appears as less of a predator with expectations that women will fall for him (they generally do) but a more gentle man who is hurt by rejection.

Leonardo di Caprio proves again what a talented actor he is (think *This Boy's Life*, *Gilbert Grape*, *Romeo and Juliet*) playing Hughes both younger and older than di Caprio is.

There are many fascinating sections of *The Aviator*. The years of filming his World War I movie, *Hell's Angels*, the clash with the Motion Picture Board because of Jane Russell's famous cleavage in *The Outlaw*;

the design of his planes and his testing them as well as his breaking flying records, the establishing of TWA (and his rivalry with Pan Am boss, Juan Rippe (Alec Baldwin)), the design of the Hercules, his two spectacular crashes and his injuries; the 1947 Senate Hearings to defend his good name against the allegations of Senator Brewster (Alan Alda), where di Caprio is very strong; and the glimpses of Hughes's fastidiousness, growing obsession with cleanliness, culminating in a powerful sequence of his seclusion. This is the stuff of good drama.

The Hollywood side is taken care of with his visits to the Coconut Grove, his years with Katherine Hepburn (who was exhilarated by his flying), relationships with the young starlet, Faith Domergue, and with Ava Gardner. Cate Blanchett gives an eerie and fascinating impersonation of Katherine Hepburn, mannerisms and all. The sequence where Hughes meets her family and they talk down to him is nervy. Kate Beckinsale is Ava Gardner but does not give any impersonation of her at all, which is very disappointing and just makes her an independent spirit who is kind to Hughes.

Almost three hours in length, audiences might be dipping in and out of *The Aviator*, depending on their main interests in Hughes, his life and career.

WE DON'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE (US, 2004, d. John Curran)

A hit on the art film circuit, but little mainstream release. A pity, because this is a strong film about very unhappy people.

It is directed by American John Curran who spent some time in Australia and made the award-winning film, *Praise*. The cast is excellent. Mark Ruffalo is the centre of the film as a suburban lecturer who is weary of his highly-strung wife who loves him deeply but whose management of the house is sloppy (Laura Dern). He is attracted to the somewhat prim (though crass when she speaks about relationships) wife of his best friend, creative writer professor and novelist (Peter Krause). The first couple have two children, the latter a daughter.

Not much happens on the surface. The couples visit, go to parties, look after the house and children, shop. The husbands deal with students, are competitive in running.

Beneath the surface and the deep emotional instability of each character is where the film's action is. The creative writer is a philanderer who has fallen out of love with his wife. He flirts with his friend's wife who feels driven into an affair. His wife has fallen in love with his friend and he with her. We chart the ups and downs of the relationships through strong dialogue and emotionally affecting scenes. We wonder about the consequences.

The test for how we respond to the film is where our sympathies are drawn to. Mark Ruffalo makes his character's behaviour credible but selfish and manipulative. Laura Dern is absolutely convincing as an authentic desperate housewife. Naomi Watts is both charming and naively self-centred, except for her daughter. Peter Krause is convincing as the character we like least.

This is thoughtful drama about people who may be our neighbours. There is more substance to these characters and their experiences than those in the similarly-themed *Closer*.

WITHOUT A PADDLE (US, 2004, d. Steven Brill)

Well, we all know what waterway we're in when we have no paddle. This is what it is like when we have three adults who still yearn for their younger days and have failed to grow up emotionally – but that makes it sound much too deep for what it is, a raucous male bonding comedy with plenty of sex and excremental jokes. But, be warned, it takes the moral high ground much of the time and preaches about wasting opportunities in our lives and not being authentic. Perhaps that is why it has performed so well at the box-office, a blend of the silly and the profound.

It obviously has memories of *Deliverance* in mind as our three heroes go out into the wilds of Northwest America on a quest to find the treasure of D.B.Cooper in memory of a dead friend, go out on a kind of City Slickers' outdoors maturing process, and meet, of all people, Burt Reynold's as a reclusive mountain man. They also meet a bear who gives new meaning to the saying of what a bear does in the woods – he has to because this activity is in keeping with the name of that creek where you are without a paddle! There are gross hillbillies, a crooked sheriff and some bikini-clad ecological warriors.

You know whether you want to see it or not.

Matthew Lillard is one of the stars, toned down from a lot of his performances, especially in the Scooby Doo films. However, Seth Green is a good actor and a talented comedian who is generally worth watching.

WICKER PARK (US, 2004, d. Paul McGuigan)

Paul McGuigan has directed a somewhat strange range of films, Scottish realism in *Acid Trip*, London Mob violence in *Gangster No. 1* and the Middle Ages in *The Reckoning*. Now he tries his hand at his first American film which is, in fact, a remake of the 90s French psychological thriller, *The Apartment*. It has been transferred to Chicago and its *Wicker Park*.

This is a difficult film to follow as it shifts in time, probing memories and creating its narrative in jigsaw puzzle fashion, scattering the pieces and relying on players to find the connections. What initially seemed an unkind remark by one reviewer – that the protagonists should have made more use of their mobile phones to get in touch with each other – actually seems a very sensible suggestion. But, of course, that would have meant quite another film.

The focus is on Josh Hartnett, usually a sombre screen presence and this is no exception. The object of his infatuation is a dancer played by Diane Kruger (*National Treasure* and *Helen in Troy*). Her best friend is played by Australian Rose Byrne (also in *Troy*). While she is in a relationship with Matthew Lillard (whose bewilderment at times mirrors that of the audience), she has set her sights on Josh Hartnett. Like many a psychological puzzle, when the picture is put together, it seems far less of a mystery and, in fact, might seem fairly straightforward, even obvious. This is the impact of *Wicker Park* – puzzle over the puzzle, admire the visual style, but then wonder whether it was quite worth the effort.

NATIONAL TREASURE (US, 2004, d. Jon Turteltaub)

Dan Brown has a lot to answer for. Even though he did not initiate religious and political conspiracy theories with mysterious codes to decipher (in fact, he is quite derivative of a long line of novels and studies), he has so popularised them with his *Angels and Demons* (which is a better read than its *Da Vinci* sequel, though both would fail any basic history or religion exam) and the extraordinary best-selling history of *The Da Vinci Code* that we can expect any number of books and films that set us going on codes. What is it about us that codes and conspiracies have more credibility than actual history?

This can serve as a prologue to a review of a very entertaining actioner, *National Treasure*. It works very well and can serve as a guilty pleasure if seen by workaholics or serious historians. And it is about code-breaking to find the Knights Templar treasure – again. But how can we believe that it was transferred to the US before the 18th century with no one, except Ben Franklin and a few of the Founding Fathers noticing, let alone in the quantities that were hidden in... but that would be to spoil it all. One had better not mention where the code is located either – even more ingenious than in *Da Vinci's* works.

Nicolas Cage is a man with a mission, inherited from his grandfather, Christopher Plummer, but poo-pooed by his sceptical father, Jon Voight. But, once on his way to find the treasure (including a trip to a boat in the Arctic where he falls foul of his greedy buddy (Sean Bean) and his cronies), he picks up as dim associate (Justin Bartha) and an expert on documents (Diane Kruger). In the race against time and the greedy, as well as the authorities, there are plenty of adventures, as if *Indiana Jones* were operating in Washington and New York, including stealing the Declaration of Independence.

With tongue firmly in cheek, director Jon Turteltaub takes us on a heady, serious and comic chase which serves as top escapist entertainment.

MILLION DOLLAR BABY (US, 2004, d. Clint Eastwood)

If you intend to see this Clint Eastwood film about a female boxer which has plenty of bouts as well as some serious issues and don't want to know about the twist turns, it is better to go to see the film and not read on.

On the other hand, if you are reading further, you have seen the film and are thinking over its questions.

Eastwood has proven himself not only a legendary screen presence but also one of Hollywood's most important directors. After the success of *Mystic River*, it is, at first, a surprise that he has turned his attention to the world of boxing. He is obviously at home in this world as he plays a grizzled trainer with guilt memories of abandoning his daughter and being responsible for fighters' injuries. In his old age, he is trying to be protective, especially of his champions. He also goes to Mass every morning and spars with the priest over personal spirituality and theological and moral issues. His best friend and sometime confidant is Scrap (Morgan Freeman), former fighter and general manager and cleaner upper of the gym. The gym attracts some good fighters and some oddballs as well, all tolerated by Frank (Eastwood) – except for Margaret Fitzgerald (Hilary Swank) who is from a 'white trash' background but who has a knockout gift for fighting. He says she is not tough enough – girly! Naturally, she wears him down and mellows a lot of his sourness (although he studies Gaelic and reads Yeats).

The film is narrated by Morgan Freeman in his wonderful resonant voice that he used in *The Shawshank Redemption*. The first two acts of the film focus on Frank, Scrap and Margaret's training. The second act is Margaret's success in the ring. Not knowing what was to come, the scene of Margaret's knockout at the hands of a vicious fighter was more than a shock. It was disbelief. This means that the third act is not what we might have been expecting. Margaret is a 7equences7ic, entirely dependent on nursing and machines. She is abandoned by her greedy hillbilly family but Frank is absolutely devoted. Then she asks him to turn off the machines. Frank's crisis is not only the morality of doing this, but also what effect it will have on him and his guilt about fighters' injuries, destroying a second chance at having a daughter, not being protective enough.

He discusses the issue with the priest who is rather cold yet 7equences7ic challenging. This means that the resolution of the film is based on emotional response to the situation, the morality of using extraordinary means to keep a person alive, the request for assisted suicide (a theme which is central to the Spanish film, *The Sea Inside*). It leaves the audience who has gone to see a boxing movie going out of the cinema needing to give more thought to the moral issues, at an intellectual principle level and at an emotional level, to ask whether compassion is the final criterion – and what are the immediate and long-term consequences.

Million Dollar Baby, so well directed by Eastwood, with excellent performances, especially by Hilary Swank as fighter and as 7equences7ic, is a film for questioning and reflection.

ASSAULT ON PRECINCT 13 (US, 2005, d. Jean Francois Richet)

This evocative title brings to mind the classic thriller written and directed by John Carpenter in the mid-70s. As with so many new versions of an older film, the recent film-makers prefer to use, instead of re-make, the words re-imagining or 7equen. This is justified in this case as the present version has the blessing of Carpenter who, it is said, suggested that the street gang members who besieged the precinct become crooked police. He thought it more relevant to today's questioning of all authority figures.

The film opens intensely with a drug deal and a tour-de-force display by Ethan Hawke. We are in Detroit, in winter, New Year's Eve, heavy snow and a skidding police bus which has to detour to shelter its prisoners in the decrepit precinct building which is about to close down. In charge is the traumatised sergeant, Hawke, with subordinates Brian Dennehy and Drea de Matteo. The sergeant's counsellor, Maria Bello, is forced to shelter because of the weather. The principal prisoner is a local gangster, Laurence

Fishburne. The group is unwilling to take in the gangster but when masked gunmen open fire and they find that it is a corrupt police squad led by Gabriel Byrne, the forces unite for a very long night.

This is an effective blend of action and character studies, quite exciting and a powerful reminder about our violent responses when we are forced into self-defence. The director is French, an enthusiast who admires the work of American action directors. He pays homage to them as well as to John Carpenter. He gets strong performances from his cast and the screenplay is far grimmer and less romantic than what we might expect. Not bad at all of its type.

ELEKTRA (US, 2005, d. Rob Bowman)

Rob Bowman is best known as the director of *The X-Files*. He is still dealing with material where fiction is stranger than fiction and brings quite a visual flair to a story that does not always make logical sense but is hurrying on to the next episode.

Elektra appeared as a character in the film version of the Marvel Comics, *Daredevil*. She seems to have been despatched to her eternal reward. But, no, we find that she did die but has achieved a lively resuscitation – with empathy for those who have died violently. However, her new profession is as a paid assassin, so she does not mind too much despatching her marks. When she finds that a sympathetic neighbour and his daughter are her next targets, she wisely uses her intuitive powers, her contact with a group of supernatural power-hungry martial arts experts known as ‘The Hand’, and the Master who seems to have rejected her from the kind of training establishment that Uma Thurman and Daryl Hannah attended in *Kill Bill Volume 2*. The Master is an elegantly enunciating Terence Stamp – who seems to have the ability to appear out of nowhere, even in battle fatigues for some reason.

Elektra is Jennifer Garner looking spectacularly fit in exotic costumes and, despite the dangers and her previous death, coming off best against The Hand assassins who can be hurled into eternity at the swipe of a sword.

So, this is what Elektra is all about, a daft mixture of action, romance, comedy and special effects (and a somewhat obnoxious teenager who turns out to be the key to everything and will be the Elektra of her generation).

This review may not have given the right impression. Despite its being preposterous, let yourself go and it is a guilty pleasure.

ELLA ENCHANTED (US, 2004, d. Tom O’Haver)

2004 seems to have been a year for a Hollywood obsession with royalty and Cinderella stories. Not only was there *The Prince and Me*, *The Princess Diaries 2*, there was *A Cinderella Story*. And *Ella Enchanted* (with Anne Hathaway of *The Princess Diaries* having another bout with fairy tales).

This Cinderella variation is quite good fun. It is in the vein of that very amusing spoof of fairy tales, *The Princess Bride*. This one is not so sharp or smart but, taken with a grain of salt, it is good fun.

Poor Ella starts life with a blessing (or curse) that she will obey every order she is given. This proves difficult at school, but is worse when her mother dies and father (Patrick Bergin) brings home an ugly stepmother (Joanna Lumley in her Patsy, Ab Fab, style) and two stepsisters (Lucy Punch is excellent as the older, presumptuous one). Hugh Dancey is Char – Prince Charmont – who has to learn to be a humane prince, especially when his wicked uncle wants the kingdom with its singing elves, worker giants and ugly ogres. Who should be the wicked uncle but Cary Elwes, who all those years ago was Westley who married the princess bride. One can grow old and smile (said Hamlet) and then be a villain.

Sets are enjoyable though the special effects look like smaller budget work. Still, there is Eric Idle as the narrator, Steve Coogan as the evil adviser, Aiden McArdle who wants to be a lawyer instead of an elf that sings, Jimi Mistry as a face in a mirror and Minnie Driver as Ella’s aunt. Speaking of singing, there is a

musical turn as Ella sings 'Somebody to Love' and there is an old-fashioned finale with 'Don't Go Breaking My Heart'.

It has all the makings of being turned into a stage pantomime for Christmas.

LADDER 49 (US, 2004, d. Jay Russell)

This is an action that drama that reviews itself. The action sequences are quite spectacular: fires in Baltimore city buildings and the efforts of the firefighters to rescue people and put out the fires. These sequences are filmed with intensity and edited to create a breakneck pace. On the other hand the human drama sequences are exactly what you are expecting, a group of decent people living their ordinary lives. This means that, depending on your interest preference, Ladder 49 is a drama punctuated by action or an action show punctuated by births, marriages and deaths.

The film opens with a huge blaze and Jack Morrison (Joaquin Phoenix) rescuing a worker before he is trapped and a smouldering floor gives way. If our whole life passes before us as we face death, then the film has Jack's life pass before him in flashbacks. He is the good-natured and willing rookie, the happily married man who loves his wife (Jacinda Barrett) and children, the heroic veteran, the man who is prepared to risk danger in order to save lives. While there have been several films about firefighters (most notably Ron Howard's 90s film, Backdraft), this one evokes memories of the heroic fighters who battled the World Trade Center explosions and can be seen as a tribute to them. In the aftermath of September 11th, the film opts for grim realism rather than neat Hollywood heroics (though there is a lot of heroics).

Joaquin Phoenix is an actor who can play villains (as in Gladiator) but who can also communicate reticent charm. He certainly does that here, giving the film a rather warmer human face than might be expected. John Travolta is the older chief of the department which is peopled by the usual suspects (some fights but generally good comradeship) who are surprisingly mostly Catholic. The technical advisers have got it right this time for the several sequences of marriages, baptisms, funerals.

One can watch the human drama in neutral and move into higher gear with the fires.

A VERY LONG ENGAGEMENT (UN LONG DIMANCHE DE FAINAILLES)

(France, 2004, d. Jean-Pierre Jeunet)

This is a very French film (tres francais) which hit the right note with the French public. While non-French audiences will like it, its French sensibilities will not be entirely comfortable with them.

Matthilde, the young Frenchwoman who is handicapped by polio when a girl, is one of those very sweet girls, shy and retiring, who responds to an emotional crisis with surprisingly relentless determination which is commented on too obtrusively by an offscreen female voice who describes the emotional stress that Matthilde is going through in that literary, somewhat abstract way that the French love.

This is a World War One story from the trenches at the Somme. The trenches themselves, the grim no-man's land, the mud and squalid environment are re-created with telling detail. We feel that we are there. We are also immersed in the bombardments, the pounding, the crashing noise, the exploding shells and flying earth. Although this happened 90 years earlier, it is a relevant reminder of the impact of that war in Europe and for allies beyond and the needless loss of hundreds of thousands of lives.

Based on a novel by Sebastian J, the film is a jigsaw of war narrative in 1917, the aftermath of war in Paris and beyond in 1920 and the detection that Matthilde instigates to try to find her lost fiancé who had been condemned to execution for self-mutilation along with four other soldiers. This means that the audience continually moves between the war and the consequences, with strong emotional shifts, as we learn more about the men and their lives, the callously self-centred action of officers (which makes one want to see again the seminal films of Kubrick and Losey, Paths of Glory and King and Country, which dealt with similar themes) and Matthilde's determination despite ever-increasing possibilities that her fiancé is dead.

The film was directed by Jean Jeunet. He is an offbeat stylist in his range of cinematic devices for creating atmosphere (*Delicatessen*, *City of Lost Children*, *Alien Resurrection*). While his narrative is more straightforward considering the jigsaw screenplay, his style of camera shots, split screens, use of stock footage, means that there is continuous suggestion for deeper emotional response and understanding.

Jeunet made an international name for himself with his magic realism comedy, *Amelie*. He is working again with the star, Audrey Tautou. She has a charming and pretty screen presence. This time more demands are made on her and she is quite persuasive as Matthilde. She still has a touch of the fey, but there is steel beneath. An impressive cast creates quite a gallery of characters both in war and peace, including a surprise for world audiences with Jodie Foster as a war widow.

A Very Long Engagement can be added to the list of respected war films as well as the list of intense love stories that the French call 'amour fou'.

TOM WHITE (Australia, 2004, d. Aleksis Tsilis)

At the Australian Film Institute Awards for 2004, Somersault received thirteen nominations and won in all categories. While Somersault deserves congratulations, it is a pity that there was not a more even spread of awards, an acknowledgement of the value of other nominees. 2004 was a slight year for Australian production, but one film that merited greater attention was *Tom White*, especially for Colin Friels' performance in the title role. He should have been voted best actor.

Perhaps *Tom White* was too sombre a film for many tastes. After all, the story of a man in midlife crisis, finally standing at the crossroads of his future is not your cheery night out. Nevertheless, it was well worth seeing - not only for its portrait of this middle-aged man but for the symbolism of what he represented in Australian urban society. *Tom White* is a symbol of Australian business success, with all its prestige, conveniences and trappings, which is ultimately found wanting. *Tom White's* symbolic journey amongst the less successful people in society, those who find themselves or choose to be at the margins, is a challenge to audiences to discover where their social and human values lie.

Taking him as symbolic, however, and his journey as archetypal, we might speculate further that his journey is that of the crises of high-flying Australian men.

What *Tom White* does is walk away from his life. His marriage has become brittle. He has failed at work and is on the way out - and walks out. His poise and acumen are gone. After an alcoholic binge, he literally disappears from his taken-for-granted safe world. His world no longer matters to him.

Tom's journey through the underside of Melbourne is not quite a pilgrimage through an Inferno. Rather, it serves as a journey through a kind of Purgatorio. The people that he encounters represent the inhabitants of an urban purgatory which could eventually lead them to their hell. Tom moves in with a rent boy, has an affair with a drug addict and experiences the brutality of her supplier, stays with an old man who has not quite opted out of life but has bypassed it and observes it with a wry wisdom, but still finds a woman to relate to, and a boy who has run away from a middle-class home. What effect does this St Kilda experience have on Tom?

He has moved out of an isolated introversion. He is not dependant on his inner world for support - which it was failing to supply anyway. He goes 'out there' and discovers that he can relate to men and women that he previously would not have encountered or would have avoided. In fact, he discovers that he is 'energised' by his friendship and contact with them.

The world that he enters is a very practical world of the senses where intuitions and shrewdness are necessary for physical survival but are not the main focus for everyday living. A place to stay, shelter, something to eat, the bodily warmth and companionship of people today, tonight, here and now, are what he experiences. It is the same with his criteria for his decisions - his decisions concerning others and his lack of decision concerning his own life. It may have been necessary for him to be analytic and logical in the past, to be reasonable in his dealing with wife, bosses and clients. Here, in his purgatory, it is the men

and women themselves who are important. It is the subjective circumstances of their way of life, its difficulties (sexual exploitation, drug abuse, murderous violence) that determine what decisions are made.

It is, perhaps, too strong to say that decisions are made. Rather, Tom is now more open to the flow of life, to the unpredictability of surviving on the streets. He learns to be less of a controller.

Tom White is a portrait of contemporary life in the margins of an Australian city. Its director, Aleksis Tsilis, once made a very grim picture of life in a prison, *Everynight, Everynight*. While he has taken his story outside this time, it is still the picture of people imprisoned by circumstances and choices. Some, like the old man, choose not to get out. The rent boy still has a choice. The addict is killed. The boy has his life before him and needs reconciliation with his family. This is what Tom discovers about people, about life and about himself. His crisis has opened up to him a down-to-earth world of sensing and feeling. This is part of his individuation in his crisis. The open ending means that we continue to wonder how much he has absorbed and how much it will influence the next phase of his life.

SIDEWAYS (US, 2004, d. Alexander Payne)

About Miles.

The previous film co-written with his long-term writing partner, James Taylor, and directed by Alexander Payne was *About Schmidt* with Jack Nicholson. It was a road film, a journey by a retired man who travelled America to discover more about himself and freedom. *Sideways* is also a road film. This time the traveller is a middle-aged man, Miles, who is in depression after his divorce and his failure to have his novel published. His companion on the road is his college days friend, Jack, whose TV acting and commercials career is at a standstill but who intends to marry at the end of the week-long trip they take through the vineyards of California. It is a sideways journey.

Miles is played excellently by Paul Giamatti. Giamatti is a familiar face, not necessarily a familiar name, from many supporting roles. In 2003, he made his star mark in *American Splendor*. He now brings Miles to life, a complex character with whom one sympathises but who can be very annoying. Jack is played with relish by Thomas Hayden Church. He is the opposite of Miles. He is always posing and acting. He is completely self-absorbed (and one dreads his marriage), infantile in his approach to everything, especially sex and women.

The vineyards setting is important. There is ample opportunity for aficionados to appreciate the variety of vineyards, get information about the wines and share vicariously in some of the tasting. But the wine is a symbol of life (as explained in a moving speech by Maya, a waitress friend of Miles). Miles is a wine expert and he can taste the subtleties. He can be elitist, but he is capable of appreciating wine and the varieties of life. For Jack, everything tastes the same. He just wants the pleasure of having a drink.

The two women in the story differ considerably. Sandra Oh is freewheeling Stephanie. Looking for love, she believes Jack's spiels and is doomed to frustration and anger. Virginia Madsen is very moving as Maya. She too has a taste for life but is able to listen to Miles, share his vision, support him. She may be the one.

Payne and Taylor's screenplay is intelligently and often wittily written. Rolfe Kent supplies an unobtrusive but mood-creating score. *Sideways* is a thoughtfully entertaining film.

SEDUCING DOCTOR LEWIS (LA GRANDE SEDUCTION) (Canada, 2003, d. Jean-Francois Pouliot)

What's in a name? *Seducing* has all kinds of sexual overtone and leads us to expect some medical sex story. It isn't.

The posters have already taken the remark that a reviewer would like to make about this little comedy: it is like the Ealing films from the UK in the 1950s, films like *Whisky Galore* (which had the American title *Tight Little Island*). This film is located on a tight little island off the Canadian coast. The central

character, Germaine, remembers his childhood days when fishing was the livelihood and everybody was content. Now, the population of 125 is in the doldrums, cashing their dole cheques with little hope of renewal - except, maybe, if they can land a contract for a factory. The catches: they have to pay a hefty bribe to the company, they need to have over 200 inhabitants, they need to have a resident doctor.

And that is where Doctor Lewis comes in - and the seduction. Can they convince the city doctor who has come for a month to look over the place that he should stay? They also have to raise the money with the help of the rather unimaginative bank manager who fears being replaced by a machine. They also have to convince the company boss that they have the correct population (which eventually leads to logistics problems as they have to race along back streets to get to the next venue to create a crowded impression!).

It is all very genial (except the issue of the bribe which seems to be taken for granted as business management). The doctor is a nice man but is very upset when his engagement breaks down and he realises that everyone is deceiving him. Well, you know what happens. The important thing is watching how it happens.

Needless to say, there are a lot of characters on the island and there are lots of amusing situations (the listening in to all the doctor's phone calls and wanting to intervene when he is critical, a snorkeller putting a frozen fish on the eager angler's hook...).

While the setting is Canadian, the film travels well and has a universal humour and appeal.

RAY (US, 2004, d. Taylor Hackford)

In a year of biopics (Howard Hughes, *The Aviator*; Kinsey, J.M.Barrie, *Finding Neverland*), Taylor Hackford has made a biography of and tribute to blind musician and activist, Ray Charles.

The framework of the film is chronological (naming dates and places), from 1948 when Ray was 18 and leaving home to play in Seattle to the mid-1960s when he went into drug rehabilitation and turned around his life. There is a postscript set in 1979 when the ban on his appearing in concert in the state of Georgia (in 1961 when he refused to play to segregated audiences) was revoked and he received a tribute and a welcome.

However, there are numerous flashbacks to his childhood punctuating the narrative and giving visual insight into the lyrics of some of his most popular songs. We are given glimpses of his childhood poverty and his strong washerwoman mother, his being paralysed during the drowning of his younger brother, his gradually going blind as a child and his mother's ways of training him to fend for himself.

The Ray Charles story is not all that different from stories of other black entertainers like Billie Holiday or the Turners. He has to fend for himself despite his blindness. He is introduced to heroin early and refuses to acknowledge his dependency. While he marries his sweetheart and loves her and his children, he is a womaniser, and has a long relationship with one of his back-up singers. This is a sympathetic portrait, but it is also warts and warts, especially in the 1960s when he is a success and he becomes more ruthless in his business dealings.

But what Ray Charles loved more than anything else was his music. Capable of imitating any style, he aped Nat King Cole and other singers until he was urged to find his own voice. He moved through jazz, gospel, rhythm and blues to his own style of communicating and his versions of classics. He is seen as a pioneer in the development of American music in the middle of the 20th century. There is a wide selection of his songs, from his records, during the film.

One of the main reasons for the success of Ray is the uncanny performance and impersonation by Jamie Foxx. Winner of many awards (in a year which saw his strong performance in *Collateral*), he is a convincing Ray Charles in all his facets, good and bad, weak and strong.

KINSEY (US, 2004, d. Bill Condon)

Kinsey is a well-written, intelligent biopic of the renowned sexologist. Clearly its subject matter is a minefield: the sexual behaviour of American men and women in the 20th century. Kinsey published his book on men in 1948 and his book on women in the early 50s. He was dead by 1956. He belongs to an era when the subject matter was not spoken about publicly in the United States, where research was limited and research and interviewing techniques still in development. It was also the era of the Depression, World War II, the Cold War and hearings into Un-American activities. Looking at Kinsey at the beginning of the 21st century, listening to its quite frank screenplay, looking at some of its images, this is a film that Kinsey might have only imagined and never believed would be made.

Bill Condon wrote and directed the biography of director, James Whale, *Gods and Monsters*. He also wrote the screenplay for the film version of *Chicago*. His writing skills are in evidence in the way that he has structured this biography, how he has evoked Kinsey's very strict household, Kinsey's early career studying insects and producing research on thousands of specimens, his move from insects to studying the variety in human beings to the limited courses on sexuality in Indiana universities in the 1930s, to his move towards his famous research.

Kinsey has been blamed for everything that followed in the decades after his death from the pill to gay marriages and all kinds of permissiveness. In retrospect, it is clear that psychologists from Freud, to sexologists from Havelock Ellis, were moving the study of human sexuality to centre focus. Kinsey was articulating this, uncovering taboos and enabling doctors, philosophers, moralists to probe more deeply into normal and aberrant behaviour.

Kinsey himself was a strong man who was not above being caught up in the dangers that his investigations could lead to, permissiveness in relationships, his own and those of his interviewers, to same sex encounters. He was open to attacks concerning his own moral stances - many of which were resurrected by American groups and boycott movements on the release of this film.

With a respected actor like Liam Neeson playing Kinsey, there is a gravity in the treatment and in the character study. Laura Linney leads a wide-ranging supporting cast as his wife, John Lithgow as his father and Peter Sarsgaard as his chief researcher and confidant.

We all probably take a prurient curiosity into watching this film. That is natural. What the film offers in the space of two hours is an opportunity to understand Kinsey better in his context and to evaluate what has happened in sex research, writing and discussion in the ensuing fifty years.

LEMONY SNICKET'S SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS (US, 2004, d. Brad Silberling)

When you glance again at Jim Carrey's performances of a decade earlier (*Ace Ventura*, *Mask*, *Cable Guy*), you realise how hard he is mugging and caricaturing his way through physical slapstick and over-emphatic enunciation. He is still capable of that but, after *The Truman Show*, *Man in the Moon*, *The Majestic* and *Eternal Sunshine*, he can do subtlety as well as broad comedy. His *Count Olaf* in this series of *Unfortunate Events* gives him ample opportunity for both.

The *Harry Potter* stories opened up a different world of childhood, contemporary versions of myths and legends as well as the dark side of fairy tales. These are the kinds of Gothic stories that Lemony Snicket tells (and we see Jude Law as Lemony Snicket in his attic writing and explaining this to us and urging everyone who wants a happy ending to leave the theatre!).

The three talented but bereft Baudelaire children are left to the mercy (well, no, the lack of mercy) of Count Olaf who wants to adopt them and inherit their wealth. Timothy Spall as their kind of guardian-lawyer wants to protect them but is cajoled by Olaf into believing his lies. The children's *Unfortunate Events* lead them to seek the help of their eccentric snake-loving uncle Monty, a very kind and genial Billy Connolly, who is dispatched by Olaf, and the reclusive aunt Josephine, a pantomime dame Meryl Streep. Olaf turns up in various disguises to dispose of uncles and aunts and to persuade his judge neighbour to act in a play about a wedding while really marrying Olaf to his niece thus ensuring his inheriting the money.

Fires, snakes, giant leeches - there is plenty to make younger audiences to go happily 'ugh'. The cast enjoy themselves. This is a contemporary grim fairy tale.

THE DOOR IN THE FLOOR (US, 2004, d. Tod Williams)

There have been a number of versions of John Irving novels: *Hotel New Hampshire*, *World According to Garp*, *Simon Birch*. Irving himself wrote the screenplay (and won an Oscar) for *The Cider House Rules*. He has given his blessing to this version of the first third of his novel, *Widow for a Year*.

This is the kind of film that is described as independent. It is not a studio film and it does not rely on a happy ending.

The focus of the film is on a sixteen year old (a believable performance by Jon Foster) who spends a summer as an assistant to a celebrated writer of somewhat eerie children's stories - like the story of the sound of someone trying not to make a sound. The film ends in a squash court with the writer literally going down through the door in the floor.

The author and his wife have not recovered emotionally from the deaths of their sons in a car accident - and, it is dramatically effective that we do not see the accident scene until the end of the film. The writer has become hardened, is alienated from his wife who is less able to cope. He is dependent on the young man for typing, chores around the house and, especially, for driving. In the meantime, the inexperienced youngster is infatuated with the wife. What follows is a sexual initiation, something of a blend of the quiet care of *Tea and Sympathy* and the exploitation by Mrs Robinson of *The Graduate*. The writer, meantime, is involved in a grim affair with a woman he is sketching.

The description makes these goings on sound sordid. In many ways they are. But that is not the whole point. Traumatized people act in unpredictable and often destructive ways. This is clearly what is happening to these characters. The events are sometimes bizarre, but they need a moral and emotional sensitivity to the complexities rather than a righteous dismissal.

Jeff Bridges is the writer and gives yet another interesting and complex performance, a blend of the genial, the controlling, the desperate and the vicious. Kim Basinger is the grief-stricken mother who leads on the willing young man. Mimi Rogers has the difficult role of the artist's model, victim of the writer's degrading her. The young daughter is played by Elle Fanning (younger sister of Dakota Fanning).

This is a film of moral dead ends and byways, where people are trapped, trap themselves and can escape only through their door in the floor.

FILMS ON SCREEN, FEBRUARY 2005

Peter Malone

This is a service of the SIGNIS Website, presenting reviews by Peter Malone of films that have been screening during the previous month.

February

ADAM AND PAUL
ARE WE THERE YET?
BALLAD OF JACK AND ROSE, The
BOOGEYMAN
CAVEDWELLER
CHORUS
COACH CARTER
DEAD END
DUCK SEASON
FATELESS
FIRST DAUGHTER
FLIGHT OF THE PHOENIX
GHOSTS (GESPENSTER)
GRAND VOYAGE, Le
HIDE AND SEEK
HITCH
HOSTAGE (OMIROS)
HOSTAGE
HOTEL RWANDA
IN GOOD COMPANY
LAST MITTERAND, The (LE PROMENEUR DU CHAMPS DU MARS)
LIFE AQUATIC WITH STEVE ZISSOU, The
MA MERE
MONSTER MAN
9 SONGS
PAPARAZZI
PARADISE NOW
PIECE OF BREAD, A
RACING STRIPES
REVENANTS, Les
SHALL WE DANCE
SOMETIMES IN APRIL
SON OF THE MASK
SOPHIE SCHOLL, THE LAST DAYS
SPANGLISH
TOO FARAWAY, TOO CLOSE
WEEPING WILLOW, The
WOODSMAN, The
WORDS IN BLUE (LES MOTS BLEU)
YES

FIRST DAUGHTER (US, 2004, d. Forest Whitaker)

Chelsea Clinton has a lot to answer for! Well, not directly. But, she was an incumbent president's daughter and she did leave the family nest (the White House, anyway) to go off to study and try to live something of a normal life. This basic plotline has already been used in homage (or rip-off) in the slight comedy romance, *Chasing Liberty*. Mandy Moore was the first daughter and, surprisingly, Mark Harmon was the president.

First Daughter has roughly the same story, episodes and crises. She is also quite an embarrassment to her father with some mildly wild behaviour – that still makes good TV copy. He is campaigning for a second term and, it seems, the less than prim behaviour of a first daughter is a great risk for a successful campaign.

This time Katie Holmes is the refugee from Washington. Michael Keaton is an anxious president who really wants to win. Sharply spoken friends who get invited to presidential dinners, security guards who are incognito plants as students and blow their cover and their chance for romance, presidential aides who want the president to control his daughter – all the expected ingredients.

On screen, Forest Whitaker has often been a tough presence. However, his soft, very soft, side emerge in his directorial projects like *Waiting to Exhale* and *Hope Floats*. This is slightly sharper, but still quite soft.

FILMS ON THE GENOCIDE IN RWANDA

NOTE: an introductory comment on *Hotel Rwanda* and *Sometimes in April*. Both these films were made in 2004, ten years after the genocide when Hutus massacred Tutsis and the third tribe, the Twas, in Rwanda. They should both be seen. Terry George is the Irish writer of *In the Name of the Father* and *Some Mother's Son* (also director), both focussing on injustice in Northern Ireland. Raoul Peck is the Haitian director of films on the Congo dictator, Lumumba.

Both films are very similar, often overlapping in events of 1994 and the way they are portrayed visually. In fact, sequences from each film could be inserted into the other. Both films are complementary, the hero of *Sometimes in April* eventually finds refuge in the Hotel Mille Collines in Kigali which is being managed by the hero of *Hotel Rwanda*.

Hotel Rwanda is a biographical portrait of Paul Rusesabagina, the Hutu manager of the hotel who has a Tutsi wife. *Sometimes in April* also has a Hutu lead, a military man, married to a Tutsi wife. *Sometimes in April* is broader in scope since it also features the political discussions in Washington DC as well as some of its action taking place in 2004.

SOMETIMES IN APRIL (US, 2005, d. Raoul Peck)

Writer-director, Raoul Peck, was asked by Home Box Office, on the strength of his films on Lumumba, to make a film about the 1994 Rwandan genocide when militant Hutus massacred almost a million Tutsis and 30% of the third tribe, the Batwa (Twa). There have been documentary models of films portraying 20th century genocides (*Shoa*, *S 21*), fictions (*Sophie's Choice*), docudramas (*Schindler's List*) and biographies (*Hotel Rwanda*, *The Killing Fields*). Peck has opted to tell a family story set within the broad historical, political and social context of this small country of central Africa. The result is a profoundly moving experience, putting a human face on the suffering brought about by fanatical and brutal atrocities.

The screenplay veers between 2004, the tenth anniversary of the genocide, opening with a teacher and students watching a tape with a 1994 speech by President Clinton. The Hutu teacher (Idris Elba) remembers his military career, his Tutsi wife (Caroline Karemera), his children, his radio personality brother who had embraced and fomented the Hutu ascendancy. We see the horrible killings through the teacher's memories although he still does not know the actual fate of his family. But the audience does.

Intercut with the barbarity of the killings are sequences of US and UN action and inaction, especially in the US State Department where a sympathetic bureaucrat, Prudence Bushnell (Debra Winger) tries to raise US consciousness beyond the rescue of American citizens and declaring to the media which side are the 'goodies'. Also intercut are 2004 sequences of trials being held in Tanzania where the teacher's brother has now pleaded guilty. The challenge is how to acknowledge the truth, whether forgiveness and reconciliation are possible, and how to build an inclusive Rwandan future – finishing with an image of teacher and students enjoying Charlie Chaplin tweaking the pomposity of tyrants in *The Great Dictator*.

The cast performs with both humanity and dignity. The visual portrayal of the killings is graphic but restrained enough for most audiences to be able to watch the film – which they should. They will grieve at such prejudice and inhuman cruelty.

HOTEL RWANDA (UK/South Africa/Italy, 2004, d. Terry George)

It is probably a blessing for the commercial success of *Hotel Rwanda* that Don Cheadle and Sophie Okonedo were nominated for acting Oscars, otherwise the film might have received very limited release. (This happened with director Terry George's moving film about IRA prisoners in the late 1970s, *Some Mother's Son*; it was considered not commercial enough to warrant a promotion budget.) Along with Raoul Peck's quite similar, *Sometimes in April*, it offers an opportunity for a world audience to learn something about the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and learn lessons about compassion and the need for political will for help and intervention.

Shot principally in Rwanda, the film has an authentic look and feel, some of it with documentary vividness. However, it is the story of one man, Paul Rusesabagina, the dapper manager of the Mille Collines Hotel in Kigali, who prided himself on running a four star hotel for prominent guests, offering the best in style and service. Groomed by the Belgian company, Sabena, who owned the hotel, he has been able to ingratiate himself with military leaders and is well-known to the United Nations forces. He is a Hutu, but is married to a Tutsi. When the Hutu uprising begins, he is desperate to protect his wife and children but has to face crises in Hutu staff malice, the evacuation of foreign nationals (but no locals), the impotence of the United Nations, the brutal physical violence of the massacres. He takes in refugees, especially orphans from the Red Cross, and manages to save many of them.

This is a particular focus (*Sometimes in April* ranges more broadly, especially with US policy and the aftermath in 2004), the story of an ordinary man who is asked to be more heroic than he ever imagined. His story is placed firmly in context so that we understand something of the uprising, the Hutu hatred of Tutsis ('rebel cockroaches'), the urgings of hate radio, the slowness of the world to respond.

Don Cheadle (who can do comedy as well as con-man gangsters so well) is utterly persuasive as Paul. The audience experiences the action through complete sympathy with him. He seems accent-perfect (despite his horribly phony Cockney in *Oceans 11* and *Oceans 12*). Sophie Okonedo is his wife. A strong African cast gives authenticity and Nick Nolte (as UN leader), Joaquin Phoenix (as a TV reporter) and Jean Reno (as the president of Sabena) give the film some international appeal.

It is harrowing to remember that such genocide and subsequent refugee movement could happen in the 1990s.

SHALL WE DANCE (US, 2004, d. Peter Chelsom)

The 1996 Japanese film, *Shall We Dance*, was popular all around the world. However, sub-titled films do not reach the large market. Hence the re-makes and their Americanisation. Reviewers who remember the original fondly generally lambaste the American versions both for being American and for not dramatising the Japanese sensibility. A lot of criticism was focused on Richard Gere's credibility as a humdrum office worker who could not dance and that the basic situation of his going to dance lessons secretly could not happen in contemporary America. Maybe, maybe not.

This is a feelgood movie, a nice movie, a decent movie. In fact, Richard Gere seems to be enjoying himself immensely, his laughter in many sequences being infectious. He is also more than a bit paternal with his two children. It is a pleasing role for him.

Jennifer Lopez usually gets a bad press as well. Her role is very melancholic, so she does not have much opportunity to be effervescent except when she dances. Susan Sarandon gives a sensible performance and has some of the best lines about the nature of marriage and commitment (that a spouse is important also because they are a witness to their partner's and by sharing it give it meaning). Added to that are some excellent supporting roles, Lisa Ann Walters as the buxom dancer who dreams of winning competitions; Stanley Tucci giving another very different performance as the bald secret dancer; Richard Jenkins as a private detective).

This is a midlife story with a happy ending, that if we take the opportunity to break out of the mundane with something that we can learn and achieve, then we are the better for it and so are those around us. This sounds a bit like a sermon but, along with the dance sequences which are both humorous and strictly

ballroom, this is a message film that it is quite right to feel good, even if reviewers would prefer an unhappy ending!

IN GOOD COMPANY (US, 2004, d. Paul Weitz)

The posters for In Good Company highlight that it was from 'the director of About a Boy'. They do not even hint at what is true, 'from the director of American Pie'. Perhaps with American Pie and its box-office success, brothers Paul and Chris Weitz got their puberty blues out of their system and moved on to mid-life. This is definitely where they are with In Good Company. This is a film that offers a chance and hope to the 50 year old – and reminds the 20s something hotshot that verve isn't everything, that experience counts for something. Not what you would expect from American Pie!!

This is a very positive film. It raises the issues of redundancy in a cut-throat globalising world. Malcolm McDowell (who can look sinister at the best of times and here is lit to look like evil capitalism incarnate) is a tycoon who has acquired the magazine Sports America. Dennis Quaid (whose character is 52) has been head of advertising for years and has built up a loyal staff. Topher Grace (whose character is 26) takes over with orders from on high to trim staff, cut salaries and get more contracts. His marriage has quickly foundered and he is a workaholic. He is now Quaid's boss.

This is a film which can be described as conservative in a positive sense. Progress does not lead to Utopia. Moving in and out of commitment does not always lead to happiness. Long marriages and deep commitment are possible. Dealing with people in the workplace as people and with respect is humane as well as a means of achieving goals. The old are not always over the hill and the young do not have all the answers.

Dennis Quaid is quite persuasive as the husband, father, boss. Topher Grace is on the way to stardom. Scarlett Johansson gives a quiet performance as the elder daughter and Marg Hellenberger has taken time off from CSI Investigations to play a mother role.

It is not a particularly startling film, but its themes are refreshing.

THE LIFE AQUATIC WITH STEVE ZISSOU (US, 2004, d. Wes Anderson)

This is Wes Anderson's fourth film (Bottle Rocket, Rushmore, The Royal Tennenbaums). The response to his films is both amusement and bemusement.

On the amusement side, he creates a gallery of quite extreme characters who are unpredictable and offbeat, writes amusing lines and has a way with wayward situations.

On the bemusement side, it is the gallery, the lines and the situations which are so offbeat that you are not sure where Anderson is going or where we the audience are going. You might not like the ride and get off. But, there is a certain oddball fascination that keeps you going.

Bill Murray does a splendid turn as Steve Zissou (a bemusing Jacques Cousteau parody), a kind of Discovery Channel explorer who has taken to the seas, made a series of programs, has had his best friend eaten by a 'jaguar shark' and who has fallen on hard times in his own self-esteem, Zissou company morale, in losing grants to his rival (and, possibly, his wife) and who finds a young man who could be his son has turned up. What is he to do? Go on a voyage and make a program on finding the jaguar shark.

In real life, the program would not have a chance of getting on a respectable channel – but that is part of the humour as the film is divided into the sections of the documentary. His crew is a collection of strange characters including Willem Dafoe doing a very funny turn as an over-loyal but rather slow German, a singer of David Bowie songs in Portuguese, Noah Taylor and Michael Gambon as his producer. The brains behind the project is Angelica Huston as Zissou's wealthy wife (who was once married to his rival, Jeff Goldblum). Regular Anderson collaborator, Owen Wilson, is the possible son. He gives a performance that is the opposite of his usual screen persona (just in time as he has been ubiquitously overdoing it), a

quietly well-mannered Kentucky gentleman. Add to the mix, a pregnant British journalist who is both tough and hormonally geared to outbursts of weeping, Cate Blanchett, and you might guess what you are getting into.

It is set in Italy and the Mediterranean, has a lot of sea action (including pirates) and some animation of the reefs and fish by Henry Sellick.

Obviously this kind of film could drive some audiences mad with its touches of the absurd – but for those who go along on the voyage, it is cleverly amusing/bemusing.

TOO FARAWAY, TOO CLOSE (Iran, 2005, d. Reza Mir-Kirimi)

Reza Mir-Kirimi has a talent for well-crafted narrative films as well as a deep religious sense. This has been evident in his previous films, *Under the Moonlight* (about a trainee mullah who has to reaffirm his vocation after being exposed to the poverty and seamier side of Tehran) and *Here, a Shining Light* (about a simple guardian of a shrine who gives its possessions to the poor). Both are SIGNIS award-winning films.

This is a much more ambitious film which he carries off with smooth aplomb. The focus is on a wealthy Tehran specialist who has neglected his son, preferring celebrity, dubious connections in the criminal world and a penchant for betting. He goes on a journey (this is a special road film) which becomes a spiritual quest, even a pilgrimage to find his son on an astronomy trip in the desert. His being along, his concern about his son's health and his own carelessness in his son's regard, the people he meets along the road, all make emotional demands on him that he is at first reluctant to acknowledge and follow. When he meets a young, dedicated doctor who has put him on a pedestal and whom he helps when she is called to an accident emergency, makes him reflect more deeply on the values in his life. Ultimately, he is lost in the desert and only a miracle can save him. He has to face his life and his death. It is a test of his faith, which he has neglected even more than his son.

Mir-Kirimi does not emphasise the spiritual and religious dimensions of the doctor's journey. Rather, they are referred to and the audience is expected to have their own views on faith and providence and how they interpret the doctor's actions.

The film sketches in considerable detail of contemporary life in Iran and also offers a wealth of vistas and landscapes with changing weather, grandeur, beauty as well as terror. Very much an Iranian film but one which communicates on a universal level.

THE WEEPING WILLOW (Iran, 2005, d. Majid Majidi)

Majid Majidi is one of the Iranian directors who has a good reputation outside his own country. He has won numerous awards with his films *Children of Heaven*, *Color of Paradise* and *Baran* (all of which won awards from OCIC in 1997, 1999, 2001). His portrayal of children has been memorable.

While there is a child in *Weeping Willow*, the focus is on a middle-aged man who has been blind since the age of eight. He is a professor, leading a comfortable life, with a devoted wife, a little girl and a loving mother. What if his life were to change? How would he change? What would he change about his life. These are the questions the film asks. These are the questions the film offers some answers which can be both pleasing and disturbing.

Settings are in affluent modern Tehran, with a trip to Paris early in the film. While the film is immersed in its culture, it is accessible to audiences around the world.

The film is beautifully crafted and boasts a superb performance by one of Iran's leading actors, Parviz Parastouie, a restrained performance which has moments of anguished outbursts. This is a complete contrast to his 2004 performance in the delightful comedy, *The Lizard*, where he is a petty criminal who has the chance to escape from prison in Mullah's dress and (like Whoopi Goldberg in *Sister Act*) is mistaken for a genuine holy man.

Underlying the film is a deep spiritual dimension and raises issues of prayer and answers to prayer and what we do in our choices with the answers to our prayers.

Checked to here

LES REVENANTS (THEY CAME BACK) (France, 2004, d. Robin Campillo)

Though the title is translated into English, They Came Back, the characters in this unusual (and implausible) drama are referred to as 'The Risen'. This is a better title because, even though they are The Living Dead, that phrase has too many overtones of gory US horror. The French film-makers here eschew any of that kind of horror.

Immediately we see crowds of The Risen walking back into their city and, gradually into their previous lives. The film examines (rather than explores) the scientific, medical repercussions as well as the social and sociological issues for The Risen and for the living who have to deal with this resuscitation. The film has quite an amount of talk, discussion and expressions of theory. It has been remarked that the film raises issues of how contemporary society actually treats is disabled and ill and the populations suffering from Alzheimer's Disease. It is interesting (and actually disturbing) that no discussion of the death experience, let alone what life after death is like is offered by the screenplay. The film is minimally interested in the transcendent if at all.

For the audience to deal with this drama, there are three sets of characters to identify with: the mayor who chairs the emergency meetings and his risen wife, 10 year old Sylvain who has been dead six years and his parents who try to resume their happy family life with him and, more particularly, Mathieu who works for the city and resumes his job examining the city's underground tunnels and passages and goes back to his lover Rachel, who has been reluctant to admit that he has returned.

While there are dramatic consequences for The Risen as well as for ordinary people, they are presented in a medium-budget and rather low-key style (a bit strange since we have become used to sensationalism for this kind of story). The focus of the investigation is limited - and a more involving and deeper film might have been made - but what we have is basically interesting.

DEAD END (US, 2004, d. Jean-Baptiste Andrea, Fabrice Canepa)

What would two young Frenchmen who had made short films in France do when offered their first feature film? One would guess, stay at home and mark their mark. However, like the Australian makers of the terror-drama, Saw, they went to Hollywood. And they made another horror road movie, the kind that is full of shouting, some crass sexual touches, some gore and is destined for the video/DVD market.

There is a twist at the end that the knowledgeable in these matters might pick up. It makes a bit of a difference to interpreting what has gone on in the preceding hour and a quarter but does not quite make up for it. It is a generally ugly film with definitely ugly characters. Press comments by the makers suggest that they are presenting an ideal American family. God help us - and them. They bicker and bitch from the first moment. Dad is a control freak (and is played by Ray Wise who, after Twin Peaks and other like dramas) is used to this kind of thing and perpetually complaining (while giving ample cause for everyone else to complain after he has taken a Christmas Eve shortcut that gets them lost in more ways than one). Lin Shaye (best known for some gross-out comic roles like that in There's Something about Mary) seems normal till she starts revealing her secrets. The son is sex-obsessed, with a nasty sense of humour and does not get killed off early enough! The daughter is the nicest of them all, though she reveals she is pregnant - her boyfriend is the first to go.

So, now you know.

LE GRAND VOYAGE (France, 2004, d. Ismael Farroukhi)

This is quite a devout film for Muslim audiences. The writer-director is a Moroccan who lives in France. His story highlights what seems to be happening in all world religions at the beginning of the 21st century. The young generation has become quite secularised, especially in Europe, and do not practise their religion and deep down have either indifference or contempt for their parents and grandparents and their devout adherence to their faith.

Le Grand Voyage is not so great for the young protagonist who is being forced to miss his exams by his stern and inflexible father who tells him that he must drive him to Mecca so that he can fulfil the duty of the Hajj. So, this is a road movie, which is a pilgrimage. The pair travel through Italy, the Balkans, Turkey and Jordan, sometimes finding frontier difficulties as well as being lost and experiencing the confidence tricksters who pose as sympathetic guides (with a persuasive back story to match).

For the father, who prays regularly, it is a lifelong ambition fulfilled. He is often less than gracious to his son who, in his turn, puts on tantrums. For the son, it is an incomprehensible journey, a waste of time (and of tourism opportunities). It is only when they are in Mecca that he begins to have some understanding of his father and of the power of his Muslim heritage.

A challenging film for those who are interested in contemporary cinema interpretations of Islam and who note the similarities with and differences from their own faiths and practices.

Best screenplay award for the Spirituality Cinema award at the 2005 Fajr Film Festival, Tehran.

RACING STRIPES (US, 2004, d. Frederik Du Chau)

One of the last things on the minds of the children that this film is aimed at is whether they thought it drew on the girl in a champion race conventions of National Velvet and combined it with the talking animals that were made so popular by Babe. Well, of course, none of them would be thinking that. It's the kind of things that reviewers do to help them situate a film in cinema history and it gives them something erudite to say.

Which is the opposite of this feelgood film which was shot in South Africa though set in Kentucky. When you hear that it is about a racing zebra, you might think it impossible! But, if a baby zebra in a travelling circus were lost in a storm and a famous trainer grieving the death of his wife in a riding accident and over-protective of his teenage daughter who has a talent for racing took it home and it grew up thinking it was a race horse and encouraged by all the animals at the farm, then it would not seem too far-fetched!

It is a pleasant film with Hayden Panettiere (who did all the riding herself) as the daughter and Bruce Greenwood as the father. There is top class talent in the voice department with Dustin Hoffman and Whoopi Goldberg as a comic shetland and a wise goat respectively. Frankie Muniz voices stripes but there is a great comic turn by David Spade and Steve Harvey as two garrulous, singing horseflies.

Something to entertain the whole family.

CAVEDWELLER (US, 2004, d. Lisa Cholodenko)

Quite an enigmatic symbolic title for this modest but effective film. Cavedwellers can be recluses, people who hide and have gone back to nature. Early cavedwellers were primitive. The epithet caveman is not a compliment to a man - and it describes some of the behaviour of the leading men here. When cavemen were brutal, the women had to suffer, to hide, to run away if they could, to protect their children. These are the kinds of thoughts that come to mind while watching Cavedweller.

Lisa Cholodenko has made two quite different films with the chic and sexually ambivalent world of High Art and the bizarre world of Hollywood and the record industry in Laurel Canyon. Now she goes south and west to California and, more importantly, the kinds of backwoods communities of Georgia.

This is Kyra Sedgwick's film. She is centre screen all the time. At first, it is difficult to sympathise with her. Her long-term partner is killed in a drunken car crash and she makes a hasty decision to return home with her daughters, to Georgia. She had run off ten years earlier, abandoning husband and daughters, with a musician. How can she return and be accepted? This is the gist of the story. And there is a lot more back story than we might have thought, filled in with vivid flashbacks.

Kyra Sedgwick (Mr and Mrs Bridge, Phenomenon) is totally convincing as a woman who has made a mess of her life. When we understand the pressures she was under, we appreciate her better. And we appreciate her even more strongly when we see her making decisions which are self-sacrificing. The last 20 minutes of the film give it quite some depth.

Kevin Bacon (who has been married to Kyra Sedgwick for many years) is the care-free musician. Aidan Quinn gives a powerful performance as the brutal husband. The girls who portray the daughters, two who have not seen their mother for ten years, one of whom has religion from her possessive grandmother who has brought them up and the other who could go the same way as her mother, as well as the daughter by the musician, give substance to the struggles in broken family relationships.

Winner of the Ecumenica Prize at the Karlovy Vary festival, 2004.

PAPARAZZI (US, 2004, d. Paul Abascal)

There are quite a few shocks during this rather vigilante-like thriller – the first being that it is produced by Mel Gibson's company, Icon, the same company that produced The Passion of the Christ. The second shock is that Mel himself turns up in a cameo appearance, giving his blessing, so to speak, to the project and the director who had previously been his hairdresser and TV director.

Tawdry is the adjective that comes to mind to describe the treatment of what is a very serious topic, the callously intrusive stalking of celebrities by paparazzi who sometimes invade privacy with dire and violent results.

Cole Hauser portrays an action star from a righteous background. He seems something like an alter ego of Mel Gibson in his Lethal Weapon days. He certainly plays to the media gallery but then falls foul of an unscrupulously criminal gang of paparazzi led by Tom Sizemore whose overacting, on an uncontrolled high performance is often ludicrous. Hauser then wreaks his revenge (with some tacit OK from Denis Farina as a police chief) like a Death Wish protégé. An ugly film.

THE SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS MOVIE (US, 2004 d, Stephen Hillenberg)

- needs to be reviewed by a child or a parent to assess its entertainment impact. However, this is a comment from an outsider.

The story of a young sponge who lives happily in a city beneath the sea and who presumes he is going to be made manager of a fast food outlet only to be disappointed is imaginative. When Neptune's crown is stolen to be hocked by a Napoleonic would-be world leader (even though he is an amoeba), Bob and his pal Patrick (a really eccentric starfish who is prone to exhibitionism, signs of affection and fishnet stockings – which has made some American groups wonder about his orientations) go on a mission to find the crown. And all ends up happily.

LAURA'S STAR (Germany, 2004 d. Piet de Rycker, Thilo Graf Rothkitch)

A mild animated film, fairly basic and straightforward in style, that tells the story of an average family moving to the city from the country and Laura, the rather overbearing daughter, who lives in her imagination. It seems an entertainment for undemanding little girls.

THE MAGIC ROUNDABOUT (France/UK, 2005. d. Jean Duval, Frank Passingham, David Borthwick)

Once upon a time, there was a French television series which was dubbed and popular in the UK from the mid-60s to the mid-70s. Now it has a 21st century incarnation (with more than a nod to Lord of the Rings).

The children I saw this film with, one little vocal girl in particular, seemed to enjoy this tale of Dougal, the Robbie Williams-voiced dog, trying to combat the evil ice ogre, Zeebad (Tom Baker) with the help of the nice wizard Zebedee (Ian McKellen) to stop the whole world being frozen into oblivion.

The adventures are fairly basic but the characters are lovable – and voiced by a top range cast: Jim Broadbent, Lee Evans, Joanna Lumley, Kylie Minogue, Ray Winstone and a spaced-out Bill Nighy.

Probably a bit trying at times for parents but all works out well in the end.

SON OF THE MASK (US, 2005, d.

Jim Carrey made the character (caricature) of The Mask his own. It is almost impossible to imitate him and, for that reason, this brief follow-up is disappointing. Xx is pleasant enough as a would-be animator who lacks personal oomph and drive. But, as The Mask (which, fortunately, is not often) he is quite grating.

The screenplay concocts an elaborate story of how Thor (Bob Hoskins) is continually angry with xx the God of mischief, the Trickster who has lost his mask (Alan Cumming who really has all the exaggerated comic sequences). In the meantime, the main characters who benefit by the mask are the pet dog (and he really is a canine Mask) and a baby (sometimes real, sometimes animatronic, sometimes CGI).

There are some amusing moments but it is, shall we say, undemanding.

SOPHIE SCHOLL, THE LAST DAYS (Germany, 2005. d. Marc Rothemund)

For non-Germans, Sophie Scholl and the young opposition group to which she belonged, The White Rose, are not familiar at all. However, Michael Verhoeven and Percy Adlon both directed films about the movement in the 1980s. Since then, transcripts of the Gestapo interviews with Sophie Scholl have become public as have transcripts of the court proceedings where she and her brother and the writer of their statements were found guilty of treason. Marc Rothemund's film is a reconstruction of incidents but, principally, a verbatim dramatisation of interviews and trial.

Julia Jentsch won the Best Actress award at the Berlin Film Festival as Sophie. It is a quietly commanding performance. A young woman courageously offers to distribute a paper critical of Hitler and the military effort after the debacle for German troops at Stalingrad. She is caught, interviewed at length by an expert interrogator, Hans Mohr. With her clear, succinct and plausible answers, she persuades him that she is innocent. When her brother is found out, she declares straightforwardly what she did and why. The trial is conducted by the notorious judge, Roland Freisler, who seems to be emulating the Fuehrer with his histrionic rantings.

There are moving sequences in the prison with her cellmate, the visit of her activist father and concerned mother, the final bonding of the condemned trio before she is guillotined.

This is a serious film, a film of words and body language, continually demanding attention. The sequences where Sophie draws strength from her Evangelical faith and prayer are reminiscent of the faith of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

FATELESS (Hungary, 2005. d. Lajos Koltai)

Another perspective on the war is found in Fateless, this time from Hungary. It is based on the autobiography of the 2002 Nobel Prize winner for literature, Imre Kertesz who has written the screenplay. It has been directed by Lajos Koltai who has worked as cinematographer on many American films.

Here he has opted for very muted colour, almost black and white until the final scenes of the liberation of the camps. He has also opted for a vignette style of film narrative. This quite long film is composed of a series of incidents where the audience has to make the links. There are measured fadeouts for all these vignettes which creates an impression that we are watching a photograph album, an album of moving photographs.

The drama relies almost solely on the performance of the young actor, Marcel Nagy as Gyuri. A teenager in Budapest 1944, he sees his family rounded up by the Nazis and finds himself arrested on a bus and soon aboard a train for a brutal, waterless journey to Poland. He is chosen for hard labour and moves to several camps. We assume that he is going to be some kind of hero-survivor. In fact, a compatriot who has been imprisoned in the Ukraine for several years tries to instil in him the will to live and to self-esteem. But he is a boy. The work is gruelling. He is perpetually hungry. The Nazi guards torment the prisoners, especially with long periods of standing in rows. Black marketeers are ready to profit from the constant hunger. He does not see himself as a hero. It is a miracle that the boy survives, only to return to a city without his family and where life has resumed with seeming indifference to the victims.

This is no easy entertainment and audiences have become familiar with Holocaust suffering through documentaries, testimonies and fictions like *Sophie's Choice* and *Schindler's List* with which this film has much in common. But this is an unvarnished Hungarian witness to human cruelty and suffering.

PARADISE NOW (Holland, 2005. d. Hany Abu-Assad)

One of the acclaimed films of the Berlin Film Festival was *Paradise Now*. It was written and directed by Hany Abu-Assad, a Palestinian from Israel who lives in Holland. While the director says he was working on the script before September 11th 2001, it took on more significance after those events and in the light of the 2000 intifada.

This is a necessary film.

Most people all over the world are continually stunned by headlines of killings by suicide bombers. How can this be? What really motivates a suicide bomber? Is it the Prophet's vision of heaven, a reward for self-immolation? Or is it the desperation that decades of poverty, oppression, curtailment of rights and freedoms have brought about.

Paradise Now introduces us to two ordinary Palestinians living in Nablus. Life is manageable but not comfortable. They work at mechanics' jobs and 'hang out'. Then the word comes for them to go on a suicide mission.

The film takes us into the lives of these two men, one a cheery gung-ho enthusiast who uncritically believes all he has been told, the other a more sombre man who has stored up years of humiliation and anger. Supporting characters offer varying perspectives on the mission and the quest for peace, the director firmly believing that talks and understanding are more effective than violence and killing. The intellectual leader of the cell and his deputy portray the intensity of the political and violent groups along with the filming of the video of the bombers stating their dedication to their mission after undergoing an almost religious ritual of shaving, washing and purification. A human rights activist, daughter of a martyred bomber, puts the peace and dialogue point of view. The mother of the about-to-be terrorist, shows the human face and reality of the grief that these actions bring about.

The way of life in Nablus is presented in day-to-day detail and it is something of a shock when the final sequences in Tel Aviv show an affluent, prosperous modern city, an enormous difference between standards of living in Israel compared with those of Palestine.

HOSTAGE (OMIROS) (Greece, 2005. d. Constantinos Giannaris)

Ethnic and national tensions are to the fore in Constantinos Giannaris' Greek drama, *Hostage*. It takes place over one day. Elian gets up one morning in a town in Northern Greece. He reads his Albanian

mother's tenderly desperate letter, then burns it. He walks to the bus station and, during the journey, hijacks the bus.

The film dramatises real events of 1999. Giannaris talked to actual hostages and families to create a human story for his political thriller drama.

As the hijack proceeds, most of the hostages begin to act according to 'The Stockholm Syndrome'. They gradually understand what motivates Elian (anti-Albanian prejudice, police framing him for arms dealing, torture and revenge for his affair with a police chief's wife) and begin to identify with the hijacker. The Greek police seem sympathetic – the cold ruthlessness at the end is a shock. The Albanian police take Elian's mother to the border and act with the Greek police.

Hostage fills in the back story of the hijacker in some detail (as well as some imagining of what he thought might be the happy outcome of his actions). It shows his determinations as well as his fallibility. The stories of the hostages are also briefly developed. When the final confrontation occurs, quick editing and sound make the audience literally jump in shock.

This is familiar enough material, but the treatment is well above average and takes its audience into the troubled world of Albania and Northern Greece of the 1990s.

LE PROMENEUR DU CHAMPS DU MARS (THE LAST MITTERAND)

(France, 2005, d. Robert Guediguian)

The Last Mitterand (Le Promeneur du Champs du Mars) is based on the book by Francois Mitterand's sometimes unwilling and harassed biographer, Georges-Marc Benamou, who also wrote the screenplay, as they worked together during the last year of the French President's life. As with Sophie Scholl, this is a film of words rather than action – a kind of verbal Citizen Kane with the subject moodily participating in his own research.

Direction is by Robert Guediguian whose films usually focus on passionate slices of life in his native Marseilles. This is quite a different project for him, an examination of an important public figure who saw himself as exceedingly significant but who was evasive in answering questions about his role in the latter years of the war.

Michel Bouquet, who has been giving excellent performances for more than forty years, brings the sometimes arrogant and waspish Mitterand to life. However, Jalil Lespert as the researcher is a rather abrasive screen personality, so there is little warmth even when Mitterand is co-operating. This will be of great interest for French audiences but those with little knowledge of Mitterand will have to make an effort to be engaged.

YES (UK, 2004, d. Sally Potter)

For some years, Sally Potter has directed a range of films that have been excitingly experimental (Orlando) or more pleasingly mainstream (The Man who Cried). This time she has returned to the experimental mode while offering a narrative that tells the story of the emotional changes in a middle-aged woman. It takes a few minutes to realise that the screenplay has been written in verse, iambic pentameter, more frequently than not, rhyming. It is to the credit and skills of the cast that this seems minimally artificial. Sally Potter also experiments with colour and monochrome, stop-motion sequences and unexpected angles and editing. She has also composed the score. The audience is conscious of the art and artifice, responding to the narrative thrust while reflecting on the issues and themes.

Most of 'Yes' seems more like 'No' in its outlook on women, men and relationships. Ultimately, however, the film moves to an affirmation of being alive.

Joan Allen has been one of the US's most striking actresses (The Crucible, Nixon, Ice Storm, When the Sky Falls, The Contender). This is really her film. She portrays an Irish-American woman, allowing

herself to be trapped in a loveless marriage, infatuated by and then needing the affection of an immigrant Lebanese cook. Simon Abkarian is the cook. Sam Neill is the cold husband. Sheila Hancock is her dying aunt, with a performance that is principally voiceover.

The stylised dialogue provides modes for each character to express more philosophical reflections. The central character is a scientist, so the film offers quite a lot of thought on science, the universe, what it is to be a human being and the relationship between science and religion, the presence and absence of God. There is a very powerful conversation late in the film which raises questions of equality between peoples, where the Lebanese man expresses frustration at the condescension of Western affluent society ('we know your songs, do you learn ours...?') However, the film has a kind of chorus of cleaners (led by Shirley Henderson) who use the mundane details of bedroom and bathroom cleaning to reflect on dirt, mortality and constant change.

This is the kind of film that critics who say they want films that go beyond the banal but, when faced with a film like 'Yes' dismiss it as pretentious. 'Yes' is not an easy entertainment but it is worth a thoughtful response.

LES MOTS BLEU (WORDS IN BLUE) (France, 2004, d. Alain Corneau)

More conventional but sympathetically done is Alain Corneau's *Les Mots Bleu* (Words in Blue), the story of a child traumatised when very little and unwilling/unable to speak. Sylvie Testud plays the girl's struggling mother, trying to protect her child from bullying and give her a sheltered life. This attitude is threatened when she enrolls her daughter in a specialist school and fears that she will move further and further away from her. The little girl develops, makes friends and is a serious achiever under the tutelage of a sympathetic Sergei Lopez.

For many tastes the beachside finale may seem a bit much for this kind of hopeful story.

GESPENSTER (GHOSTS) (Germany, 2005. d. Christian Petzold)

Troubled girls, this time teenage, are the subject of Christian Petzold's *Ghosts*. Nina lives in a shelter and has a job working as a park cleaner. When she sees a young woman, Toni, being assaulted, she helps her and they begin an on-again, off-again friendship. When she is expelled from the shelter, the two set up home. Complications occur when a depressed mother, always searching for her dead daughter, claims the girl as her own – which the girl herself wants. The other in the meantime does an audition of a director and goes off with him.

Slight but well acted, especially by Julia Hummer as Nina, a slice of street life in a German city.

ADAM AND PAUL (Ireland, 2004, d. Lenny Abrahamson)

The Irish are prolific users of what has been called the 'multi-purpose' f word. We might remember it from *The Commitments* and more recent stories of terrorism. It is a dialogue staple of Adam and Paul.

It starts as one of those offbeat comedies with two seemingly hopeless junkies wake up and wander Dublin, getting into trouble, seeing their mates, looking for a score and generally messing up. But, after a while, thoughts of Samuel Becket and *Waiting for Godot*, tramps and existential conversation, come to mind and we begin to respond to the underlying humour and humanity of this very odd couple.

Mark O'Halloran, the writer (who also acts as the taller tramp – we don't know who is who as everyone greets them as Adam and Paul) says he also had Laurel and Hardy in mind as a model for the interdependence and the comic routines. Because of the picaresque adventures that are one minute warmly laughable and the next moment disconcerting (just as we begin to like them, they harass and rob and nice Downes syndrome young man at a bus stop).

This is a contemporary Irish yarn of the homeless and the druggies, the cons and the pubs – a comic-serious reflection on ‘Such is Life’ with a touch of blarney.

THE BALLAD OF JACK AND ROSE (US, 2004, d. Rebecca Miller)

Daniel Day Lewis stars in this film which was written and directed by his wife, Rebecca Miller (Personal Velocity). (Her father was playwright Arthur Miller.)

The Ballad of Jack and Rose is a story of father and daughter set on an island off the US east coast in 1986, the father living the more mundane aftermath of his utopian commune days, wanting to save the world and believing in freedom of all kind. Now he is terminally ill. His daughter, Rose, has never known any other life than her early days with the commune and this intimate life with her father. They are inseparable, except when he visits a divorcee, Catherine Keener, in town. When she and her two teenage sons move in, emotional crisis occurs.

Day Lewis is always an interesting screen presence, communicating a sense of being slightly off-kilter. Camilla Belle is able to make of Rose a complex character both sympathetic in her feeling that her life was suffering intrusion and irritating in the irresponsible reactions to the guests. Catherine Keener gives yet another strong performance. Beau Bridges is the developer who becomes Day Lewis’s target – though there is a rather mellower than expected resolution to their antagonism. Jason Lee is a sympathetic neighbour and Ryan McDonald is very good as the oversize but sweet son. Jena Malone is unrecognisable as the runaway girlfriend who just turns up.

For a certain generation, especially of Americans, this is an opportunity to take stock of the hippy era, the hopes of the communes and the return to mainstream life that was the mark of the 1980s.

SPANGLISH (US, 2004, d. James L. Brooks)

If there can be Franglais, then why not Spanglish!

James L Brooks won an Oscar for Terms of Endearment but directs few films. His last was the 1997, As Good as it Gets. He is in something of the same thematic area here although the setting is Los Angeles and we have two mothers and daughters.

This is a kind of fairytale with a realistic ending. Part of it is the dream for Hispanic migrants to find a well-paid job and provide for the family in America. Part of it is the nightmare of working in a dysfunctional American household and finding that the daughter wants nothing more than to be just like the Americans.

It works and it doesn’t, but it’s the kind of goodhearted film that you should give the benefit of the doubt to – and, then, maybe its Brooks’s close association with the Simpsons over the years that he writes a kind of live-action Simpsons.

Whatever the characters and caricatures, one thing is certain, Brooks as director and writer seems besotted with Spanish star, Paz Vega (Carmen, Sex and Lucia). The camera loves her and so do we. She is Flor, the maid and housekeeper, beautiful, vivacious, generally common-sensed and principled. Shelbie Bruce as her daughter is a convincing young actress and has some marvellous scenes where she not only translates but acts out the conversations she is translating.

So, the Hispanic side is pretty good and the themes worth responding too.

Now, the American family. Tea Leoni is a mother of two who is an emotional wreck, driven, incessantly talking and commenting on her behaviour, insensitive to her non-slim daughter and grating on her long-suffering husband. She blames her alcoholic ex-singer mother for being crazy and mixed up. (It is a pleasure to see Cloris Leachman as the mother – she has the good lines.)

And, Adam Sandler is the husband, a master chef, a kind man and loving father. In fact, Flor is amazed that his sensibility seems more like that of a Mexican woman. He wanders befuddled through the film, affirming his daughter, bewildered by his wife, dissatisfied that the personal touch is being removed from his acclaimed and over-booked restaurant and more and more drawn towards Flor. This is not the Airheads Sandler. Rather it is the Sandler of Punch Drunk Love and he makes the character his own.

The film really is sometimes irritating, sometimes lovable.

MONSTER MAN (US, 2003, d. Michael Davis)

A poster blurb announces that this slasher film is Jeepers Creepers meets Duel meets The Texas Chainsaw Massacre. The makers of these films have serious grounds for both plagiarism suits and plagiarising badly suits – well, perhaps not Texas Chainsaw because by the time the film reaches this rip-off it gets a little more interesting in a gory kind of way. Other than that it is too stupid to be funny or scary. Direction is basic (or below). The screenplay is both crass and lame, the acting is terrible, especially with a charisma-less leading man in Eric Schumann, Justin Urich as a gross motormouth and Aimee Brooks starting as a highway vamp and ending up even more so. Only for those who feel they need to see every Massacre derivative (and even then...?)

LES CHORISTES (THE CHORUS) (France, 2004, d. Christophe Barratier)

To sir with music.

One of the most popular films at the French box-office in many years followed by BAFTA and Oscar nominations for Best Foreign Language film. It would be hard not to enjoy it and applaud a story of a dedicated teacher who improves the quality of life for his problem students. But it is both sweeter and tougher than the usual rebel class/heroic teacher movie.

Director Christophe Barratier was a child musician himself and felt the need to express something in his film about his own life and disappointment at not being a musician. However, he has paid tribute to music, especially choral music, and the beauty and clarity of young voices. He had been impressed by a 1945 French film, *The Cage of Nightingales*, directed by Jacques Dreville and starring Noel Noel, and thought it would be the vehicle to rewrite to bring his school and chorus to life. He has relocated the film to 1949 when the French government was trying to improve its understanding of children and their problems, introducing psychological profiling. (To have updated it to the present would have made too difficult demands to dramatise contemporary urban problems with modern music and song; Barratier said he could focus on the music more carefully by staying in the past.)

The film opens with a successful conductor visited by an old schoolfriend with a diary of the teacher who taught them to sing. He reads the diary and it comes to life. The school is one of those old French Dickensian institutions, run by a disappointed teacher who takes out his frustrations in biting language and cruel punishment of his boys (who are problem children, sons of single mothers, boys with criminal tendencies and war orphans). There are grim scenes in the refectory, the dormitory, the classroom. And most of the action takes place in winter.

Matthieu Clement (a middle-aged, balding, chubby failed musician, Gerard Jugnot) takes up a job as a supervisor at this school, trying to follow the rules of the principal, acting as a disciplinarian with the boys. However, he allows his natural kindness to emerge and discovers that many of the boys can sing. Gradually and happily, he forms the choir and builds it to concert pitch. The sweetness includes the music itself, the troubled boy who has an angelic voice and a little orphan for whom Matthieu becomes a father-figure.

The toughness (which led the British censor to give the film a 12A certificate where children under 12 can see the film only if they are accompanied by an adult) includes a few swear words, some boyish crudities and an allusion to the possibilities of sexual abuse – a touch of realism in a school where the boys were difficult and the treatment harsh.

The music is attractive. The screen presence and singing voice of young Jean Baptiste Maunier, the performances of the adults moving and the inspirational tone of the film make it satisfying and intelligent entertainment.

HOSTAGE (US, 2004, d. Florent Siri)

There are pre-production plans for a Die Hard 4. For those who can't wait so long, there is Hostage.

This is a pretty good action thriller, holding the attention all the way through, filmed in a vividly fresh way by French director, Florent Siri, and providing many twists and turns, not all of which are predictable. And here is Bruce Willis yet again, saving the day.

One of the pleasing things about Hostage is Bruce Willis's presence and a different performance. We are familiar with his tough presence, sometimes tinged with wry and sardonic humour, that curl of the mouth when he smiles. Instead of smiles this time, he has some tears. He also expresses his fears as he confronts the criminals and his anxieties for the safety of his wife and daughter (who is played by his actual daughter, Rumer Willis). This is a much more vulnerable Bruce Willis.

He plays a seasoned negotiator with distraught people holding families siege. The tense opening sequence sees him at work – and failing. This, of course, sets the tone for the Monday siege a year later when he has taken the position of police chief in a quietly affluent neighbourhood. When three young men who steal cars covet a special car and follow it home, their theft turns into a confrontation, violence, an assault on a father and confining his two children in their luxury home. The rest of the film is the siege, plus some complications that the three young men never anticipated: the owner of the house is an accountant for highly placed criminals (something which the screenplay never really quite explains).

Siri has obtained not only a good performance from Willis but also from the little boy in the house (Michael Bennet) who shows more courage and nous than is usual and from two of the young louts, Jonathan Tucker as the wannabe leader who finds himself completely out of his depth and Ben Foster, truly sinister in look and manner as the psychopathic member of the group.

Really, very well done – and Bruce Willis is still on top.

HITCH (US, 2005, d. Andy Tennant)

There is something about Will Smith that makes you like him no matter what. Whether he is a man in black, in the wild wild west, challenging robots or flying on independence day, he is the genial figure who combines the joke and the sentiment as you like it. Which means that Hitch is a hit for Smith fans.

He is a date doctor with quite a flair for helping men overcome their shyness, awkwardness or just plain stupidity to marry the girl of their dreams (and this is just during the credits). As for himself, he was disappointed in love when he was a gawky student and he avoids entanglements. When he tangles with a dedicated reporter (Eva Mendes) who is equally unwilling to be disappointed in love, they really hit it off well and there are some enjoyable dates, especially a visit to Ellis Island where she sees documents about her ancestor (unfortunately he was a serial killer, a butcher, not a purveyor or meat!)

Hitch takes on an above average awkward client who is infatuated with one of the richest women in New York City. When the reporter starts stalking the celebrity, we have a recipe for disaster all round – which is what happens. But, of course... and there is a very happy ending with everybody at the wedding and dancing. Who could ask for anything more!

Actually, Ken James as the geeky client shows that a little bit of extra weight should be no impediment to true love. The object of his affection, Amber Valetta, is much taller and much thinner (and richer), but she needs love not money. Eva Mendes is a lively partner for Will Smith, she can give as good as she gets.

An enormous success in the US, and a really nice film about love and commitment, allowing for its fairytale affluent setting, it could be successful anywhere.

ARE WE THERE YET (US, 2005, d. Brian Levant)

This is the question that occurred to me numerous times while watching this film. It has to end sometime, the sooner the better. It is one of those American 'family' films that glorify the most obnoxious and precocious children who could lead one into temptation of murder! And, what is worse, after being spoilt and mischievous, they are going to be wringing our hearts for sympathy before the end.

Ice Cube, once a tough gangster-rapper type is now turning into Bill Cosby. When he agrees to take the children of a friend by plane (they mess that up), by train (they make him miss it) and then in his new, expensive car which is progressively demolished during the trip, you know you are in for the long haul. His forbearance is nothing short of miraculous. If you like cheeky kids wreaking mischief on adults with slapstick humour and tears at the end... so be it!

COACH CARTER (US, 2004, d. Thomas Carter)

Back in 1989, Morgan Freeman appeared in the film, *Lean on Me*, the true story of a school principal in a tough neighbourhood who imposed discipline (with the help of a threatening cudgel) in a no-nonsense manner and improved the standards in his school. Perhaps the real Ken Carter, on whose career as a basketball coach this film is based, saw *Lean on Me*. He doesn't wield any implement but he is in the strong disciplinary tradition. His 'weapon' is respect. He demands that his players call him 'Sir' and he calls them 'Sir'. He demands absolute punctuality, infringements leading to running and push-ups. He also demands a contract whereby the players will maintain an agreed average in their studies (guaranteed by teachers' reports). Gradually, he build up a team in Richmond, on the outskirts of San Francisco which plays together and wins. On the personal interactions, the build up is more gradual, the students (mainly African American but not exclusively) have home problems, relationship problems and academic problems. The situation comes to a head when the students fail to honour the contract with their studies and Coach Carter imposes a lockout, to the anger of the parents and the school board. The climax is not quite what you expect, but it is based on faith in the goodness and fairness of human nature.

This actually happened in 1999.

The film is in the tradition of the American coach movies (think Denzel Washington in *Remember the Titans*). The sport is basketball and there are plenty of matches to delight fans – plus some coaching tips and strategies. This is Samuel L. Jackson's film and he is completely convincing as Ken Carter, a principled man and former school champion, good husband, stern father (not prone to use the word 'love' at all) but fair, courageous in sticking to his guns despite animosity from critics, yet aware of the needs of his students.

It is more interesting and enjoyable than one might have anticipated and will appeal to those who think that a tough line in discipline is more effective than being nice. To Sir with basketball.

9 SONGS (UK, 2004, d. Michael Winterbottom)

A test case for censorship boards around the world. For many, the explicit presentation of actual sexual activity will mean that the film will not be released in commercial cinemas. However, it did receive an 18+ certificate in the UK.

What is it about? Two twenty somethings meet at a rock concert in London, fall in love and continue their relationship for some months before she decides to return home to the US. He works, she studies, they go to more rock concerts (hence the 9 songs) and engage in sexual activity which would normally be private but which the director makes the audience privy to. There are some sequences in Antarctica where he has worked and his reflections on being in that continent and on relationships. There was no script as such and the actors improvised. It is inexpensively and digitally shot. The difficulty is that in its 69 minutes running

time, we get only glimpses of the characters rather than an understanding of who they are and the non-sexual glimpses are really very ordinary (except for some cocaine snorting).

What is the controversy? Should images of actual and explicit sexual activity be included in a 'commercial' film that does not claim to be pornography? It raises the perennial problem for those who want liberalised regulations concerning sexuality but want restrictions on violence and for those (especially Christians and other religious people) who want restrictions on sexuality but are comfortable with explicit depictions of violence. (Of course, in movies violence is simulated as is sexual activity – but in this case the sexuality is not simulated.) Most boards use community standards as a guide for what is permitted. Some say *9 Songs* indicates a healthy freedom, others that it indicates decadence in contemporary society.

Director Michael Winterbottom has worked on the principle that depictions of sexuality, which is good, is preferable to depictions of gratuitous violence. In *9 Songs*, he is not simply depicting cold and clinical sexual activity or pornographically provocative sensuality. His characters are in relationship and their activity is directed towards the other in terms of their love for one another.

The debate will focus on whether the material is pornographic or not but, more seriously, whether actual sexual activity is appropriate for inclusion in films.

HIDE AND SEEK (US, 2005, d. John Polson)

In *The Sixth Sense*, a traumatised Haley Joel Osment saw dead people. In *Hide and Seek*, a traumatised Dakota Fanning sees mysterious companions that no one else sees. In *The Sixth Sense*, Bruce Willis was a psychiatrist who discovered something unexpected. In *Hide and Seek*, Robert de Niro is the psychologist who has to deal with his daughter and make some unexpected discoveries. In a way, *The Sixth Sense* was so good at 'misdirecting' audience attention that it meant that audiences are more alert to plot twists – but, personally, it was only just before the truth was revealed that it occurred to me what was really happening. A reviewer can only hope that audiences will enjoy the plot development and the surprises.

It is actually pleasant to see Robert de Niro acting the part of a quietly normal character for a change, bespectacled, concerned, domestic and worried about his daughter's strange behaviour after her mother's violent death. Dakota Fanning is always a knowing little actress and she is convincingly gaunt and troubled here. Some good actresses are also part of the scenario, Amy Irving, Famke Janssen, Elizabeth Shue and Melissa Leo.

Australian director, John Polson (*Siam Sunset*, *Swimfan*) keeps the whole thing fairly edgy even as everyone is trying to help the little girl back to normal, but the climax is overly American as it resorts to violence to solve everything. But it is an entertaining, sometimes off-kilter psychological thriller.

THE WOODSMAN (US, 2004, d. Nicole Kassell)

The woodsman of the title is the man with the axe who frees Red Riding Hood after she has been devoured by the wolf. This is a film which is both realistic and asks us to use our imaginations in assessing the characters and their behaviour.

It is also a film which tackles a very difficult subject: the paedophile. Specifically, the paedophile who serves his prison sentence and then returns to the world where he has to find a place to live, a job and has to report to a psychologist to continue his therapy and is hounded by police acting as parole supervisors. Many will say that this kind of criminal deserves all that he gets or does not get. However, if a society is healthy, it can be judged by the way it treats its criminals, its humanity despite atrocity. While proper supervision that prevents the paedophile from re-offending is essential, how does he cope back in the world?

After the film is over, we realise that there are a lot of questions that were not answered. This woodsman has been in jail from age 34 to 46. How serious were his offences? What treatment did he receive in prison? How was he helped with his obsession? How deserving is he of audience sympathy?

As played with conviction by Kevin Bacon, he does elicit some sympathy. He is given a job because of his reliable past at work. One of the truck drivers takes a shine to him and she begins a relationship with him. When she discovers the truth, she has to make decisions about her feelings and her principles. This is especially the case after the secretary in the lumber yard takes a dislike to him and makes public his situation. The policeman who harasses him at home makes no attempt to disguise his contempt.

There are two dramatic complications for our emotional response. The first is that the woodsman sees a paedophile stalking young boys in the street below his apartment. What is he to do? Is the fact that he is concerned about the fate of the boys and acts on this enough to forgive him? On the other hand, the film also shows that the drives that made him molest young girls has not gone away despite the therapy. The scene where he meets a young girl in the park and befriends her and the crucial scene where he follows her with dangerous intentions make us wary.

Kevin Bacon is excellent in his role and is supported by his real-life wife, Kyra Sedgwick.

BOOGEYMAN (US 2005, d. Stephen Kay)

The American countryside in Boogeyman does not look quite American – perhaps that was intended to give an eerie atmosphere to this psychological horror story. Then the credits reveal that it was filmed in New Zealand where Sam Raimi's company had spent years filming the television series, Hercules and Xena (which is why Lucy Lawless, the one time Xena, appears here – she is married to the producer as well).

Mention of Sam Raimi reminds us that he is a horror aficionado who made The Evil Dead, Darkman and The Gift. He and his partners have set up a new company to make horror thrillers. Their first was the US remake in 2004 of the Japanese film, The Grudge. It was a huge box-office success. The Boogeyman is their second film. And it is pretty good of its kind.

Raimi makes the important point that the parodies of the 90s, especially the Scream and Scary Movie franchises really brought the slasher horror genre to a close for the time being – although the Americans are still making and re-making derivatives of the Texas Chainsaw Massacre. Raimi goes on to say that the horror films breaking new ground are those from Japan and Korea (witness the Ring films and their US remakes). The emphasis is less on slash and gore but rather on atmosphere. They take ordinary people in ordinary situations and move them into a mysterious world, part natural, part supernatural, where it is hard to distinguish what is real and what is ghostly. At least, for the moment, this is a more fruitful way of dramatising horror – although it is less horror than terror.

Boogeyman is slight. Barry Watson is a grown up man who realises that his father's bedtime story frightened him into imagining that the Boogeyman took his father away when he really walked out on his family. Or has he imagined it and what if the Boogeyman were still taking people away and stalking his old family home? What better than to go to confront fears in the home by staying overnight? The real answer is probably counselling but in lieu of this, that is what our hero does. And, yes, the Boogeyman is still there.

For the slasher fans, this may be tame stuff (check the comments posted on IMDb by those who want fright jumps). For those who prefer a little more subtlety, this one keeps one in tense tingling most of the way through.

MA MERE (France, 2004, d. Christophe Honoré)

Georges Bataille was a French novelist whose books went into the dark side of human nature, especially sexuality. In recent years, especially in the films of Catherine Breillat, like Romance and The Anatomy of Hell, French film-makers have been exploring these themes, often quite graphically.

The French are a philosophical people – after all it was Rene Descartes who stated, I think, therefore I am – and often make films where there is a great deal of emphasis on the dialogue where the director is stating what he or she thinks. The language is abstract, attempting the metaphysical, which is well and good in a printed text. But because it has been thought and expressed, it does not guarantee that it is, especially in cinematic form. These films are images of course, but they do not correspond to the words, their tone, their possible depth. Rather, they often look crass and crude.

With *Ma Mere*, expectations are high. Isabelle Huppert is the star along with the up and coming Louis Garrell. However, the spoken content is philosophical while the images are more pedestrian, a whole lot of sex going on some of which is elegantly photographed, the rest rather in your face.

During a holiday in the Canary Islands, a young man (who has strong sexual urges and who sometimes goes through the motions of praying) discovers his father's dark side and that his mother is openly decadent. She also has a passion for her son. When she goes off with her girlfriend who has failed to make a lasting impression on the son despite mother's efforts, she asks another girl to look after him.

Underlying all the characters is a sadomasochistic drive (illustrated) which means that we are being asked to reflect on sexuality, passion, violence, cruelty, power (and sometimes on commitment). But the narrative is not your linear progress of story. Rather, it is episodic, characters just turning up, incidents without preparation – so that a psychological understanding of the characters (which we really need) is almost impossible. Despite the talk about life and love, the ending is quite nihilistic.

DUCK SEASON (TEMPORADA DE PATOS) (Mexico, 2004, d.Fernando Eimbcke)

A young Mexican director has opted to make a film about bored youngsters in today's more affluent urban life. He has filmed in black and white and confined himself to an upstairs apartment: two fourteen year old boys, their sixteen year old neighbour who wants to use their oven and the pizza guy.

For audiences wanting a case study, there is something to watch as the lazy Sunday passes and the group play video games, experience power cuts and have to talk (or not), argue about whether to pay for the pizza or not, look at photo albums or just sit and doze.

For those not wanting to examine the case studies carefully, the temptation is to just sit and doze. It is a real challenge to make an interesting film about bored people. Despite admirable film-making techniques and performances and the potential for reflection, this film makes us share the boredom.

FLIGHT OF THE PHOENIX (US, 2004, d. John Moore)

Those with long memories (though not necessarily accurate ones) and those who enjoy movies on television may have strong impressions of Robert Aldrich's 1965 *The Flight of the Phoenix* with James Stewart and Richard Attenborough, Peter Finch, Ernest Borgnine and a strong male supporting cast. A plane crashes in the Sahara and a passenger (Hardy Kruger) claims that they could rebuild the plane.

Forty years on, the crash is in the Gobi desert in a hot July (but filmed in the dunes of Namibia). Dennis Quaid is the gung-ho pilot and a blonde and bespectacled Giovanni Ribisi, like a cross between a Gestapo interrogator and Dr Strangelove, is the aviation expert. Along for the ride from an unprofitable oilfield that is being closed down are the accountant, Hugh Laurie, and the manager, Miranda Otto. The rest are a motley lot of survivors.

The interactions of those stranded in the desert are par for the course, generally the expected fights, quarrelling, pep talks and motivations (better to do something than nothing), exhilaration in building the plane again and dismay at the accidents that hinder the re-building (and the threatening roving smugglers).

Where the film takes off (or rather comes down) most effectively is in the flight sequences through the sandstorm and the crash. This is where effects and stunt work combine to jaw-dropping effect. Irish director John Moore also made *Behind Enemy Lines*, which was better on the action than on the drama,

and is an avowed 'plane freak'. Those who share his passion will best appreciate his film. Otherwise, it is big and loud and best during the action.

FILMS ON SCREEN, MARCH, 2005
Peter Malone

This is a service of the SIGNIS Website, presenting reviews by Peter Malone of films that have been screening during the previous month.

BE COOL
CONSTANTINE
DOWNFALL
KUNG FU HUSTLE
MARIA, FULL OF GRACE
MACHINIST, The
MELINDA AND MELINDA
MISS CONGENIALITY 2
RAGE IN PLACID LAKE, The
RING 2, The
ROBOTS
VALIANT

THE RAGE IN PLACID LAKE (Australia, 2003, d. Tony McNamara)

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.

MARIA FULL OF GRACE (US, 2004, d. Joshua Marston)

Most audiences want an entertainment when they see a film. However, there is something very satisfying (entertaining in the broadest sense) when we see a film that is interesting and explores real situations and values.

Maria Full of Grace is such a film.

It should be noted at once that the Maria of the title is not the Virgin Mary, despite the familiar words 'full of grace'. Rather, the American director, documentary-maker, Joshua Marston, has taken hold of this phrase, which is now part of the heritage of our language and applied it to a young woman from Colombia. He says that in her struggles and her decisions, she discovers her own inner grace and goodness.

The leading actress, Caterina Sandina Moreno, was a surprise nomination for the recent Oscars, for Best Actress. She did not win. She was too much of an unknown. But the nomination has ensured that the film will have a wider release around the world.

It has already won several Catholic awards at festivals in Latin America. The juries have been impressed by the power of this portrait of poverty and social injustice in Colombia. They see it as relevant to their lives. For those of us from other cultures, it is an opportunity to watch a story that can open our eyes to how other people have to live.

We see Maria and her friends working in a flowers-for-export factory. Marston said he was surprised to discover that Colombia is second only to Holland in producing flowers for the world market. This means that Maria is a typical Colombian. As with so many other factory workers, she has a mother, a sister with a family to support. It is almost impossible to make ends meet. When she clashes with one of the bosses, she is left stranded.

Colombia is best-known as a producer of cocaine. The Americans have poured money and arms into trying to destroy the plantations and the drug bosses. The Catholic Church has been very active in Colombia in recent times promoting justice. It was in Colombia in the 1960s that the Catholic Bishops Conference followed the lead of Paul VI in urging the universal church to have what he called 'a preferential option for the poor'.

In many ways, this is what Maria Full of Grace is about. Audiences will be shocked at Maria's recruitment as a 'drug mule', a carrier who will take sachets of drugs into the US, posing as a tourist visiting family. The cartels employ many such carriers, promising them enough money to enable them to support their families. Even more shocking is the detail shown of how the young women have to train themselves to swallow twenty or more containers and keep them down until they can be recovered when they arrive at their destination.

Customs and police are alert to this traffic and grill suspects.

Where the film creates tension is when one young woman becomes gravely ill (it is not her first trip) and, ultimately, dies. Maria is then faced with decisions about what she does in New York, how she will get help to recover the woman's body and send it back to her family and what her own future will be.

The film becomes very moving as Maria seeks the help of her relatives and is introduced to Don Fernando, the man to whom all the Colombian migrants turn to for help and solutions to their problems. The character is based on Orlando Tobon who has been doing this charity work since 1968. More impressively, Tobon takes on the role of Don Fernando giving the American sequences even greater authenticity.

At the end, Maria has taken a giant step to discover her own grace and we are confident that she might now grow in grace.

THE MACHINIST (Spain, 2004, d. Brad Anderson)

Quite an impact. This is a tour-de-force portrait of madness and the disintegration of a personality.

Screenwriter Scott Kosar has written horror films up till now – and the influence can be seen in this psychological horror portrait. However, he has moved on to a deeper level of human experience: conscience and guilt. He invites us into the mind of Trevor Resnick, a machinist in a large factory. Trevor is profoundly disturbed, destroying himself from the inside out. We soon realise that he is paranoid and delusional but we do not quite know what is real and what is not. He seems to be living a desperate nightmare even though he cannot sleep. Audiences need to hold on to their uncertainty as to what is actually happening to Trevor and what he is seeing in his fearful fantasies. There is a satisfying resolution and explanation – and a realisation that we have been offered clues all the way through if we have been alert enough. It is the kind of film that repays a second viewing to appreciate what has gone on, even if the experience is quite gruelling.

American financiers balked at making the film so Kosar and his director, Brad Anderson (Next Stop, Wonderland) found support in Spain. You won't pick it while you watch the film as it seems so

authentically American, but it was all filmed very effectively in Barcelona. Anderson has created a striking visual style with his cinematographer, Xavi Gimenez, and an offbeat mood with his composer, Roque Banos, who has scored the film in the multi-instrumental, orchestrated style of classic Hollywood psychological dramas. All of these contributors to the film mention Hitchcock in their interviews.

Widescreen is exploited well for both naturalism and for paranoia. The colour style is limited palette, again partly natural but mostly suggestive of the subjective perspectives of Trevor.

Promotion of the film led to many interviews with star, Christian Bale, about his loss of weight for the role to make him look skeletally gaunt. (He did control his eating and lost 63 pounds.) His physical appearance and his skill in looking insane one moment and normal the next form the basis for a completely convincing while puzzling characterisation. Also in the cast (as real characters or figment characters) include Jennifer Jason Leigh, Aitana Sanchez-Gijon, Anna Massey and Michael Ironside.

Critics have been busy finding names to suggest how the film works and the impact it makes: Hitchcock, David Lynch, Michael Powell (Peeping Tom), Christopher Nolan (Memento), Roman Polanski (especially his films about madness, Repulsion and The Tenant). The experience is referred to as Kafkaesque. The main clue is on screen with a copy of Dostoevski's The Idiot. More to the point is Kosar's reference to Dostoevski's, The Double. Actually, The Machinist has absorbed these influences within its own originality.

CONSTANTINE (US 2005, d. Francis Lawrence)

It is amazing that in an age which is increasingly secular, the images and traditions of the Catholic church provide the basis for exotic popular storytelling. It can be irritatingly inaccurate as in Dan Brown's The Da Vinci Code. It can be entertaining while sometimes irritating as in this version of a comic book hero exorcising people who have been possessed by half-breeds (both angelic and demonic), Constantine.

It is a reminder of G.K. Chesterton's paradox that when people stop believing in something, they will believe in anything.

The film-makers here have definitely done some homework, or drawn on their memories of Catholic upbringing, to invent their own version of heaven, earth and hell. This has been a popular pastime in recent years with such films as The Devil's Advocate where Al Pacino was the devil incarnate tormenting the star of Constantine, Keanu Reeves. There have been thrillers like The Sin Eater and Stigmata that played around with legends, myths and mysterious documents modelled on the Dead Sea Scrolls. Constantine is much more 'high concept' than these films.

John Constantine was a psychic child who could see beyond appearances, could see the demonic world behind the world. It so frightened him that he killed himself and went to hell. However, he was quickly released after seeing its horror and sent back to earth where he found his mission was to destroy the half-breeds and exorcise the hapless humans they inhabited.

Exorcisms have been a staple of screen stories since 1973 with The Exorcist. Possession and exorcisms are not part of everyday Catholic living but early in 2005, a Catholic university in Rome held its first course in the topic and the Catholic press featured articles on the course and the rather large number of participants, especially priests. This gives one pause for thought when watching Constantine.

There are all kinds of allusions to theology in the screenplay. They are not necessarily accurate, but they touch on a grain of truth which makes them plausible. God and the devil have made a wager to gain as many souls as possible. However, they cannot interfere with free will. They can indirectly influence humans by angels and demons who represent them on earth.

Another idea states that Jesus did not die from his crucifixion alone but from his side being pierced with the lance (a misreading of John 19). They follow this with the idea that the lance is 'the spear of destiny' which, since it was the instrument of the death of the son of God, could be the means of the birth of the son

of the devil. When this evil spirit tries to come to earth, it enters into the womb of a psychic woman (called Angela). This gives a certain plausibility to a virginal conception.

However, Gabriel is on earth and has tired of God's being so merciful and forgiving that he is intent on destroying the woman and freeing the demon (a bit like Lucifer's original sin of arrogance against God).

All this is filmed in a vividly visual style with plenty of mysterious special effects. Constantine is eminently watchable for its flair. It also manages to get the Latin correct (even as it invents Corinthians 17).

Keanu Reeves is a popular star, especially after the Matrix series. He operates on the passive presence principle where the audience tends to read into his somewhat blank features what they think he is thinking. He makes us do a lot of work.

Since Rosemary's Baby in the 60s and The Exorcist and The Omen in the 70s, audiences have frequently been readier to believe what they see on the screen in highly imaginative and invented stories rather than believe what scripture and tradition have handed on to us for a life of faith. Films like Constantine are generally just a bit of a thrill. However, if they do get audiences thinking about issues of good and evil, God and church, that would be a bonus.

ROBOTS (US, 2005, Chris Wedge, Carlos Saldhana)

It is a machine age – but never more so in Rivet Town and the big city where Rodney Copperbottom grows up and then moves to so that he can fulfil his abilities at inventing, especially, as his idol, Mr Bigweld, often says, 'to fill a need'. He is the complete altruist, loving his father (a poor restaurant dishwasher whose parts are wearing down) and mother and trying to save his idol, the philanthropist and television personality, inventor Mr

As you can see, this is a kindly and wholesome story. However, there lurks a villain, Ratchet, who has ousted Mr Bigweld and, at the behest of his monstrous mother, has consigned robots whose parts are gone to the scrapheap. Rodney, however, is kind and a whiz at fixing rundown robots. Ratchet and Rodney are on a collision course. Rodney makes many friends, especially a motormouth machine, Fender, who is always falling apart, and the glamorous Cappy.

So, there is plenty to do for the robots and the film moves along quite nicely. The animation of the various robots is always amusing and there is a lot of clever incidental detail for the observant audience, parallels to our taken-for-granted human world. There is also a lot of amusing dialogue.

In case we couldn't guess, there is not only a happy ending but a moral victory for good Rodney and evil Ratchet, which means that Robots is a genial do-gooding parable.

The voice cast is top-notch with Ewan McGregor leading as Rodney. Naturally, Robin Williams as Fender dominates every scene he is in and has a great deal of his usual patter which his fans will love. Other voices are Greg Kinnear as Ratchet, Jim Broadbent as his mother, Halle Berry as Cappy, Jennifer Coolidge as Aunt Fanny and the pleasure of Mel Brooks as Mr Bigweld.

DOWNFALL (Germany, 2004, d. Oliver Hirschbiegel)

What an ignominious end to one of history's most arrogantly ambitious grabs for power.

Downfall is the picture of the last days of Hitler and of the Third Reich. It is based on two books, one of research, Inside Hitler's Bunker by Joachim Fest, the other the memoirs of Hitler's private secretary, Until the Final Hour by Traudl Junge and Melissa Mueller. (Just after her death in February, 2002, a documentary of interviews with Traudl Junge was released, Blind Spot, Hitler's Secretary, a film well worth seeing to try to grasp how people could become so obsessed with Hitler and his vision).

With April 2005 being the 60th anniversary of Hitler's death and May the anniversary of the end of the war in Europe, the German film industry has been revisiting its past. Downfall received some initial harsh criticism because it painted too 'human' a portrait of Hitler. A sensitivity towards Hitler being shown as a human being is understandable in those who suffered or whose families suffered because of the Nazis. But, day by day, Hitler related to people and drew their affection. To have a more 'real' portrait of him does not diminish the horror of what he said and did. It is to the credit of Bruno Ganz that his portrayal embodies all these aspects of Hitler.

Germans went to see the film in their thousands. It was then nominated for an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film. Audiences outside Germany will find it a fascinating re-creation of momentous times.

The film runs for two and a half hours. Apart from a prologue where Hitler interviews six applicants for the post of his secretary and hires Traudl Junge, the film stays within the last ten days of the dying Reich. The audience is invited to perceive the personalities and the increasingly desperate situations from the sympathetic perspective of Junge while being able to see Hitler and the Nazi leadership for what it truly is: megalomaniac, racist madness.

Since Saving Private Ryan and Enemy at the Gates, films have been able to portray battles with realistic intensity. While most of Downfall takes place below ground, there are some devastating episodes of the attack on Berlin by the Russian advance, the meagre defence of the city by dwindling troops including youngsters.

While Hitler is central to the film, we see many of the other leaders, particularly the sinister Goebbels and his fanatical wife, Magda, who poisoned their children because she did not want them to live in a world without National Socialism. We see Himmler, Speer, hear about Goering and how Hitler volubly denounces them all as betraying him. His main support is Eva Braun who is shown as both shallow and blindly devoted.

The impact of Hitler from Downfall is that he is both man and monster. He seems to be 'softened' when we see him devoted to his dog, listening to the Goebbels children sing and be concerned about the welfare of his secretaries. But, then he rants and raves against his generals, knows that Berlin is lost but still shouts plans for armies to come to the city's rescue. When challenged about the fate of the German people, he denounces them for not being strong enough to be faithful to his vision, that they deserve to be destroyed by the invading allies.

When we study history, we think in terms of personalities and events and how we are to interpret them. With a film like Downfall, we have the opportunity to put faces on characters, watch behaviour and listen to statements that we abhor and experience emotionally what otherwise might remain abstract insights. Recommended as an opportunity to revisit appalling history

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

President Richard Nixon was never assassinated, of course. However, 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 has a basis in that incident. It creates a scenario which might explain why someone could want to assassinate the president.

This film is not your everyday entertainment, not exactly mainstream. But, it does have a well-known cast which might attract more people to see it than would otherwise see it. It is the kind of film that challenges Catholics to examine values in today's society.

Richard Nixon himself is seen only in television clips. There is a great deal of talk about him. This means that audiences need to remember the impact that he had made as president, especially the escalating of the war in Vietnam and the bombing of Cambodia. In 1971, his Vice President, Spiro Agnew, had to resign because of money fraud. By August 1974, Nixon had to resign, disgraced by the Watergate break-in to find documents to discredit the Democrat party and the subsequent investigation and Nixon's being implicated.

This film is principally a portrait of a disillusioned man. He is a man with very little self-esteem, who is looked down on by his successful brother (whom he stupidly tries to cheat). He is also divorced from his long-suffering wife and allowed rarely to see his children. At work he is patronised by a loud furniture salesman boss and his son. He tries to read the self-help books recommended by his boss but becomes caught up in the rights and wrongs of truth and lies in business. This is a portrait of the average American man of the 1970s – but who could be the average man of our own times.

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 offers 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. Yet, he is also exasperating, just as he would be in real life. Penn has had an impressive career for more than twenty years as actor and director. In his recent films, especially *Mystic River* for which he won the Best Actor Oscar for 2003, he has proven himself a consummate actor.

There is great support from Naomi Watts as his ordinary and hassled wife. She is one of the stars of the moment, the lead in *Ring 2* and the forthcoming remake of *King Kong*. She appeared with Sean Penn in the challenging *21 Grams*. Jack Thompson is his supremely self-confident boss. Don Cheadle, so impressive in the recent *Hotel Rwanda*, is his good friend and support. In just one scene, Michael Wincott is chilling 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.

VALIANT (UK, 2005, d. Gary Chapman)

One of the marketing difficulties with so many animated features these days is trying to determine just who the audience is for a particular film.

2004 saw quite a number of fine animation films, including *Shrek 2* and *The Incredibles*. 2005 opened with *Spongebob SquarePants*, *The Magic Roundabout*, *Robots* and *Valiant* with quite a few more on the distribution lists. Are they really for children? Are adults meant to enjoy them? Sitting with children during screenings, one would come to the conclusion that the surest jokes to rely on for their laughter involve breaking wind (and *Robots* does have an extended joke like this that the kids loved). On the other hand, many animated films have wisecracks and movie references that make sense only to a movie buff – *Shrek* is full of these, with the fish voiced by Martin Scorsese looking like him, something the average six-year old may not pick up! *Finding Nemo* is the film that seems to have got the blend absolutely right. It's a difficult market.

All of which is prologue to a consideration of a British animated feature that flew in at Easter: *Valiant*, a World War II adventure which pays tribute to the role of the Homing Pigeons during the war, many of whom were awarded the Dickin medal, the animal equivalent of the Victoria Cross – which came across as a tongue-in-cheek joke until you learn that this is perfectly factual and serious. *Valiant* might be humorous but it should also be taken seriously.

The reviewer for *Sight and Sound* thought that the younger audiences would enjoy the broad gags and fast action. I hope so but am not so sure. In fact, the audience which will enjoy *Valiant* is probably the 50s and over. The same *Sight and Sound* reviewer thinks that it is in the mission-based vein of 60s movies like *Where Eagles Dare* and *The Dirty Dozen*. If your memory goes back further then you know that *Valiant* is the stuff of the British film industry of the 1950s. *Valiant* could be Richard Todd or Kenneth More or John Gregson or Dirk Bogarde. This is the tradition of *The Dam Busters*, *Reach for the Sky* and all those movies where Britain won the war. It makes one realise that Ewan McGregor (who voices *Valiant*) could be a contemporary version of these 50s stars.

What is striking is that Valiant presents an image of Britain, especially England, of the past which fifty years have changed considerably but which still lingers as some kind of model for being British. Watching Valiant, the immediate reaction was 'stiff upper beak'.

Valiant who, it should be explained, is about as tall as Richard Todd or Ewan McGregor compared with tall Hugh Laurie and John Cleese (who voice the officer pigeons) is the plucky littler feller who is rejected by the recruiting officers but who, of course, being small can get into literal tight spots and saves the day. In fact, it is just as well because the message he brings is that the D-Day landing is to be in Normandy.

But the qualities of the British hero that he aspires to and which the officers give witness to and which the gruff sergeant major (is there any other kind?), voiced by Jim Broadbent want to instil are the traditional British: the hero has an inner-world strong independence but is clear that orders must be obeyed. Orders are orders and one hops to it at once. The hero is responsible, dependable, singleminded and does not let emotion get in the way. In an emergency, hunches about an alternate way of achieving the goal could be permitted. And any grieving for loss comes after the job is done.

Just when 'stiff upper beak' seemed a good title for this article, the Sight and Sound review turned up with the comment: 'Many of the characterisations fall back on 'Allo, 'Allo stereotypes for comic effect: the Germans are sadistic, the French flamboyant while' (here it is) 'the British are a mix of stiff upper lip pomposity and tally-ho pluck'. Perhaps this stereotype of Britishness was never true – but it was often put forward as desirable.

Of course, there is a variant on the valiant: the city spiv. Valiant does have a great spiv, a con-bird called Bugsy, who is voiced with comic relish by Ricky Gervais. Since Sight and Sound reviewer, Matthew Leyland, is on a roll by this stage of his review, here he is again on Bugsy: 'he puts on a display of shifty braggadoccio'. But, of course, Bugsy becomes a hero too.

PS. When you see Valiant, look out for Tim Curry's General Von Talon torturing John Cleese's Mercury and threatening, 'We hef means of making you sqwark'.

THE RING 2 (US, 2005, d. Hideo Nakata)

After The Ring, The Grudge and Boogeyman, comes The Ring 2, a series of very popular American horror films which avoids the emphasis on blood and gore and prefers to tell ghost stories with eerie atmosphere and some jump shocks. They all derive from Japanese originals. In fact, Hollywood has invited some of the Japanese directors to the US to do the remakes of their films. This was true of The Grudge and is true of The Ring 2, directed by Hideo Nakata.

The prologue to this sequel looks very similar to that of the original, teenagers watching a deadly video. But now we know the background to the video, so The Ring 2 concentrates more on the effect of the ghost of the deadly Samara in taking possession of young Aidan and his mother, Rachel's attempts to save him.

The setting has shifted to Astoria, Oregon, as Rachel and Aidan try to make a new beginning and forget the video and its menace. But the video and Samara now come looking for them, appearing to frightening effect in their dreams, building to a climax where Rachel has to sacrifice her life for her son's.

The film is moody not gory. It creates an atmosphere of unease and menace which should make it more accessible than some of the slasher horror movies – but which may disappoint those who want something more up front and obvious. The ominous symbol in The Ring 2 is water rather than blood.

Naomi Watts and David Dorfman continue their roles as Rachel and Aidan. They are sympathetic characters and ensure that audiences are on side. Simon Baker is the ill-fated friend this time round and there are cameos by Elizabeth Perkins as a serious psychiatrist, Gary Cole lightening the mood as a shifty estate agent and Sissy Spacek in a crucial sequence as the evil Samara's real mother.

The surprise and ingenuity of the original have gone but this is a worthy continuation of the story and moods of *The Ring*.

BE COOL (US, 2005, d. F.Gary Gray)

After the humour, playing with the gangster genre, the satire on Hollywood and the general tone of clever American wit in Elmore Leonard's style in 1996's *Get Shorty*, everyone had high hopes of the sequel, *Be Cool*. But, despite all the efforts, it does not quite gel. It is one of those films where the sum is less than many of its parts.

As Chilli Palmer, Florida loan shark turned movie producer, John Travolta created an energetic variation on the anti-hero. Ten years on, Chilli is much more settled, rather unflappable, which means that he gives the impression of being impassive. He is surrounded by all kinds of bad guys which include the New Jersey Mafia, the new Russian mafia, dodgy local record producers and black gangster tycoons. This means you have to be on the ball to follow all the crosses and doublecrosses as well as the double doublecrosses. And the types on screen don't seem to be worth all that concentration.

Something like *Ocean's 12*, everyone on screen seems to be having a great time (and they all appear dancing at the end, including James Wood who was popped in the first reel when there were jokes about sequels and how they work), but they can't quite make the audience feel as enthusiastic as they do.

The exception is *The Rock*. As a violent bodyguard who is flamboyantly gay and is longing for an acting audition between hits, he is consistently funny and witty (even doing a 'monologue' of the two cheerleaders in *Bring It On*) – and he gets the final laugh in his film poster with Nicole Kidman.

There are plenty of talented people in the cast: Harvey Keitel, Vince Vaughan (who strains to be a white would-be black gangster), Uma Thurman, Cedric the Entertainer and Andre 3000 (who do have some funny moments), Christina Milian and Danny de Vito. Maybe the look behind the scenes at the Los Angeles music industry is not as interesting or funny as a look at the movie industry – it does not seem to be Elmore Leonard's world. Some of the dialogue is Leonard and Leonard-like. Any film which has Cedric the Entertainer chide Andre 3000 as he slurps his take-away noodles, 'does your dining experience have to be so obtrusive?' couldn't be all bad.

MISS CONGENIALITY 2, ARMED AND FABULOUS (US, 2005, d. John Pasquin)

The original was an entertaining piece of fluff with Sandra Bullock as an accident-prone FBI agent infiltrating a Beauty Pageant to unmask a killer while making friends with the contestants and parodying the airhead aspects of the pageants. Audiences seemed eager for more so writer Marc Lawrence has obliged and Sandra Bullock has returned as producer and star.

It's easy and undemanding watching.

As before, it is a mixture of sugar and spice with sugar winning out. However, for a lot of the time Bullock's agent Gracie Hart is rather abrasive, taking the glamorous makeover she has undergone to be the PR face of the FBI too seriously. The trouble was that the public was recognising her in the middle of stakeouts and ruining the undercover work. When her old friend Miss World and pageant chaperone (William Shatner) are abducted, Gracie is back in action, eventually aided by a partner, the tough Sam Fuller (Regina King), despite their vigorous mutual antagonism. She is once again groomed by a gay designer, a campy Dietrich Bader. The Las Vegas FBI chief, Treat Williams, is hostile. But, the agent assigned to get them away falls under Gracie's spell and, at the last moment, the very last moment, she solves the case and saves the hostages.

If you like Sandra Bullock, you won't have too many problems. Otherwise, there are some funny lines, an episode in a Vegas drag club with Tina Turners, some variations on FBI action. Though it all ends up sweetly, Gracie is not exactly Miss Congeniality all along the way which gives the film, depending on your point of view, some edge or some nasty taste.

KUNG FU HUSTLE (Hong Kong, 2004, d. Stephen Chow)

This is the kind of entertainment that does not need much review. Hong Kong actor-director, Stephen Chow, made a soccer comedy in 2001 which tickled the funny bones of audiences around the world with its madcap group of would be soccer-players who are trained in meditative ways to become champions, Shaolin Soccer.

Now his avowed intention is to become a martial arts screen hero before he is too old. And what a result. Never mind the story – about gangsters and oppression of the poor in 1934 and the need for a hero. It is the action, stunt work and effects that are everything. Paying homage to everything from Bruce Lee to Jackie Chan, from Crouching Tiger to everything else (or borrowing from them), he has concocted a comedy action show which is often very funny, very slapstick – and it won the Hong Kong awards for 2004.

MELINDA AND MELINDA (US, 2004, d. Woody Allen)

Woody Allen has fallen on hard critical times in the early 2000s, some of his films (Hollywood Ending) barely getting a cinema release. He is criticised for being too narrow in his focus, affluent articulate New Yorkers suffering from angst, and for his wit seeming to dry up. Certainly, his films of the last five years or so do not make the impact that earlier films did.

Best to say that Melinda and Melinda is about average. As always, he is served by a strong cast. As always, there is a neurotic Woody Allen or Woody Allen substitute – this time it is Will Ferrell who does a pretty good Allen impersonation (except that he is twice the size of Woody). As always, there are conversations peppered with oneliners about the woes of the human condition.

The concept is this. Four people sit in a restaurant, a writer of serious drama and a writer of comedies. They discuss what it is that makes tragedy tragic and comedy comic. And it is all illustrated by a character called Melinda who appears in two stories with variations on the same situations. In one she is depressed. In the other she is lighthearted. She comes to New York and stays with friends. Their marriages are in trouble. She falls in love. They all have to sort things out. Which is funny? Which is tragic?

This is not the most profound of Woody Allen's films. The characters' lives exist on a fairly superficial level. What carries the film through are the performances rather than the dialogue. Radha Mitchell does very well as Melinda and Melinda. Others in the cast include Amanda Peet, Chloe Sevigny, Jonny Lee Miller and Chiwetel Ejiofor.

We will just have to wait for his next film. (He did have success with Match Point.)

AMITYVILLE HORROR, The
AROUND THE BEND
BEAUTY SHOP
BULLET BOY
CHICKEN TIKKA MASALA
CLIFFORD'S REALLY BIG MOVIE
CURSED
DIRTY SHAME, A
GUESS WHO
HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY, The
INTERPRETER, The
IN YOUR HANDS
ISTANBUL TALES
MAN OF THE HOUSE
MARMALOUK (THE LIZARD)
MEAN CREEK
NEW TOWN

SAHARA
TARNATION
UNTOLD SCANDAL
WEDDING DATE
WILD SIDE
xXx 2

LIZARD (MARMOULAK) Iran 2005, d. Kamal Tabrizi)

The winner of the SIGNIS Interfaith prize for 2004 at the Fajr Film Festival in Iran 2004 was The Lizard. It also won a special award for its actor and the people's popularity award at the festival. Because the subject of its humour was the figure of religious authority, the mullah, it was initially refused release in Iran itself.

In fact, 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 from the prison hospital, 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 are all kinds of satire at the expense of over-earnest, formal religion, especially with two young men, one continually asking questions and taking notes, the other very sincere 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.

A film, comically questioning authority where religion and the state are so intertwined, is quite controversial in this context. However, it travels outside the country very well.

THE INTERPRETER (US, 2005, d. Sydney Pollack)

Very smart casting to have Oscar-winners, Nicole Kidman and Sean Penn, starring together. Audiences expecting romance on screen will detect some teasing possibilities but will have to admit that this is not at all the focus of The Interpreter.

Rather, it is a contemporary thriller, a plot like many of those 500 page novels that people buy at airports, an entertaining read. This is an entertaining watch - a bit of Ludlum-like international conspiracies, some secret service police work and, because this plot has an African background, there are echoes of Wilbur Smith. Quite effective ingredients.

The appeal is to an older, more thoughtful audience.

Mention of Africa reminds us how topical this story is. The screenwriters must have had Robert Mugabe and recent history in Zimbabwe firmly in mind when they created a liberating hero who had lost his early ideals and had turned his country into something of a police state. They could well have had the Congo in mind as well with echoes of the tragic events in the Rwanda genocide of 1994. There are also reminders of

2004 events where Mark Thatcher was linked with European mercenaries involved in toppling a government.

We realise that this kind of screen story twenty years earlier would have been set in Latin America, in Chile or El Salvador, with secret police and ruthless dictators. Events have moved on to more peaceful democracies in that part of the world – although it still provides many stories of abductions and drug lords. Now it is the turn of Africa. This is a thriller that is also meant to make its audiences consider pressing issues in the contemporary world.

The setting is the United Nations, under fire in recent years, especially with criticism from the US government. The Interpreter is strongly on the side of the UN with discussions about the relative effectiveness of violence versus diplomacy. 'Diplomacy might take longer but it is more lasting.'

So, this is the kind of film that does not appeal to those of a more hawkish disposition and who prefer to go into action quickly and solve problems. Those who are more sympathetic to dovish stances will be on side. It is the kind of film that could be characterised as somewhat left-wing liberal, wearing its heart on its sleeve. It believes that goodness can overcome evil, even terrible evil.

Perhaps this appealed to Sean Penn's political views. He gives a solid performance as a man grieving the death of his wife, a secret service agent who is commissioned to protect a witness and prevent an assassination in the UN chamber. Nicole Kidman is the interpreter, a refugee from a fictional southern African country (with accent to match), who has information about the assassination but who only gradually reveals the truth about herself. Catherine Keener is Penn's tough and efficient partner.

Since the action, apart from a prologue in Africa that highlights the ruthlessness of death squads, takes place over a few days, action has to be tight and well-paced. It also means that back stories have to be filled in so that audiences can be emotionally as well as intellectually involved in the issues of liberation, terrorism (and there is a horrendous bus crash sequence in mid-town New York) and national and international security agencies.

The United Nations building plays a crucial role and the audience has a strong sense of its environment and the whole city of New York.

Direction is by veteran Sydney Pollack (The Way We Were, Tootsie, Out of Africa) who made the 1970s conspiracy theory film, Three Days of the Condor. He has not lost his touch.

AROUND THE BEND (US, 2004, d. Jordan Roberts)

A surprisingly likeable film.

While 'around the bend' might mean in English that you are a bit mad, this title comes from a song by Creedence Clearwater Revival which refers to something 'up around the bend'. That is the cue for a road movie and that is what this film is – but with quite a difference.

We are introduced to three generations of the Lair family. The patriarch is former archeologist, Harry, Michael Caine (with his too noticeably odd American accent) who has taken care of his rather normal, even straightlaced banker grandson, Jason, Josh Lucas, who has custody of his six year old son, Zack.

Harry is a wily old coot who likes to dine out at KFC restaurants. When his long-absent son Turner, Christopher Walken, suddenly turns up, he is finally ready to die. But, not before arranging his cremation and complicated rituals for the scattering of his ashes. This is to be a pilgrimage for son, grandson and great-grandson, travelling from California to New Mexico, opening successive clues stuffed into takeaway bags over a KFC meal. The journey leads them through their own emotional desert as well as some rocky ground to understanding, love and forgiveness. It is a fine film on family reconciliation.

Michael Caine makes quite an imprint on the film in a small but significant role which sets the tone of the film. Christopher Walken gives another complex and intense performance that indicates great weaknesses in Turner's character but also the potential for coming to terms with his mistakes and his life. Josh Lucas is sympathetic as the son who has reason to resent his absent father and who is the carer for his son, played by the talented Jonah Bobo.

If the film had not been made in the US, reviewers would have referred to it as being 'quirky', as having 'quirky humour'. It has. It also has great pathos and is well worth catching, talking about and reflecting on.

CHICKEN TIKKA MASALA (UK, 2005, d. Harmage Singh Kalirai)

There has been quite a spate of films and plays about Asian communities, especially Indian, in the United Kingdom (East is East, Anita and Me, Bend it Like Beckham). This one is a very broad comedy, with touches of farce, set in Lancashire. Judging by the prolific end credits, it seems as if this film had great community support in Preston both from people and businesses.

The screenplay is credited to the 18 year old Roopesh Parekh. However, movie fans will realise that they have seen it all before in Ang Lee's 1993 The Wedding Banquet. While it is a comedy about the problems of arranged marriages, it is also a comedy of an arranged marriage where the potential groom is gay and already in a relationship.

Everything here goes as might be expected although the treatment is light, farcical and good-natured. It is not exactly the most sophisticated British comedy. However, it does not overly preach its messages. Rather, it shows how harmful arranged marriages could be. It does not make caricatures of homophobic attitudes. While the characters are generally quite genial, they tend to be variations on the stereotypes, especially interfering grandmother, visiting Indian who wants to go to a lap-dancing club, fussy relatives. Most of the cast come from British television series and serials, including Coronation Street.

For the broader British audiences, Sally Bankes is a literally larger than life barmaid who has not really had much to do with Indians and their customs and who turns out to be a good sport in pretending to go through the marriage ceremony to save face all round. It is all cheerfully ordinary.

THE WEDDING DATE (US/UK, 2005, d. Clare Kilner)

Some films are inconsequential. This one seems inconsequentially inconsequential.

With the popularity of wedding films (Wedding Planners, Singers, Crashers and Big Fat, Best Friend's and Monsoon Weddings), this one has an audience out there. But, at just under 90 minutes and with whole chunks of dialogue that could have been further elaborated to make sense of the characters, their behaviour and their (fairly rapid, given the time frame of the wedding) life-decisions but are missing, this is the least satisfying of the wedding movies.

After a New York opening, the rest of the action takes place in London and the British countryside.

Debra Messing does her best with an odd part, a capable woman who goes to pieces when going to England for her sister's wedding and, to spite her fiancé of many years who dumped her, hires a male escort for \$6,000 to accompany her and falls in and out of love with him – with a number of tantrums along the way. Dermot Mulroney plays the escort as if he were the most charming, sympathetic and moral man in the whole world.

What actually happens is fairly farcical comedy: confessions, angers, chases, punch-ups, kiss and make-up. It is all a bit thin.

MAN OF THE HOUSE (US, 2005, d. Stephen Herek)

There is no real need to see this one – not even on a plane.

Five Texan cheerleaders witness a murder. After a short time, the unkind thought enters one's strained and impatient mind that the plot might have been better had they been the victims. For most of the film most of them behave in a murderable fashion. One is inclined to agree strongly with Tommy Lee Jones, who is the Ranger assigned to protect them, every time he refuses them their petty and selfish requests and realises how dumb they are. Of course, you know that by the end of the film they will all be great friends and that the girls will have saved the day. That is what happens – though it does not save the film.

There is a complicated plot about a corrupt Texan businessman, his henchman killing off his debtors and a bad apple FBI agent who is the actual murderer and threatens the girls. There is a fairly preposterous showdown on the highway on the Mexican border.

It should be mentioned that this is meant to be more of a comedy than a thriller, with Tommy Lee Jones posing as a cheerleader coach to maintain cover and having to deal with the girls and their dumb comments and behaviour. He also gets to romance Anne Archer with beauty treatment help (to little avail) from the girls. Some of the complaints about the film are that its portrayal of the girls is sexist. But, there is a little homily on cheerleading and its importance for enthusing and inspiring.

That is what the film is not – enthusing and inspiring.

BULLET BOY (UK, 2004, d. Saul Dibb)

Not a promising title, but it really does focus the themes of this impressive, brief slice of London life.

It is not as if this material is unfamiliar. It is quite familiar, unfortunately so. The bullet boy of the title is a young man just released from prison, returning home to Hackney, meeting up with old pals, getting caught up again in local feuds despite his caring mother's appeals to him, the example he gives to his 12 year old brother, his girlfriend's pleading with him. It has to end badly because this is a cautionary tale about street violence, strains in home life, the danger of guns.

What makes the film better than average is the serious intent which gives the film a credible tone, the sharp characterisation and dialogue and the pace and style of photography and editing.

Released in the UK during the election campaign of 2005, it highlights many social problems that government has to face: poverty and lack of opportunity in many of the black communities in London, tensions and gang violence and petty crime, the role of prisons and possibilities or not of rehabilitation.

Director and co-writer Saul Dibb had previously made a 40 minutes television documentary. The atmosphere of the film and its locations have a documentary feel. He has a fine cast with Ashley Walters as Ricky, the doomed protagonist, Claire Perkins his long-suffering mother, Luke Fraser as the young Curtis whose fascination with guns almost leads to further tragedy and Curtis Walker who portrays a reformed criminal who leads a congregation of born again Christians.

Worth seeing for a glimpse of London's urban problems.

THE AMITVILLE HORROR (US, 2005, d. Andrew Douglas)

The first time round in 1979, The Amityville Horror was a very popular horror film about strange and diabolical things going on in a respectable Long Island house. First, a family was murdered. Second, the family that moved in without knowing this seems to have been haunted – and the father possessed – by the spirit of a malevolent preacher who had persecuted and killed local Indians. The house was something like a gate of hell. The film fitted into the spirit of the 1970s with The Exorcist, The Omen, The Sentinel and a host of imitations. In fact, there were three television sequels for Amityville.

This re-make is strong on jumps and scares but weaker on plot and character development. While the film follows the same lines of 'the true story', the earlier film had an interesting Catholic sub-plot concerning the Church, priests and the experience of possession. This is much less developed here.

All in all, another scary movie where Ryan Reynolds does his best veering between affectionate husband and stepfather and diabolically violent menace.

WILD SIDE (France, 2004, d. Stephen Lifshitz)

Stephen Lifshitz's films are about families and about sexuality (*Drole de Felix*, *Presque Rien*, *La Traverse*). They all have some bizarre elements where Lifshitz wants to take his audience beyond their ordinary experience and elicit sympathy for individuals who are different or who live on the margins of society.

This is particularly the case with *Wild Side*. The central character is Stephanie, a transsexual who used to be Peter. Stephanie shares a Paris apartment with a male prostitute, Djamil, whose family comes from North Africa and a Russian migrant who speaks no French, Mikhail. They form an emotional and sexual ménage à trois. When Stephanie learns her mother is ill, she and her companions go to the countryside of northern France where Peter grew up – and there are many flashbacks to the happy childhood, especially the bonds between Peter and his father, between Peter and his long-since dead sister. The mother recovers and is welcoming, though puzzled, by Stephanie and her choices.

Lifshitz presents his characters very sympathetically. This is difficult because Stephanie Michelini as Stephanie is very reserved, giving an impression of coldness and distance. It is much easier to identify emotionally with the rather carefree Djamil and the tormented Mikhail. Lifshitz uses the current French frankness and explicitness in showing sexual activity. This leads to a puzzling question: in so many films about transsexuals, they are presented as prostituting themselves. Is this true or does it give a wrong impression and is unjust to transsexuals? *Wild Side* contributes to the prostitution impression.

SAHARA (US, 2005, d. Breck Eisner)

Dirk Pitt has been around a long time. He is the central character in many of Clive Cussler's adventure novels and was seen on screen in the 1970s in the ill-fated *Raise the Titanic*. Apparently, Clive Cussler has not been too happy about this adaptation of his novel, even suggesting that readers will be put off buying his novels because of it. Be that as it may, it has to be said that *Sahara* is one of those old-fashioned rollicking adventures that is absolutely silly, preposterous and good fun!

By the end, one is left wondering why President Bush did not employ Dirk Pitt and his sidekick, Al Giordino, to go into Iraq and solve the problems there in a couple of days. After all, here they smuggle themselves into Mali, discover potential weapons of mass destruction (mass pollution), confront the greedy industrialist who is being exploited by a mad military dictator and destroy the lot. And this without obvious time for eating, drinking, sleeping or even toilet breaks. And, for a lot of the time, Penelope Cruz as a WHO doctor is along for the ride and for final peril on the helipad on top of a high tower.

Matthew McConnaughey fits the part of Dirk Pitt with smiling confidence, a latterday Indiana Jones with no trace of Harrison Ford angst. Steve Zahn as Al is always good for a laugh and plays the loyal buddy well. (When asked by Pitt what he would do if he were about to be unmasked as the world's worst polluter, he answers, 'Run for president?')

This is a much larger than life world. Settings are in Nigeria and Mali (with Morocco doing the honours with the impressive desert and river locations). William H. Macy is the retired admiral who employs Pitt and Al for daring salvage expeditions (the main goal being a warship and its bullion from the American Civil War which is allegedly buried under the Sahara sands which overwhelmed the river it was travelling in and buried it – even Noah's Ark on the top of Mt Ararat has more credibility than this, especially as the cannons they find in the ship finish off the dictator's helicopter). The CIA and various international

authorities and companies are involved, so are Tuareg tribes, as well as the World Health Organisation investigating a plague in Mali.

As with recent films like *The Interpreter*, political situations in Africa rather than their equivalent in Latin America, popular staple for the 80s and 90s, are centre screen. *Sahara* is an adrenalin fix, extra large.

CURSED (US, 2005. d. Wes Craven)

It is surprising that *Cursed* has not been more popular. Perhaps writer-director Wes Craven has outdone himself and is getting old(er). Having invented the *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise (and revisited it cleverly in a film about a film, Wes Craven's *New Nightmare*), he then deconstructed the fright horror slasher genre in his *Scream* series. Perhaps *Cursed* is going back to more traditional genres. This seems to disappoint those wanting a new direction. However, it seems a pretty good werewolf film with plenty of scares and jumps, plenty of plot twists as well as homage to the whole tradition of horror movies.

Christina Ricci is Ellie, a TV producer. She still looks like Wednesday Addams but with a little more colour and verve (though she still mostly wears black). Her boyfriend (Joshua Jackson) is a harassed manager of a horror museum in Hollywood. The other principal character is Ellie's brother, Jimmy, played very well by Jesse Eisenberg (*Emperor's Club*, *Rodger Dodger*) who could use his performance here as a bumbling werewolf nerd as an excellent audition for a Woody Allen film.

Apart from a couple of less than effectual, low-budget glimpses of the werewolf chasing and leaping, the special effects are good and frightening. The scary bits are well paced. The screenplay by long-time associate of Craven, Kevin Williamson, incorporates plenty of werewolf lore and blends it with the glossy world of LA media – just the place for werewolves.

The motivation for all this werewolf activity is interestingly invented – although it seems that some people are just simply born werewolves and have to learn to control its manifestations. But falling in love can have a devastating effect on control. That's how Ellie becomes involved. However, there is a contemporary sub-plot involving Jimmy and a homophobic jock, Bo (Milo Ventimiglia) who is bested in wrestling by Jimmy's werewolf infection and then comes out of the closet to help in the werewolf hunting.

If you are not into werewolves (and they are not into you!), then you can take it or leave it. But, fans of werewolf movies should take notice.

BEAUTY SHOP (US, 2005, d. Bille Woodruff)

After two *Barber Shop* movies, directed especially towards an African American audience, it seems only fair for the men to have a rest and for us to see a female equivalent. So, here is Queen Latifah in *Beauty Shop*.

It is a good-natured show, though some self-consciously sensitive audiences have felt that it is inversely racist and indulges in stereotypes. But, isn't that what broad comedies do? Isn't that how they work? Stiff upper lip Poms? Loud Yanks? Snobby French? Brash Australians? Everything can be the subject of jokes and humour.

That having been said, the main target of aggressive jokes is Kevin Bacon as the most pseudo of European coiffeurs with a closet full of affectations. He is the 'hiss the villain' for this kind of feelgood show.

When Queen Latifah has had enough of Bacon's snide comments, she opens up her own beauty shop with the help of mother (Della Reese) and talented musician daughter. Some of her old co-workers and clients join her (Alicia Silverstone as a very white Georgia girl in the middle of a black staff as well as Andie McDowell and Mena Suvari as clients). Plenty of things go wrong and we join in hoping that all will be put right. Plenty of things go right and the beauty shop becomes a haven and a rendezvous – though a lot of the time we are just listening in to girl's gossip.

Fortunately, there is a gallant gentleman living upstairs (Djimon Hounsou) who can fix electric connections, can play the piano and teach Latifah's daughter and is not married so is available for the romantic part of the film. Who could ask for anything more?

One critic was heard to say loudly that he could not stand Queen Latifah because she is always the same, so pleased with herself - with her genial screen presence and warmth, why shouldn't she be?

NEW TOWN ORIGINAL (UK, 2004, d. Jason Ford)

This film was made on a next to no budget in Essex. It is not exactly the kind of film that a paying audience would want to see in a movie complex. But, on video or on television, it is not without interest. Some in the UK film industry have suggested that it is a competent calling card for investment in the director's next film.

This is a story about a group of lads who go to work, come home, go out on the town (a bit limited in the small town pubs), meet the girls – and do this day after day, week after week. When Michael (Elliot Jordan) goes home from the pub with Nicki (Katherine Peachy) who used to be Si's girlfriend, Michael's best mate, Johnno, who is infatuated with Nicki, warns Michael that Si is after him.

Michael tends to be the quiet type, but is taunted into standing up for himself and decides to bash Si. There are a couple of unexpected complications that keep the attention, but this is life in a small town, a portrait of the kind of small town life that eventually gets tiresome even for those who live it.

If you catch it, it does not have a long running time and is a chance to get a glimpse of ordinary life, UK provinces style.

GUESS WHO

US, 2005, 105 minutes, Colour.

Bernie Mac, Ashton Kutcher, Zoe Saldana, Judith Scott.

Directed by Kevin Rodney Sullivan.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner is now something of a classic of the mid 1960s. Audiences watching it now may wonder what all the fuss was about when Katherine Houghton brought her fiancé Sidney Poitier home to meet Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn. Director Stanley Kramer had, almost ten years earlier, defied racial prejudices in the US in the prison escape drama, *The Defiant Ones*, with Sidney Poitier and Tony Curtis chained to each other. 1963 saw the Civil Rights March on Washington. Integration was moving slowly through many of the states.

So, why a re-make in 2005?

Well, it's not exactly a re-make. Rather it's an updated version. What is significant, of course, is that the racial roles are reversed. Zoe Saldana is bringing her fiancée, Ashton Kutcher, to meet Bernie Mac and Judith Scott. This is a comedy intended for the African American audience, a feel-bad at first, feel-good movie that is meant to break through racial stereotypes so that black and white see persons before colour.

The humour is often very broad which has made some white reviewers very self-conscious. The black cast, on the other hand, enter into the spirit of the thing with all kinds of jokes at everyone's expense, though there is a dinner sequence where white fiancé is urged to tell more and more jokes about blacks, articulating some of the harsh humour which makes everyone both laugh and wince.

A lot of the situations are obviously contrived to make the points. That doesn't matter unless you are expecting a serious tract on racial equality. It makes its point by highlighting the stupidities in prejudiced attitudes and behaviour. It also highlights how, once people get to know each other as people, colour becomes unimportant.

Bernie Mac is more genial and funny than his usual brash performances. Ashton Kutcher is also more pleasant than usual. No classic like its predecessor but a reminder that racism needs combating at all times and that often 'laughter is the best medicine'.

THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY (UK/US, 2005, d. Garth Jennings)

Douglas Adams' popular fantasy began life as a radio play in 1978, a year after the release of Star Wars. Following its great success, Adams wrote five novels with his ordinary Everyman hero, Arthur Dent. There has been a BBC television series, video games and web sites but, until now, no film. Adams himself wrote two drafts for the film before his sudden death in 2001.

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy has become a British classic

This is a review of the film as a cinema experience since your reviewer has not heard, read or seen any of the previous versions. On emerging from a slightly overwhelming viewing, I was immediately given two contradictory comments by devotees: the first said that Douglas Adams would have hated this movie; the second said that it was extremely faithful to the spirit of the original. It probably means that those who cherish memories of radio and the books, who have created their own imaginative version of the universe, should give this film a miss to avoid disappointment.

What is the film like? It's certainly like space science fiction films only its treatment is comic and often disrespectful. It's certainly like a Monty Python treatment of space, particularly The Galaxy Song from Monty Python's Meaning of Life. In fact, there is a philosophical undertone to the odd and mad goings on, precisely trying to find the meaning of life.

Since Arthur Dent is caught one morning having his house destroyed for a local bypass and warned by his friend, alien Ford Prefect (Mos Def), that earth has only a minute or two left before it is destroyed for a galactic bypass, he takes off on his adventures in dressing gown and pyjamas. His picaresque adventures lead him to the President of the Universe, a self-absorbed dimwit named Zaphod Beeblebrox (an irrepressible Sam Rockwell) and earthling Trillian (Zoe Deschanel). They are aided by robot, Marvin, who has been outfitted with GPP, Genuine People Personalities (though you would not pick that up from Alan Rickman's sepulchral monotone).

There are special effects galore, a race of large grublike creatures, the Vogons, who are a parody of nitpicking government civil servants but who are not above turning into a militia, talking mice, and John Malkovich as a religious zealot who is only head and shoulders on metal legs!

Apparently, the original was very funny but this version raises smiles rather than guffaws. In fact, some of the characters are a bit on the irritating side. In compensation they find a weapon which, when fired, enables the victim to understand the firer's point of view. (They have to fire at the obtuse Zaphod many times.)

However, there is a lot to think about. By choosing an ordinary man to identify with, we reflect on the great questions of existence on a rather commonsense plane. When Arthur Dent is returned to his home, it is a bit like T.S.Eliot's returning to the place we started from and knowing it for the very first time because Arthur has to think about the universe he is hitchhiking around.

His dismay at the destruction of Earth takes a turn for the better when inventor Bill Nighy takes him on a tour of the galactic factories and laboratories (these sets are most impressive) and then shows him the earth re-created. Guide comes down strongly on the side of a world of beauty and order created by a benign intelligence (reminiscent of the argument for the existence of God).

What finally prevails, as it must, is a sense of hope, of human dignity and the overwhelming power of love. Amidst satire, anarchy, spoof and asking the big questions, there is a lot of search for wisdom.

MEAN CREEK (US, 2004, d. Jacob Aaron Estes)

Mean Creek is a modest film with a comparatively brief running-time by first time director, Jacob Aaron Estes. However, he has made a striking and forceful film that can be recommended to select audiences.

It would be of great benefit for conversation amongst parents and teaching staffs. Screenings and guided discussion among younger adolescents could help them articulate their moral questions and their value stances. Mean Creek has already won the prestigious American Catholic Humanitas award at the Sundance Film Festival.

The press notes usually contain a great deal of inflated gumph to promote a film. However, the notes for Mean Creek give a quick overview of the thinking behind the film and what it communicates:

“... not only a suspenseful morality tale but a rare and revealing portrait of a new generation, capturing the swagger, hidden insecurities, the posing and the yearning to fit in, the savvy and the barely contained aggression and, perhaps most of all, today’s fierce search for moral ground without any clear compasses.

“Using a handheld camera and a raw, visceral visual style that sets the audience adrift with the characters, the film provides a gritty, authentic and thought-provoking peek into growing up.”

It focuses on bullying in the school yard. It dramatises the anger and the drive towards some kind of getting even, including a moderate amount of crass teenage language and behaviour). It reminds us that adolescents think they have everything under control but that at any moment something devastating can happen and they have to accept responsibilities and the consequences.

The setting is a very small town in Oregon. The bully is a large and heavy boy used to getting his own way. Josh Peck is absolutely credible as this kind of boy. He talks too much, criticises and mocks others so that he can seem ‘cool’ and ‘with it’, whereas it is all posturing. As he goes out on the river with the group that wants to teach him a lesson, we begin to feel sorry for him as he has shown a pleasanter side of his character than we (and they) had ever seen. But, then we squirm as he keeps digging his own grave as, unaware, he relentlessly keeps piling on the gibes. And you know that something terrible is going to happen – and it does.

The young cast is always believable. Rory Culkin is the vulnerable victim, Trevor Morgan his protective brother and Scot Mechlowitz is excellent as the leader, a show-off who is really as bad a bully to his friends as the boy he is targeting. Giving the film greater depth are background stories for the two bullies, especially their difficult home lives and their inner insecurity.

Estes said that he was bullied when he was young in San Francisco and, being imaginative, he devised all kinds of fantasy revenges... “suddenly I started to wonder about the guy who was the bully. Who was he? Why was he doing this? And why had I let him affect me in such a profound way? These were the really interesting questions to me – and they became more interesting than getting back at the guy.”

That is what Mean Creek is about, moral dilemmas, the pressures of friendship and, finally, having the honesty to take responsibility for actions and their consequences.

xXx: THE NEXT LEVEL (US, 2005, d. Lee Tamahori)

There will be no complaint from the testosterone brigade when they watch this action-packed terrorist story. In one sense, xXx is critic-proof because it will easily sell itself. The publicists will think this is just as well because so many critics do not want to be seen commending this kind of populist stuff. They have just sneered and dismissed it: ‘there’s no accounting for tastes’.

Lee Tamahori, a New Zealand director (Once Were Warriors) told me in 1994 that he would love to go to Hollywood and make the kind of movie he enjoyed watching when he was a kid. Over ten years he has (Mulholland Falls, The Edge, Along Came a Spider and episodes of The Sopranos) and achieved a career high with the James Bond adventure, Die Another Die. Which means that Lee Tamahori knows how to tell

a good action yarn, employ a somewhat sardonic tone for the characters and proceedings, and use stunts and effects for maximum and optimum impact. There are plenty of explosions, raids, car crashes, chases, a tank attack on the USS Independence and a climax with a high speed car and a helicopter pursuing a bullet train. Who could ask for anything more!!

Actually, the film is somewhat subversive in its presentation of US government and, more particularly, US Defence authorities, especially the Secretary for Defense. Perhaps not Donald Rumsfeld's favourite movie. In xXx, the action was in Europe. This time the terrorists are rogue Americans and the actions does not go out of Virginia and Maryland. Even The US Capitol building suffers attack and damages to its dome.

Ice Cube steps in to make the original xXx, Vin Diesel, look a bit restrained. Samuel L.Jackson is tough authority. Willem Dafoe is a contemporary Benedict Arnold, treason in the name of patriotism and making America safe.

The plot is full of plot turns and twists that seem so blatant, doing the exaggerated obvious, that there is nothing to do but go along with them. It's the same with the dialogue, a tongue-in-cheek screenplay of obvious lines, especially those that flaunt 'attitude'. It is a film of attitude. It also has the courage of its exuberant convictions.

FILMS ON SCREEN, MAY 2005
Peter Malone

This is a service of the SIGNIS Website, presenting reviews by Peter Malone of films that have been screening during the previous month.

BROTHERS (BROEDE)
CAUTIVA
CLAN, Le
DIRTY SHAME, A
GOOD WOMAN, A
HEAD ON (GEGEN DE WAND)
IN YOUR HANDS
JACKET, The
KINGDOM OF HEAVEN
MACHUCA
MONSTER-IN LAW
PRIVATE
SEED OF CHUCKY
SIN CITY
STAR WARS EPISODE THREE: THE REVENGE OF THE SITH
TARNATION
TWIN SISTERS (DE TWEELING)
UNTOLD SCANDALS
WOLF CREEK
WOODEN CAMERA, The

NOTE: A supplement of film reviews of films screened in Cannes follows these reviews.

THE JACKET (UK/US, 2005, d. John Maybury)

Director John Maybury declared that he was very pleased that it was difficult to slot The Jacket in any genre label. He is quite right. It is one of those multi-layered films that almost defies clear description.

The Jacket's prologue opens during the Gulf War with a graphic visual and sound collage of bombing and combats and concludes with the point blank death of the hero of the film. He tells us that this was the first time that he died. With the war over, action goes ahead a year where the recovered Jack Starks (Adrien

Brody, Oscar-winner for *The Pianist*) is hitching on the road. He encounters a young girl, her drug-raddled mother and a broken down car. He is then picked up by a friendly driver but stopped by the highway patrol. The next thing he is being accused of murder and confined to an institution for the criminally insane. This adds road film and murder mystery to the war genre.

The institution is one of those terrible places, a modern Bedlam, some Shock Corridor stuff, with Kris Kristofferson as a doctor experimenting with drugs and confinement in a morgue body shelf-container as a means for recovering memory. What happens inside the box, especially when strapped into the jacket, takes us from science and medical drama to time travel and 2007. And, if that sounds intriguing, then the film is recommended.

One of the difficulties for time travel and changing the future or the past is the lack of logic inherent in these scenarios. Different time and timeless dimensions may be all right. But, the future changing the past? (Think films like *Frequency*.) What makes it somewhat more plausible is speculating on whether the events are actually happening to Jack or are the kind of events he would like to happen.

While the harassed Jack might be vent on vengeance, the film changes genre yet again and moves towards more benign themes, Jack as a kind of guardian angel, protecting the mother and daughter, especially the daughter (Keira Knightly) whom he meets in 2007.

John Maybury has worked as an artist and production designer. He gets ample opportunity to create moving images of contemporary graphic art, especially for the introduction of Jack's memory recovery. (Maybury also directed the portrait-study of painter, Francis Bacon, in 1998 with Derek Jacobi.)

The cast is persuasive, Brody not being a conventional looking hero which makes his performance stronger and more ambiguous. Kris Kristofferson, more grizzled than ever, is quite sinister. Jennifer Jason Leigh is his opponent in the institution and Jack's helper. Daniel Craig has a lively cameo as one of the inmates.

So, difficult to describe, but easy to recommend to audiences who like intelligent and visually arresting drama.

MONSTER-IN-LAW (US, 2005, d. Robert Luketic)

It comes as a profound shock (at least to some of us) that Jane Fonda has not been on the big screen since the moving *Stanley and Iris* in the early 1990s. *Monster-in-Law* is a film that accentuates the age divide. Will you see it for Jennifer Lopez, JLo, or for Jane Fonda? This review reveals which side of this barrier, this reviewer opts for.

Jane Fonda. She obviously enjoys her return to the screen as a possessive mother who assumes her son will not be happy with the woman he is obviously (not to her) in love with. She plays a TV talk show host who is unceremoniously fired and loses it on camera while interviewing a Britney Spears clone. Just when she is ready to come home from an institution after a breakdown, her son brings his girlfriend and, in front of her, proposes. What else to do but wreck the engagement: over-organise the ceremony, try to make her feel out of place, feign breakdown, move in with her prospective daughter-in-law and torment her, even aggravate her nut allergy, until she wants out? Jane Fonda even has the chance for slapstick and a punch-up with Jennifer.

Fonda's assistant is played by Wanda Sykes, a genial stand-up comic who makes wry observations all the way through. Jennifer Lopez is pleasant, rather subdued for much of the film but, once the tables turn...

Michael Vartan, tall, stubbled and handsome, plays it nice. In fact, it is all pretty nice – a bit like icing with a scattering of peppercorns in it. When Elaine Stritch turns up for the wedding as Fonda's mother-in-law, she brings some welcome acerbity to the dialogue.

This is a light, Saturday night comedy-romance, a film for a nice date.

SIN CITY (US, 2005, d. Robert Rodriguez and Frank Miller)

As a tour-de-force of state of the art CGI and cinematic technology, this is a fascinating experience. Storyboarded exactly like the graphic novels it is bringing to the screen, it combines black and white photography with splashes of colour (mainly blood red), white on black silhouettes, swift editorial cuts and a pace that rarely lets up. An impressive gallery of actors do their comic book stuff with great relish. Mickey Rourke is particularly impressive as a both kindly and monstrous. Clive Owen is better than usual, though Bruce Willis does his world-weary good-hearted cop again (referring to himself as 60ish and old). In fact, the extensive cast is quite star studded, including Nick Stahl as a loathsome paedophile, Elijah Wood as a kind of supernatural killing maniac, Rutger Hauer as a corrupt cardinal, Powers Boothe as his corrupt brother, a senator. Benicio del Toro (made up, as is Mickey Rourke, to look like a comic strip character) is a corrupt police officer. Rosario Dawson and Brittany Murphy lead the female cast (who are not made to look ugly in any way!).

Robert Rodriguez has co-directed with the author of the graphic novels, Frank Miller, who has been so pleased with the results that Sin City 2 is already in preparation.

Robert Rodriguez also has a credit which, instead of saying 'photographed and edited by', says 'shot and cut'. That's the clue. This is a movie full of shots and cuts. Frequent, even vicious. Friend of Rodriguez, Quentin Tarantino, directs one sequence (Clive Owen driving the dead Benicio del Toro to the tar pits). They collaborated, one remembers, on the graphically ugly, From Dawn to Dusk.

One of the cast remarked that the violence is part of the wit of the screenplay. In a post-modern way it is. However, this is a film that relishes excess, the splatter of video games and horror genres while using film noir conventions. One of the most frequently used words in the screenplay (apart from the expected four letter words) is 'kill'. It demands a response to the question of how a creative pulp fiction aesthetic relates to an ethic of violence. (At a time when US military have been found guilty of torturing Iraqi civilians, this is a significant social question.)

PRIVATE (Italy, 2004, d. Saverio Costanzo)

Tough going for a tough theme.

Private is a cinema-verite, handheld camera, naturally-lit (often dark) picture of a family virtually imprisoned (completely each night) in their own home. We share the claustrophobic tension, the deprivations that the family experience, the constant fear and the perpetual humiliation that lead to clashes in the family, the father taking a defiant pacifist stance, some of the children wanting to be aggressive.

Saverio Costanzo's narrative is based on an actual family.

The important factor, of course, is where the family lives: they are a Palestinian family. Without warning, a squad of Israeli soldiers take over the house in a brutal manner and with no explanation. They take over the upstairs, threatening the family against coming up to their own rooms. The family is herded into the one room each night. The door is locked each evening and opened each morning. The greenhouse in their yard is pulled down. They build it again.

The father is a teacher, a literate man, who will not move from his house, who obeys the orders because he believes violence and aggression are truly cowardly and he defies the military authority with his human dignity. His wife becomes desperate. He has five children who react very differently, especially the oldest girl who wants to fight back but who, instead, creeps upstairs and watches the Israeli soldiers through a crack in a wardrobe and learns to admire her father.

The cast is both Palestinian and Israeli (some prominent actors from both communities). By focussing solely on the plight of the family, presuming that audiences knows the relationship between Israel and Palestine, the film makes us identify with the family rather than with the soldiers and abhor this kind of oppression. (The film was made in southern Italy standing in for Palestine.)

MACHUCA (Chile, 2004, d. Andres Wood)

A film well worthwhile catching.

English-speaking audiences do not have access to many films from Chile. Movie knowledge of Chile might come, especially for the Allende period and the subsequent takeover by the military and General Pinochet in 1973, from Costa Gavras' *Missing* (1982) or Ken Loach's segment in *11-9-2001*, reminding audiences that the 1973 coup took place on September 11th.

Here is the real thing. Andres Wood, a Chilean writer-director, some years younger than the children he creates for the film, offers Chileans and the world an opportunity to reflect on the events of the 1970s. Affectingly acted, especially by the three central children, realistically and credibly dramatised, it recreates Chilean society and political tensions at the end of the Allende era. Protests are held against the Communists. In other parts of the city, there are pro-Allende demonstrations. Children still go to school. The poor remain impoverished and marginalised. The rich carry on oblivious.

The takeover by Pinochet occurs off screen with only a speech seen on television. However, the change comes home strongly as the newly-empowered military attack alleged communists, women and children, in the shantytowns.

However, the bulk of the film is about three youngsters, one rich, two poor, growing up, observing the adults, becoming friends – but with final tragedy and betrayals. Machuca (the name of the poor boy) is worth seeing for this portrait of schooldays alone: classes, bullying in the yard, afterschool selling flags at (both) demonstrations, visiting each other's homes, kissing by the river, defending and hurting each other.

Machuca received the SIGNIS award at the Havana Film Festival, 2004, for its fresh look at Chilean history in the 70s, for its portrayal of human values of growth and friendship. Given the exceedingly bad press that Catholic priests have received in recent years because of abuse, it is something of a relief to see the priests who run the private school branded as 'Reds' because they want to mix poor students with the rich and advocate social justice as well as standards of behaviour. In fact, the film is dedicated to Fr Gerardo Whelan who was the rector of the actual St Patrick's College from 1969-1973

IN YOUR HANDS (FORBRYDELSER) (Denmark, 2003, d. Annette K. Olesen)

In Your Hands is allegedly the last of the films made under the Dogme creed. It follows the principles in its basic and 'realistic' style. However, its strong narrative and powerful performances ensures that it makes an impact on a wider audience than some of the previous Dogme films.

Religion is at the core of the film. The central character, Anne, has recently completed her studies for the priesthood and has been ordained. She has applied for a position as prison chaplain. This theme alone makes for an interesting film: a woman priest dealing with her ministry and its demands, especially the unpredictability and hostility in prison chaplaincy, and her managing her home life and her marriage along with her work.

However, *In Your Hands* goes further. The previously infertile priest is pregnant. What is the role of the addict prisoner, Kate, who is a gentle person with a gift of healing hands? Especially as it is soon revealed that she had left her baby for days while high on drugs and the baby had died from dehydration?

And then, the film goes further again. The baby may have a chromosome deficiency with the result of a 10% possibility of some defect. The Danish answer is abortion. How does this relate to Anne as a woman, mother, priest, woman of faith?

This is more than enough material for reflecting on during a film. The faith struggles are sometimes harrowing, especially in a scene where Kate asks Anne to teach her how to pray and Anne tries to get through the *Our Father* but cannot. The film builds to a gruelling climax reminding those who remember

Ingmar Bergman's many cinema explorations of the presence and, especially, the absence of God that there is often a bleakness in Scandinavian faith that can lead to pessimism.

Which means that *In Your Hands* is a powerful film experience but quite unsettling.

CAUTIVA (CAPTIVE) (Argentina, 2003, d. Gaston Biraben)

When does a nation say about its troubled past that it is time to move on to a more positive future? Can it ever say that?

Argentina has experienced a very troubled past since the 1970s: the military dictatorship of the 1970s and the disappearance of over 30,000 citizens who are still commemorated every week by the group joining the mourning mothers in the Plaza Mayo in Buenos Aires; the Malvinas war when Britain defended the Falkland Islands; the amnesty given to those found guilty of crimes during the dictatorship. Films on these themes continue to be made, especially for a younger generation who wants to know and understand the past.

Many films have been made on these themes. British playwright, Christopher Hampton, made *Imagining Argentina* with Antonio Banderas and Emma Thompson, bringing the issues to a world audience. However, its blend of realism and 'magic realism' in a highly emotive and melodramatic style did not find critical or popular favour.

Gaston Biraben researched case studies for his film studies thesis in Los Angeles. *Cautiva* is the impressive result.

Biraben has avoided the melodramatic possibilities, showing very little of the 1970s. His message is the more effective for tending towards the reticent and allowing the characters and their dilemmas to move the audience.

The opening, however, is emotional: Argentina winning the World Cup in 1978. After the goals we see the awards with the personnel of the military junta and Henry Kissinger representing the US which had backed the dictators morally and financially. When the action immediately moves to 1994 and a 15th birthday party, we realise that we are going to be looking at children born in those dangerous times.

The centre of the action is the 15 year old Christina (played with persuasively soulful presence by student, Barbara Lombardo). Political themes are indicated in classroom scenes but suddenly Cristina is involved in a puzzle that is quite shattering. Are her loving parents her real parents or is she the daughter of two of the 'disappeared'? What is the truth for her? Who is she? This is the drama of the film where the audience shares in her uncertainty as well as her pain. Are good and loving people as good as they seem? Are severe authorities the good people? Beriban has almost underwritten some of the sequences, not giving us answers that we were hoping for or expecting, making us ask questions about what each of the characters is thinking and feeling.

Many of the central characters are women: schoolgirls and friends, the adoptive mother, the grandmother and her younger daughter, the psychologist, teachers, nuns at school. Beriban shows a great empathy for his women characters. Women in the audience will identify strongly with these characters and men can learn a great deal about women's feelings and responses. This is no mean feat for a director coming from a rather macho culture.

Cautiva indicates that a troubled past cannot be let alone or ignored. There are always consequences that will need attention and resolving.

KINGDOM OF HEAVEN (US, 2005, d. Ridley Scott)

Ridley Scott has made a sweeping movie epic of knights and chivalry, of bloodthirsty battles, of wars between Christians and Muslims, of a dream and a short-lived attempt at multi-religious peace, the

Kingdom of God. It is set in the 1180s, between the second and the third crusades, the reign of Baldwin IV in the city whose name denotes peace, Jerusalem.

The history of Christendom has been a history of war. God's name and God's will were invoked to justify wars, even 'holy wars', many of which were sheer aggression, others of which were in defence of people's rights. 'God's will' has often been invoked, sometimes by both sides in a conflict, as motivation and justification for the battle. What passed for 'God's will' was often merely the whim of a leader.

The crusades of the Middle Ages have been a sign of contradiction, some seeing them as an assertion of the rights of the church against 'infidels', sanctioned and blessed by popes and saints, others describing them as a bloodthirsty opportunity for land and power aggrandisement. Some Muslim scholars have said that, at the time, they were on the periphery of Muslim consciousness and the same until last century because more significant Islamic history was happening during the 12th and 13th centuries to the east of Palestine. In recent decades, they have offered an opportunity for discussion between Muslims and Christians.

It is suggested that while Baldwin IV ruled in the Latin kingdom in Jerusalem, the setting of this movie, there was an attempt at mutual peace between Christians, Muslims and Jews, an attempt at creating the Kingdom of Heaven.

Scott and his screenwriter, William Monahan, with their western cultural backgrounds, have tried to be scrupulous in not being provocatively aggressive towards Islam. Since their perspective is that of the Crusaders, they opt for presenting the young Balian of Ibelin (Orlando Bloom) as the hero of the venture and adventure. He is written as a parallel to a 21st century Everyman, a seeker who has suffered the death of wife and child and a priest's damnation of his wife as a suicide, who has sinned in anger in killing the priest, who feels himself bereft of God's presence and joins his father's crusade to Jerusalem as a means for finding redemption. He believes that Jerusalem is a sacred place of redemption.

Balian, the Everyman, does not immediately re-discover God. During his crusading journey he does become aware of his authentic humanity and tries to act with integrity, especially in the face of greedy and ambitious Christian barons who recklessly provoke war with the Saracens to find glory and possessions. Advised by his father and his Hospitaller chaplain to make an oath to 'be without fear in the face of your enemies. Speak the truth, even if it leads to your death. Safeguard the helpless and do no wrong'. Right action according to conscience is to be his moral norm. Balian is presented as a kind of contemporary secular saint for the audience. He is motivated by a spirituality rather than a religion (which is represented by a fanatical priest, a worldly and cowardly bishop as well as the wise Hospitaller).

It is always a matter of regret when official representatives of the church appear in such a bad light, but it would be foolish to deny that many such characters have lived in every era, wielding a destructive influence. The secular saint and the ecclesiastical villain can be seen as a constant and creative challenge to the believer.

Before Kingdom of Heaven was released, it was the subject of both praise and critique, often sight unseen. Relationships between Islam and Christianity make for good copy as well as sensationalist headlines and opportunities for controversial marketing. Ridley Scott asked Islamic historian and cinema commentator, Hamid Dabashi, to be an advisor on the script and on the finished film itself. His helpful article on his involvement with the film, his comments on several controversial articles and his assessment of its stance on Islam, can be found in the UK Sight and Sound, May 2005, pp.24-27. (As of May 5th, 2005, the Google search for 'Hamid Dabashi' and 'Kingdom of Heaven' gives over 50 listings including an interesting, brief discussion from www.christianitytoday.com.)

Kingdom of Heaven challenges Christian and western audiences to re-examine their traditions on war.

The Jewish scriptures are full of battles. The language of warriors is even used of God. However, as God interacted with the people, they learnt more of the ways of peace. By the time of Jesus, with the occupation of the Romans and the periodic uprisings, the language of the New Testament began to speak more of peace than of war.

In fact, this is the message of Jesus, not only in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus condemns the aggression and vindictiveness of an 'eye for an eye' theology of conflict and his advocating of a spirituality of loving one's enemies, but in a significant episode in Gethsemane. The disciple in Matthew's Gospel who draws his sword – it is Peter in John's account and makes us wonder what he was doing having a sword to draw – believes in physical violence to defend Jesus. This is the kind of motivation of the crusaders, at least of those who thought of the battle against 'the infidels' as a cause. And Jesus' response, his motivation, his strategy? 'Put your sword back into its sheath.' He goes on to what almost seems a pacifist stance: 'for all who take the sword will perish by the sword'.

In Kingdom of Heaven we are shown a range of warriors. Guy and Reynald think by the sword. They want power, land and possessions. They die by the sword. Baldwin, Godfrey of Ibelin and Tiberius, even Sibylla, have lived by the sword and have come to see how limited and destructive this is. It is the same in the range of Saracens shown. In a time when the worldview took battle and conquest for granted, Saladin and Balian, acknowledge that the safeguarding of the defenceless and of peace are more important than the battles.

Western audiences watching Kingdom of Heaven see a range of stances on war parallel to those of the stances of the crusaders. The question to ask of Islam is what does the Koran say and teach about war? What are the popular conceptions of the jihad? What is the attitude towards Christians? Where are the meeting points on war and peace between the Gospels and the Koran? What is the 'spirituality' behind the character of Saladin, his safe conduct to the refugees from Jerusalem, his later dealings with Richard the Lionheart (who appears at the end of Kingdom of God) two decades later?

Any dialogue between Muslim and Christian will have to go deeper than the long history of bitter battles and of persecutions. There is a peace founded on Jesus and his Gospel which must dialogue with a peace from the Koran. As Balian sits on the hill of Calvary, feeling bereft of God's presence, he looks down on the city whose name is peace in a land which might have become a multi-religious haven, the kingdom of God.

SEED OF CHUCKY (US. 2005. d. Don Moscino)

There must be a sizable niche market out there for Chucky thrillers. After three Child's Play films, which introduced the murderous doll which was inhabited by the spirit of a serial killer (voiced always by Brad Dourif) who continued his spree through Chucky, it wasn't enough. In 1998, Don Moscino, who has written all the screenplays) must have been inspired by the Frankenstein films of the 30s and invented Bride of Chucky. It's not difficult to see where this is leading... and here he is: Glen (or if Tiffany the bride doll had her way, Glenda), voiced with a cultivated androgynous voice by Billy Boyd.

We first meet Glen who is tormented by strange nightmares and who lets loose murderous instincts on a family that said he was the ugliest doll they had ever seen. He escapes to America in a delivery plane and van and ends up in LA where Jennifer Tilly (sending up her image) is having a career slump and connects with the director of a biblical epic (Redman). And Glen or Glenda meets his/her mum and dad, especially Mum who is envious of Jennifer Tilly's career (the joke, of course, being that Tiffany is also voiced by Jennifer Tilly). Mum is actually on a 12-step program to stop her addiction to busy-ness which, in her case, is disposing of unwanted people. Meanwhile Chucky goes out with Glen on a bout of splatter bonding.

This means that the film is more tongue-in-cheek cheeky than usual with a lot of quite funny references to the Chucky movies themselves and humorous barbs including the targeting of Julia Roberts and Mel Gibson and his religious movies.

It's all very silly in a clever kind of way, some crass moments, some frightening moments, some funny parody moments. Of course, it is only for the Chucky-converted.

WOLF CREEK (Australia, 2005, d. Greg Maclean)

The shadow of Crocodile Dundee

First time feature director, Greg Maclean, must have felt that he had fallen on his feet at the 2005 Festival of Cannes. He was an official selection film-maker in the Director's Fortnight. He was feted. His film was well reviewed – and he had paid off his budget (and then some) through overseas distribution sales, especially in the United States. Wolf Creek was a hit.

It would be interesting, on the other hand, to hear the views of the Northern Territory and South Australian Tourist Bureaus. Wolf Creek is about tourism, but tourism that ends badly. It is a cautionary horror tale for visitors.

Maclean has said that his project was already in progress when Ivan Milat came to trial for the backpacker murders in the southern highlands of New South Wales – and he remarked in the Media kit that what was revealed in the trial was far more horrible than anything which happened on screen. Then came the disappearance of Peter Falconio and some scepticism, especially by the media, regarding the story put forward by his girlfriend about what happened. Echoes of that case are prominent in Wolf Creek. In the film, it is the girls who die and the man who survives and has to justify himself.

A French wit at the Cannes Festival suggested that Wolf Creek should be the winner, not of the Camera D'Or for first-time director, but the Camera Gore. Funny but misleading – as were so many of the critical and puff pieces that linked it to splatter films like The Texas Chainsaw Massacre. These slasher films are genre pieces where the horror seems so impossible and excessive that one suspends disbelief and simply disbelieves and admires (or not) how writer and director exploit the conventions. Wolf Creek is more serious than that.

Because Wolf Creek gathers elements of real events in Australia, we know that, despite the bizarre killer, this kind of thing can happen. There are certainly some moments of horror (very grimly so), but they are in a more 'realistic' context, more credible.

It all starts off as a road movie, tourists on the beach at Broome and a whole lot of partying going on. Three of them (two British girls and a man from Sydney) decide to visit the meteorite crater at Wolf Creek. When they break down, a friendly truckie takes them to his home – and the terror begins.

We see three ordinary people on holidays, travelling and then trying to cope with vicious violence. While the screenplay is not so interested in developing their characters, they seem to belong to the majority of ordinary types and groups. The popular audience, especially the multiplex audience will identify easily with characters and behaviour.

What the screenplay is definitely interested in is dramatising the type of the killer.

At the end of the film, where the young man is finally cleared of suspicion in the deaths of his travelling companions, the final image is that of the killer. Crocodile Dundee style, he lopes casually, a touch larger than life, free into the sunset. In fact, there are several references to Crocodile Dundee during the film, including an alarmingly sinister reference to his 'now, that's a knife'. What Wolf Creek seems to be doing is showing us the shadow side of the image, if not the reality, of the average outback Australian male/loner/hunter/hero. What we see here is this potentially heroic Aussie battler stuck in his type with disastrous results.

The killer is genial, all smiles and generosity, looking and sounding like the Dundee image. Even though he is a cruel predator (of human victims, their videos and cameras and their cars), he is not like the Leatherfaces and other monstrous hillbillies of the American slasher movies. Veteran John Jarrat plays the killer in a commonsense, Ocker, humorous and deadpan way, making his violence and cruelty all the more alarming, the manic side of the lone hunter.

When he comes across the stranded tourists, they quickly lose their wariness and warm to the friendly extraverted behaviour. He has a practical plan for how to fix their car, details of what is wrong as well as information and reassurances that all will be well.

We don't know really know what makes the killer tick. Rather, his pleasant side has been trapped by the shadow. Any development of his sensing is channelled into devising ways of tantalising, taunting and torturing his victims. Any development of his feeling has driven him into an insane subjectivity, king of the outback, king of the world in his lost world kingdom. He is one of the worst examples of the immaturity-wreaking havoc of the 'puer eternus'.

In ocker terms, the good bloke who enjoys some larrikin attitudes and behaviour has become a deadly hooligan.

Greg Maclean may be surprised at a psychological look at his film. He would say that it is an entertainment with a grounding in fact. But his choice of the Crocodile Dundee imagery enables us to ask deeper questions – and wonder about the shadow side of the Ocker man.

TWIN SISTERS (DE TWEELING) (Holland, 2003, d. Ben Sombogaart)

Receiving a later release outside its native Holland on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II, this is a Dutch point of view on the war and its divisive and destructive consequences. Based on a very popular novel in Holland by Tessa van Loo, this is a saga of twin sisters from the time when they were little girls in Cologne in 1926 until their meeting at a spa (which is introduced early into the film) when they are in their 80s. There are various stops along the timeline, 1936, 1939, 1940, 1942, 1944 and 1947. They are more than glimpses or snapshots of the girls' lives but, while the structure is episodic, the storytelling is emotional and the performances so sympathetic that we do a great deal of filling in of the gaps. It is a good example of a film which makes audiences imagine a great deal about what is going on in the world as well as in the worlds of the main characters. It is not just books which exercise our imaginations.

The sisters are parted in 1926, the consumptive Lotte being taken to Holland for a comfortable upbringing for her health, the healthy Anna staying in Germany, forced to work on her uncle's farm without any schooling.

The film parallels their lives: both girls emotionally hurt by their foster-parents, both having some kind of education, both falling in love... It is a wonderful relief when they do meet but their separated lives are dogged by people keeping them apart, terrible misunderstandings and mistakes and long periods of hatred and mistrust.

The film captures very well the comfortable life in Holland in the 20s and 30s, their consideration of the Nazis as barbarians, the rounding up of the Jews for the concentration camps and the family Frank style of hiding of Jews. Lotte experiences the consequences of Germany invading Holland. The film also captures very well the lives of the ordinary Germans who absorbed propaganda, meant well and acted according to their lights, saw the cruel side of the officers and the persecution of the Poles but accepted this as part of their lives and their fate. Anna experiences the love and loss of an Austrian soldier husband.

Twin Sisters could be described as 'old-fashioned' or 'classical' film-making, much of the material quite familiar from other films. The young Lotte and the young Anna (Thekla Reuten and Nadja Uhl) are captivating to watch. We accept the completely natural acting of the old Lotte and the old Anna (Ellen Vogel and Gudrun Okras). The film is very emotional, sometimes heart on sleeve, but mostly quite moving.

LE CLAN (France, 2004, d. Gael Morel)

Audiences will probably have many diverse and mixed feelings during this 90 minute film.

Le Clan could be the family of the three brothers and their widowed father whose story, during different seasons of the year, the film tells. The clan, more probably, is the clique of idle young men who 'hang out' together, often bored, using drugs, sex and a kind of camaraderie to keep them going.

By the end of the film, we realise what a 'womanless' world we have been in – the wife of one of the brothers appears about 10 minutes before the end, otherwise you are hard put to glimpse anyone female. The director says that he did this with purpose. The original screenplay was peopled with women but he eliminated them to portray a male world of clash and interdependence.

The first story is that of 22 year old Marc, unemployed, dealing in drugs, homosexual, erratically moody, especially with his father. His closest bond is with his pet dog – which leads to violence. This part of the film, with its focus on the young men, could be described as 'homoerotic'. The second story is that of the older brother, Christophe, who comes out of gaol. While the narrative about the family continues, the focus is more on 'social realism' with Christophe making a success of his work at a ham salting plant. Christophe's purposefulness contrasts with Marc's nihilistic stances. The third story is that of the 17 year old Olivier who pines for his mother, is reserved and often awkward. The transition to his dance and sporting activity, his coming out and relationship with his friend, Hicham, come very suddenly, making us wonder whether we really noticed him or understood him. The suddenness of Hicham's narration towards the end is brief and puzzling. The brevity of this story means that we don't get much of an opportunity to realise how Olivier ticks. It also makes us realise that we probably were offered substantial portraits of Marc and Christophe.

Set in the beauty of the lake country around Annecy, Le Clan can be a challenging glimpse of the aimlessness of today's young men.

A DIRTY SHAME (US, 2004, d. John Waters)

John Waters has revelled for over twenty five years in his role as movie iconoclast whose keynote signature is bad taste. That is usually enough warning for anyone considering seeing his films. For a while, he seemed a little more mainstream with such films as Cry Baby and, even, Serial Mom, Pecker and Cecil B. Demented. With A Dirty Shame, he has included enough bad taste to offend most people.

One of the difficulties that Waters sets for himself is his taking the somewhat puritanical views of middle America as his target. This has extended itself now to the religious right and fundamentalist Christians. He obviously cannot stand their righteousness – which he would interpret as self-righteousness. He also suspects that there is a sub-conscious level of repressed prurience in the campaigns they wage against permissiveness.

So he has decided to go the whole hog in his parody of such upright citizens, especially an embittered and frustrated housewife in Baltimore (the home town that Waters loves to picture and attack) played with more than zest by Tracy Ullman. She and the citizens like her have a preternatural radar for detecting anything sexual going on – rather complicated by the fact that her daughter, played by Selma Blair, has had a ballooning breast implant and dances down at the local dive.

Waters has devised a screenplay where, if someone is concussed, their libido is freed – and then some. Johnny Knoxville plays a mechanic who leads this band of concussed sex and bad taste libertarians.

There are scenes of bizarre behaviour that look like a scratch concert gone berserk. Waters does not mind the crass and the gross – and, ultimately, there is nowhere else to go but to excess. Waters' iconoclasm is in your face rather than subtle, rowdy rather than comic, more juvenile than adult, so that whatever points he wants to (rightly) make get mangled in the mayhem.

TARNATION (US, 2004, d. Jonathan Caouette)

Tarnation is a visually experimental autobiographical documentary by actor and film-maker, Jonathan Caouette. It has received acclaim from critics everywhere as heralding a fresh way of documentary-making along with the personal involvement of the maker.

It might be useful to consider these ingredients in order.

The film is visually arresting. Drawing on footage that the boy Jonathan took in the 1970s, along with photographs from the period, he combines this material with film of his adolescence and of his adult life in New York. But, it is not simply footage of himself. His mother becomes a central character and he includes very revealing scenes of her, her mental illness and her interactions with him. Caouette has accompanied these visuals with an enormous range of songs from the period, songs that he likes and which he thinks illustrate characters and events. He also includes film and television clips.

The film is experimental. While the narrative of Caouette's life can be easily traced, his film is more like a visual and aural jigsaw with more than an element of puzzle. The skill is in the editing. He has patiently gathered this wide range of material of differing quality and assembled it in surprising and arresting ways. The juxtaposition of super 8 film with digital video and old photographs makes for a visual stream of consciousness that reminds us of the stream of our own memories and helps us identify with Caouette as he interprets his life in a collage of associations.

The film is autobiographical. And Caouette has had a terrible life which he now puts before the wide audience. He tells his own story and places himself in front of the camera quite narcissistically, preoccupied with himself. Yet, he suffers from a mental condition of 'depersonalisation' where he feels distanced from himself – perhaps the camera is his means for being himself. This is also the story of his mother, a tragic Texan story of a young model who has an accidental fall and is never right afterwards. Abused, briefly married, unable to care for her son, experiencing years of electric shock, she appears as a victim of 20th century domestic abuse and breakdown. Jonathan cares for her and films her and films her. He also confronts his grandfather with his camera to find out what went on that was so destructive of his mother.

This is a documentary. It documents lives from a range of sources. It does not try to be objective. It takes for granted that documentary is always subjective, the point of view of the film-maker. Along with 2003's *Capturing the Friedmans* (where the family filmed themselves in great detail over many years), this is a record of American family dysfunction.

ONG-BAK (Thailand, 2004, d. Prachya Pinkaew)

London bus-side hoardings proclaimed, 'Believe the hype'. Well, what is the hype?

After the martial arts balletics of *Crouching Heroes of a Thousand Daggers*, elegantly beautiful sagas, this is athletic martial arts (no strings attached). This is the tradition of the actual stunt work of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan, Thai style. Hero Tony Jaa is worth watching for his extraordinary and accurately split-second timing leaps and bounds... and more (rather than is stolid acting).

The plot? Well, it's the old one of the young man of the village, where the head of the statue of Buddha has been stolen by Bangkok thugs before the feast of Ong Bak. He goes to the city to retrieve the head. He finds himself in a world of drug dealers and drug lords and the brutal world of fight club. It does need a team of screenwriters to know that he will (reluctantly) fight the toughest champions and win, will be involved in all kinds of chases through alleyways and on highways, will confront the villains for a death-defying rescue of the head of Buddha, will be helped by a con-cousin who will repent and the cousin's girlfriend who will end up in the village religious procession and that he will be the village hero. He does.

There is also a lot of headbutting, bonecrunching and bodypunishment in the fights that are not for the squeamish (or for the less than squeamish for that matter) but which will delight boxing and wrestling fans like those we see who spend their lives betting and screaming for bouts and knockouts in the club.

The film has been edited for western consumption by Luc Besson's company and a different soundtrack added. Of course, it is all rather comic strip in style and we are meant to smile as the hero does the anticipated things. So, a mixture of the brutal, the heroic and the comic.

HEAD ON (GEGEN DIE WAND) (Germany, 2004, d. Fatih Akin)

One of the key questions about the future of the European Union is the entrance of Turkey. Already many Turkish migrants live in Europe, especially Germany. In fact, there have been quite a number of German films dramatising difficulties for Turks settling in Germany and the often hostile reactions they get.

Head On focuses more on the Turks themselves, the contrast between the depression that many experience when a tragedy occurs in their lives and they resort to alcohol, drugs and sex and those migrants who want to preserve a traditional way of life, especially in its restrictions on women.

The two central characters suffer from death wishes. Cahit is reduced to a shell of himself and spends most of his time in a bar. He crashes his car into a wall. Sibel is desperate to break free from her family, attempting suicide several times. Sibel proposes to Cahit that they go through a form of marriage but that they both live independently of each other. And this comes to no good end either, with Cahit in gaol and Sibel hiding back in Istanbul. The rest of the film shows them both in the depths - with some fairly faint glimmers of hope.

The film is punctuated by a singer and a chamber ensemble photographed in front of the Bosphorus and the cityscape of Istanbul, reminding us of Turkish culture and tradition. It also makes a great deal of the contrast between life in Hamburg, where dreams were supposed to come true, and life back in Turkey, especially for those who return.

This is often grim and intense material, not comfortable at all – which, of course, is the point. There is a disturbingly volatile emotionality, eruptions of anger and violence as well as a persistent underlying desperation.

Head On won the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival, 2004.

THE WOODEN CAMERA (South Africa, 2003, d. Ntshaveni Wa Luruli)

The South African film industry is growing. Many of the films offer an opportunity to look into post-apartheid South Africa. The young protagonists of this film were scarcely born when Nelson Mandela came out of prison and society changed – somewhat.

This is a story of shantytowns on the edge of Cape Town, where the youngsters are able to wander around the centre of the city and visit the houses of the rich. But, there is a desperation underneath and they are frequently the butt of not so latent racism.

When a man falls from a train, Sipho finds he has a gun and a camera. He keeps the gun and gives the camera to his friend, Madiba. At home, Madiba has a wooden container for a camera. It fits nicely and he spends a lot of his time filming. The camera gives him a new eye on the world, possibilities for a future. Sipho is stuck in a violent and gun culture which, of course, leads to death. In the centre is a young girl who befriends them both, to the dismay of her white father (who has his own secrets).

Jean-Pierre Cassell has a pleasing role as a music teacher who is a bridge between the worlds of the rich and the poor through music and art.

The film uses the variety of Cape Town locations effectively. The audience feels that it has been there. The Wooden Camera is a brief film, not always so well acted, an earnest message film with a clear message, obvious to us but not to the protagonists. But, it expresses the deep feelings of its makers.

UNTOLD SCANDAL (Korea, 2004, d. Je-yong Lee)

This is a sumptuously beautiful and stately film. It is set in a period of gentrification of Korea, a transition from the more hierarchical societies of the past to a more permissive society, the 18th century.

What makes it particularly interesting is that it is a Korean adaptation of Laclos classic novel, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. This novel has had many screen incarnations: from the modern adaptation of the late 50s by Roger Vadim with Jeanne Moreau, to the best known version, the 80s *Dangerous Liaisons* and the, unfortunately, rarely seen *Valmont* by Milos Forman. More recently, it was adapted to an American high school setting in *Cruel Intentions*.

For many, the plot is well-known: a philandering cad joins with a corrupt aristocrat to seduce a virtuous young widow, with accompanying dalliances along the way. *Untold Scandal* keeps to this basic plot. However, it is beautifully and lavishly costumed, photographed with a measured, elegant style. This is, of course, a surface beauty which covers malice and deceit.

The film focuses more on the seducer and the widow (who, interestingly for Korean 18th century history is presented as a Catholic, member of a small group who do good for people but who are sometimes oppressed and persecuted). The tragedy is that the man falls in love but cannot escape from his callow past and misguided proud self-respect. The tragedy is that the widow allows herself to believe her seducer, succumbs to him and suffers when she is abandoned. The Madame tries to destroy other lives in fostering dangerous sexual liaisons. She is ultimately left with her evil self.

An impressive adaptation and an interesting Korean interpretation of a European story.

BROTHERS (Denmark, 2003, d. Susanne Bier)

Brothers is quite topical, not only in the relationship between an serious older brother and his irresponsible younger brother, but in its episode with a peace-keeping Danish presence in Afghanistan.

Danish films are often grim in their outlook. So, is this one. What starts out as a love-clash relationship and a family reunion turns into an unanticipated drama. The older brother goes to Afghanistan and his helicopter is shot down and he is reported dead. In her grief and care for her children, his wife begins to depend on the younger brother who becomes more genial. The older brother is captured and in the face of death commits an act which damages him morally and psychologically and has dire repercussions when he returns home.

The film raises a number of moral dilemmas, enough to make the audience thoughtful throughout the film while responding emotionally to the characters and their harsh and sad experiences.

A GOOD WOMAN (UK, 2004, d. Mike Barker)

A Good Woman is an adaptation of Oscar Wilde's play, *Lady Windemere's Fan*.

Oscar Wilde would not have called himself a moralist but in his plays and in his stories like *The Portrait of Dorian Grey*, he definitely proposes to his audience and analyses issues of right and wrong. The plays do it with wit and elegant style. If we listen carefully to Wilde's epigrams, we realise that under the felicitous vocabulary and phrasing, under the ironic contradictions, he is making strong moral judgments. It is done with the lightest of touches in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. In *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband* and *Lady Windemere's Fan*, there is an abundant of wit but more substance and depth.

Lady Windemere's Fan is a morality play about appearances and reality. Mrs Erlynne is a lady of the world, elegant in style but dependent on the whims and cheque books of the married men in her life. Society (and injured wives) have no difficulty in branding her a bad woman. (She is similar to but less destructive than Mrs Chevely in *An Ideal Husband*.)

By contrast the young and innocent Mrs Windemere is one year married, turning twenty one, believing only good about people and, though fearful of sounding priggish, she believes in standards and decorum. Everyone considers her a good woman.

When Mrs Erlynne goes to the Amalfi coast for the season, gossip about her abounds, especially as Mr Robert Windemere is seen, suspiciously and often, in her company. As she remarks, condemning gossip, 'You have bought gossip and should ask for a refund'.

Wilde loved upper crust society but he also knew how to highlight their foibles and the genuine nastiness underlying the respectable veneer. This is where his clever dialogue bursts pretensions. (Having seen the film with a paying audience rather than at a press preview, I was surprised and delighted how Wilde's aphorisms elicited so much delighted laughter.)

The director is Mike Barker who made *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Lorna Doone* for television and the intriguing film about Oliver Cromwell, George Fairfax and Charles I, *To Kill a King*. He has not gone so far back in history here, nor has he gone back to Wilde's 1890s London. Rather, the action has been internationalised with Mrs Erlynne and Meg and Robert Windemere now Americans. It has also been brought into the 1930s, the period of Noel Coward, one of Wilde's most obvious literary and dramatic descendants.

This transposition works quite well and contrasts American new money with the decaying old money of Britain and Italy in the form of idle and stupid aristocracy.

The casting and performances are interesting. Oscar winner Helen Hunt (*As Good as it Gets*) is a brittle Mrs Erlynne who has to do a self-sacrificing deed to save Meg Windemere. Meg is played by the versatile Scarlett Johansson. There is a very genial performance by Tom Wilkinson as a rich man who admits he is ignorant but has a penchant for telling the truth. Stephen Campbell Moore is the charmingly caddish Lord Darlington.

Ultimately, superficial perceptions and judgments are overturned. Mrs Erlynne does the noble thing and Meg is able to overcome her presumptions and pronounce her a good woman. Meg, on the other hand, has been too rigid in her expectations and her moral fragility has cracked. She is in danger of losing her reputation and becoming a bad woman.

It is something of a surprise to hear so many of Wilde's lines and realise that they have become part of the culture, seemingly off-hand, throw-away wit, but humorously ironic – and moral.

STAR WARS, EPISODE III, REVENGE OF THE SITH (US, 2005, d. George Lucas)

Yes, it is a pleasure to say that I found this episode worked perfectly.

After living in the memory of the Star War films of the 1970s and 1980s, I found *The Phantom Menace* to be a huge disappointment. George Lucas had come back with a lumbering, too often corny Episode I in 1999. It was a relief in 2002 when Episode 2, *Attack of the Clones*, was better, but it seemed an interim piece. There were hints of how Anakin would go over to the Dark Side, but it was not clear just how he would become Darth Vader.

Now, all the questions are answered. At the end of *Revenge of the Sith*, there is a really strongly felt urge to see the Luke Skywalker episodes again. And, it is worth congratulating George Lucas in bringing his epic to a satisfying conclusion.

The first young audience for Star Wars is now in its 40s. They will really enjoy this episode answering questions they have had for years. The new fans will like it too, though it is worth remembering that Star Wars was never intended for small children.

Revenge of the Sith moves right into action. There is quite a lot of 'whizz whizz bang bang' in the opening battles. Special effects are much bigger and better than they were. We then move into the personal drama: Padme is pregnant and Annakin in happy anticipation of being a father. The other aspect of the drama is that Obi-Wan Kenobi is finding Annakin restlessly ambitious, still repeating the Jedi code, but increasingly resentful that, though he is a member of the Council, he is not permitted to be a Master.

The Jedi rescue Chancellor Palpatine and he soon reveals his true self as he fulfils his ambition to be emperor of the Galaxy. In a more convincing psychological screenplay than for the previous films, Lucas is able to show how the Chancellor introduces Annakin to the Dark Side, the temptation of power. Shrewdly, he promises that Padme will not die in childbirth. He promises that when Annakin destroys the Jedi and the separatists in the outer boundaries of the galaxy, he will have achieved peace. This means that Annakin does the wrong thing for the right reasons.

The consequences are devastating for the Jedi, especially Windu and Yoda. The consequences are also devastating for Annakin himself. His cruelty foreshadows his evil as Darth Vader. As anticipated, there is a climactic duel between Annakin and Obi Wan Kenobi, leaving Annakin burnt and disfigured. We watch his being reconstructed and the now well-known mask fitted over his face (and the audience literally cheered).

For decades, many religious education teachers have been able to alert students to the deeper meanings in these replays of myths of chivalry. In this episode, they can explore the nature of evil, of how democracy can turn into despotism. (There is more than a touch of Manicheism – the theory of two equal sources of good and of evil - in the explanation of The Force, having its good side and its dark side, but the film does dramatise selfless and selfish decisions and responsibilities.)

With the birth of Luke and Leia, with Obi Wan leaving to train Luke, we are back at the beginning. We now know how situations and characters came into being, not only the evil Emperor but R2D2, 3PO and Chewbacca.

Ewan McGregor continues as Obi Wan Kenobi. Hayden Christensen does very well as Annakin and makes his choices for evil and his transformation believable. This time Ian McDiarmid as the Chancellor become Emperor has a much bigger and more important role. The effects are very effective and John Williams score is as rousing as ever.

FILMS ON SCREEN, MAY 2005/2

Films reviewed at the Cannes Festival

BASHING
BATTALA EN EL CIELO
BROKEN FLOWERS
CACHE
CHROMOPHOBIA
CINEMA, ASPIRIN AND VLUTURES
CROSSING THE BRIDGE, THE SOUND OF ISTANBUL
DELWENDE
DON'T COME KNOCKING
DOWN IN THE VALLEY
ELECTION
ENFANT L'
FILMMAKER, The
FREE ZONE
HISTORY OF VIOLENCE, A
JEWBOY
KILOMETRE ZERO

KING, The
KISS KISS BANG BANG
LEMMING
LOW PROFILE
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MATCH POINT
MIDNIGHT MOVIES
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ODETE
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PEINDRE OU FAIRE L'AMOUR
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TALE OF CINEMA, A
TEMPS QUI RESTE, Le
THREE BURIALS OF MELQUIADES ESTRADA, The
THREE TIMES
WHERE THE TRUTH LIES
ZIM AND Co

LEMMING (France, 2005, d. Dominik Moll)

Beware lemmings, those furry rodents from Scandinavia who, myth says, rush to cliffs and leap over to their deaths. This film says otherwise: at a time of overpopulation they migrate; but when they are swimming across large lakes, they die from exhaustion. Now, what that has to do with this film is another matter. They may be symbols for us to ponder. They may just be red herrings, Hitchcock's McGuffin.

It's not easy to describe Lemming let alone categorise it. It seems to belong to a new set of films (see, for instance, John Maybury's *The Jacket*) which are psychodramas of the sub-conscious, life as it might be lived for good or evil, not necessarily life as it is being lived. And, at the end, to highlight his point, the director has the song 'Dream a little dream of me...'.

The director is Dominik Moll who made the strikingly offbeat thriller, *Harry, He's Here to Help*. It is co-written with Harry collaborator, Giles Marchand, who directed *Who Killed Bambi*. The acting credits are very impressive as well, actors well cast and carrying us on with this strange story. Laurent Lucas is a hotshot automation inventor, happily married to Benedicte (Charlotte Gainsbourg). They live comfortably but when the boss (Andre Dussolier) and his wife (Charlotte Rampling) come to dinner, things begin to go haywire. At this point, it is wise to leave plot development because that is the point of seeing the film: looking at what Moll presents and trying to discern what is real and what is not.

Lemming is the kind of film that grows on you with reflection.

SANGRE (Mexico, 2005 d. Amat Escalante)

Sangre just stops. The end. Maybe, Diego, the central character, a middle-aged, very ordinary man, balding, with a cast in his eye, just has nowhere else to go.

First time writer and director traps his audience in the humdrum life of Diego and Blanca. With his almost permanently fixed camera, in long takes (sometimes very long –30 seconds for Blanca to trim her toenails), it is as if we are caught in a Mexican reality TV program where very little happens. Activities run the range from intimate sex, through Diego eating his tacos and fried egg, to lying watching telenovellas (which actually sound more interesting than what we see of Diego and Blanca).

Of course, this is a portrait of unvaried, often banal lives which make us ask what life is all about. Diego goes a good deed for a woman whose son is abducted and Blanca angrily tosses a table at him. She

apologises. Diego's daughter asks can she live with him. He puts her up in a hotel. In the last 30 minutes, there are some complications with Diego's daughter and his almost zombie-like manner of dealing with the crisis. And then he and the film just stop.

KILOMETRE ZERO (Iraq/France, 2005, d. Hiner Saleem)

Now, here is a film with a definite, even exultant, strong point of view. It is a Kurdish film, with French collaboration. Right at the outset we hear Kurds announce that President Bush and the US might be imperialists but they did get rid of the loathed Saddam Hussein. If it had been France or Switzerland who did it, the Kurds would have welcomed them. The dread name of 'Chemical Ali' is invoked and we flash back to 1988.

The contempt of Iraqis for the Kurds is palpable. The feeling is, of course, mutual. Men are arbitrarily taken, some shot, others conscripted and sent to Basra to fight Iran. They are humiliated. This is especially true of a fat Kurd called Sami who is made to run, dance, his feet beaten and generally made a laughing stock (but still expected to fight for Iraq).

The bulk of the film is a trip back to Kurdistan by Ako, who has wanted to move his wife and son and his dying father-in-law away from danger. He accompanies an Iraqi driver as they drive a 'martyr' of the war back to his home town. They clash, they fight, military officers bark orders and insults. They are their own civil war.

The film is crisply photographed bringing out the dust of the desert and the majesty of the mountains. The theme is (very) serious but there are spoof moments, especially with Sami, with Ako wanting shells to destroy his leg in the trench so that he can go back home – and trucks going up and down the countryside with saluting statues of Saddam Hussein.

As a film, plot and acting, it is fairly ordinary. It is the passion and the theme that keep our attention, as it ends on April 9th, 2003, with Ako and his wife in exile in Paris shouting exuberantly that the Kurds are now free.

MATCH POINT (US/UK, 2005, d. Woody Allen)

London has given Woody Allen a new lease of life. He obviously loves London – with more than enough sights of well-known and unknown locations. He also communicates differently from his New York stories despite similarities in characters and themes through a principally British cast, their different accents, vocabulary and voice inflections. At times, Match Point is more British than British.

We enter the upper class Hewett family with Irish tennis coach, Chris Wilton (a surprisingly effective Jonathan Rhys Myers). While we find them pompous, he finds them fascinating and soon throws in his lot with them, friendships, opera and the arts, business positions, marriage. Early on we catch him reading Dostoevski, so Allen is giving us the lead for the further plot developments. It is Crime and Punishment and Crimes and Misdemeanours revisited, English-style. Some of his cast have suggested that it is a British kind of Chekhov family and society.

There is an opening light reflection on luck when a tennis ball served balances on the net and could fall either way, win or lose. Allen uses this image with relish in the closing section of the film. He reflects on luck, planning and working. In the meantime, Chris has married Chloe Hewett (Emily Mortimer) and continued an affair with aspiring American actress Nola (Scarlett Johansson).

Matters end badly or well, depending on who won the match point. Allen highlights the patronising banality of the upper classes and the selfish banality of Chris, leaving the audience to provide its own moral anchor for judgments.

BASHING (Japan, 2005, d. Kobayashi Masahiro)

Just when you thought you were beginning to get behind aspects of Japanese inscrutability comes an extraordinary critique in *Bashing*.

This brief film focuses on Yuko who has returned home after being kidnapped while working as a volunteer in Iraq. A heroine's welcome? Far, far from it. Her volunteering abroad is seen as a disgrace. Her being kidnapped and returned even more so. Had she died, it might have been a different matter.

Everybody knows. There are attacks against her on the internet, comments in the papers. She is fired, refused service in shops and supermarkets (except McDonalds), mugged in broad daylight. Her stepmother is hostile, her father sacked.

The dialogue highlights that this kind of volunteering is alien to the Japanese ethos. Giving time to charity is not the done thing. If I could steal a comment from an American leaving the screening, 'it shows the downside of Japanese love of orderliness'. You must not do anything out of the ordinary. Nor, should you openly show emotions – which is what Yuko does after a cold and unloving childhood, seeing herself as a failure at everything.

An effective indictment of stoic conformism.

LAST DAYS (US, 2005, d. Gus van Sant)

As a cinematic aesthetic exercise, *Last Days* will fascinate cinema buffs who enjoy beautiful portrayals of the enigmatic. And it looks good as well. Others will find it tedious and, perhaps, trite in its treatment of the burnt-out star. It is in the vein of his *Gerry* – but makes *Elephant* seem hyperactive.

Van Sant has written as well as directed and declares that he has drawn from the last days of Kurt Cobain in his depiction of Blake (Michael Pitt in a well-wrought performance). Which means that we watch, often stare at length, at glimpses of a rock star in mortal decline: loss of self-confidence and the will to perform, drugs, fickle friends and hangers-on or, in the words of his final song, 'it's a long, lonely journey from death to birth'.

While van Sant wants to offer a tribute-interpretation of artists like Cobain, the world he offers is a mixture of grunge and nihilism that seems hopelessly depressing. Peggy Lee, long before, sang 'Is that all there is?'

THE FILMMAKER (France, 2005, d. Alain Cavalier)

In 1994, honoured director Alain Cavalier began what has become a cinema diary. He filmed his wife extensively, especially her cancer concern, her weight consciousness as well as her domestic work, like cooking, in detail after detail. His own brush with cancer in his nose becomes a key element. He films his parents in their illnesses and, especially, his father's death. Other characters move in and out. There is much discussion of art and cinema. Cavalier asks the usual questions about life, death and meaning and reflects on his own abandonment of Catholicism in describing his father's last rites and the meaning of belief in transubstantiation. Later he takes a host home from Mass and films it, asking questions of belief again. He remains devoted to Therese of Lisieux whose life he filmed in *Therese* in 1987.

Obviously this is a work of love – and a work of self-love – creatively edited as a personal visual collage of a life. It depends on how ingratiating the filmmaker makes himself from the start whether an audience wants to stay with him over two hours or not. For those caught up in his visual delights and compositions, details of his home, a pet bird feeding on worms and other minutiae, there is great pleasure. But for many, his film does outstay its welcome.

WHERE THE TRUTH LIES (Canada, 2005, d. Atom Egoyan)

Some critics will have to get over their shock (and disapproval) that Egoyan has left his serious themes and treatment for *LA Confidential* territory. Some of their denunciations seemed a touch hysterical. After all, a director can do as he or she pleases, not bound by academic expectations or limits. And Egoyan has done

Where the Truth Lies very well indeed, a screenplay adapted from a crime novel, multi-dimensional in its creation of characters, multi-layered in its themes and use of time frames and piecing the jigsaw together.

The setting is 1972. A young journalist begins to write the biography of a stand-up comedian and his partner who played an important role in her life when she had recovered from polio and was a guest on their 1957 telethon. She is obviously interested in doing a 'Citizen Kane', but finds herself in deeper emotional waters than she was prepared for as well as a mystery which she ultimately solves. Egoyan recreates the showbiz world of the 1950s, its glitz, its popular celebrities and the scandal potential behind the scenes. He makes the glossy world of 1972 (pre-Watergate) a place where the truth actually lies for protection.

Kevin Bacon shows himself yet again to be a versatile performer, comedy shtick as well as deadly serious. Colin Firth relishes the opportunity to distance himself from his Mr Darcys (Pride and Prejudice and Bridget Jones). And Allison Lohman proves she is one of the rising stars to keep watch for. It just shows you what a serious director like Atom Egoyan can do with a genre piece.

ELECTION (Hong Kong, 2005, d. Johnnie To)

It's a natural mistake to assume that this is a drama about democracy in Hong Kong. There really is an election, a vicious campaign and more vicious aftermath but the scope is limited: who is to be the Chairman of a Triad, Big D or Lok? And that is one of the problems for a western audience trying to work out who is who, who is on whose side (or not) and who is killing whom, especially when most go by nicknames like Whistle, Sparky or Long Gun (but these thugs are a far cry from humorously nicknamed Damon Runyon characters).

Johnnie To has done some action thrillers but has moved into social themes with 2004's Breaking News and now this Hong Kong variation on The Godfather. These are not nice people. While the chairman tells an underling that crooks must use their brains these days, he is not above dispatching his rival in a brutal finale. Fortunately, there is the end disclaimer that his screenplay bears no relation to any actual people or events! It is simply a skilfully made dark (often literally dark) Chinese mob drama.

KISS KISS BANG BANG (US, 2005, d. Shane Black)

The elemental title for sex and violence.

First time director Shane Black has been writing action thrillers in Hollywood for many years (Lethal Weapon screenplays, for instance). He really comes into his own with this top entertainment.

Black uses the noir tradition to amusing effect, LA Confidential style. But he also plays with his skills as a writer by introducing a narrator who jests and argues with the audience, even going back to correct some of his introductory omissions. Black also gives each day of the action its caption – all titles of Raymond Chandler thrillers which relate to this plot as well. He makes reference to sexy potboilers and their tawdry and impossible plots and their violent climaxes with the hero tortured then shooting sixteen people (our hero is a bit more modest) as well as spoofing the requisite happy ending. The dialogue is smart, often knowing, and always clever. Come to think of it, there are lots of echoes of Chinatown as well.

Robert Downey Jr is in top form as a would-be child magician who has only made good as an adult petty thief, who steps into a movie audition while escaping the police and finds himself in Hollywood, apprenticed to a private eye named, for obvious reasons, Gai Paris (an agreeable Val Kilmer). Downey keeps just the right tone to make you like him, laugh when he invites you to and then gasp in dismay as he makes every mistake in the book, wrong guessing situations, throwing away weapons, revealing too much to the thugs...

This is a very confident and entertaining kiss and bang show, very likeable and enjoyable.

MIDNIGHT MOVIES From the margin to the mainstream. (Canada, 2005, d. Stuart Samuels)

This documentary (88 minutes) is a must see for movie buffs. It is also a must see for students of sociology, of social change and the movies having social effect and changing ways audiences perceive and accept different types of movie-making, especially the sardonic irony that pervades films since the 1970s.

The format is straightforward. Six films that succeeded in cinemas at midnight screenings from 1970 to 1977 are put forward as key films in changing audience consciousness. They are Jodorowsky's *El Topo* (the first midnight movie), the 1930s antidrug film, *Reefer Madness*, George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, John Water's *Pink Flamingo*, Perry Henzell's Jamaican reggae feature, *The Harder They Come*, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and David Lynch's *Eraserhead*.

The directors are seen with frequent comments plus Richard O'Brien, creator of *Rocky Horror*. The film clips are quite abundant, more than enough to get a helpful impression of each film, its style and impact. And it is interesting to be reminded at the end how successful Romero, Waters and Lynch still are.

CACHE (HIDDEN) (France/Austria, 2005, d. Michael Haneke)

Le Cache is so good that Michael Haneke can be called a master-filmmaker. His insights into violence and the media came powerfully through in *Benny's Video* and *Funny Games*. Deeper themes were intriguingly presented in *Code Inconnu* and *The Piano Teacher*. He took a different road in the apocalyptic *Time of the Wolf*. Now he is back in suburban France with a middle class family and urban terror – and more.

The opening requires a little patience. This is rewarded as the plot unfolds, literally a plot of menace by surveillance video tape, childishly brutal drawings and anonymous calls. The target is a TV celebrity interviewer. As the threats increase, he and we delve into his past. The likeable victim, Georges Laurent, becomes more and more unpleasant a character, more paranoid and increasingly less worthy of our sympathy. Daniel Auteuil, star of so many French films, is extraordinarily versatile; versatile in the sense that he always looks the same in drama, comedy or period piece, yet he is always different. He creates his characters from within. This performance is faultless. He is beautifully supported by Juliet Binoche as his puzzled wife.

While the cumulative effect of the paranoia on Laurent, his wife, son and affluent friends is powerful and thought-provoking – it includes France's treatment of Algerians in the 1960s – there are some wonderfully staged set scenes: George's bedside conversation with his mother (Annie Girardot), George's apartment encounter with Majid and the mother's questioning of her son. There is also one of the most startling and shocking violent moments which Haneke can create so well that brings home the deadly reality of what we are watching. At the end there is suggestion and speculation rather than clarity and closure – but we need to continue pondering this film long after it ends.

Winner of the Ecumenical award in Cannes 2005, the FIPRESCI award as well as the Festival's Best Director.

QUANDO SEI NATO, NON PUOI NASCONDERTI (ONCE YOU'RE BORN...)

(Italy, 2005, d. Marco Tullio Giordana)

A worthy film. A rather romanticised picture of boat people, conned by smugglers, crammed on to a broken down boat and, finally, left drifting in the Mediterranean. They receive a reasonable welcome to Italy although much of it is makeshift as authorities process the refugees.

However, this comes only after 40 minutes where we are introduced to a wealthy factory owner and his family in Brescia (where school and factory witness to the incoming migrants). Young son, Sandro, accompanies his father and a friend on a cruise which we see in too lengthy detail and then, as in Kipling's classic, *Captains Courageous*, of a rich boy falling overboard and having to learn cultural tolerance and hard work on a fishing ship, he does likewise.

The picture of the refugees is sympathetic. A principal carer is a kindly but harassed priest. The parents are so glad to discover their son is alive that they try their best for the Romanian and his sister. Not everything is sweetness and light but the film opts for a hopeful and benign welcome to strangers.

THE KING (US, 2005, d. James Marsh)

The central character's name is Elvis but his behaviour is not that of a king. Rather, this is a Texan reworking of a genre popular in the 1960s and 1970s where a seemingly angelic stranger ingratiates himself into the life of a family and then proceeds to change them one by one, sometimes redemptively, otherwise malevolently. Pasolini's *Teorema* is the cinema classic of the genre. There is also Harold Prince's *Something for Everyone*, with Michael York, and Joe Orton's *Entertaining Mr Sloane*. Another striking (diabolical) example is Dennis Potter's *Brimstone and Treacle*.

The audience gets to know the dark secret almost immediately so the suspense is in watching what the stranger will do and when the family will discover what is happening to them. The context is that of a born again pastor in a rather fundamentalist church (the son is campaigning for the high school to re-introduce creationism to counter evolution). At first it is hard to believe that this nice young man is so malevolent though we know he has reason to be. We are charmed by appearances and manners.

This is a first film by director James Marsh. It is accomplished rather than outstanding. Part of the interest in seeing the film is Gael Garcia Bernal (*Amores Peros*, *Fr Amaro*, *Motorcycle Diaries*) in the central role, well mannered but deadly. William Hurt is very effective as the pastor. Clearly, the context means that this is also a film about God, faith, testing of faith and loss of faith.

DOWN IN THE VALLEY (US, 2005, d. David Jacobson)

There is a lot to like in this rather long and sometimes melodramatic picture of growing up in the San Fernando Valley. It is a struggle for many families. Wade is trying, not too successfully, to bring up his precocious adolescent daughter Tobe (short for October) and shy son Lonnie. Into their lives comes a genial cowboy. Tobe falls in love with him. He brings Lonnie out of himself, especially with shooting lessons. He does not impress Wade and trouble soon looms.

This is also a gun culture film. There are plenty of guns and, here, they lead to more violence than we would have expected. There is also madness, a lot of it laid at the door of poor parenting and rebellion.

Edward Norton exerts a great deal of charm as Harlan, the alleged ranch-hand from South Dakota. This makes his quixotic behaviour more credible and, ultimately, alarming. He becomes the western hero for the girl and the boy – and they are certainly looking for a hero. Evan Rachel Wood (*Thirteen*) is a more rounded character than the usual teenager. Rory Culkin gives us another of his winsome and winning quiet kids. David Morse, always reliable, is Wade.

Of course, the would be cowboy and his attitudes and pursuits (right up to a shootout) are metaphors for the morally wild west of the Valley, the need for the lawman, the hero and justice. It is just that Harlan, despite his efforts, is not the real thing.

FALSCHER BEKENNER (LOW PROFILE) (Germany, 2005, d. Christoph Hochhausler)

Suburban alienation again, German style. Armin is 18. He has finished school, not particularly successfully and is applying, on the urging of his high expectation father and doting mother, for one job interview a day. We see several of these and he hasn't a hope of employment. Armin lives in a comfortable home and has a supportive family, including two older, successful brothers. But, Armin also lives in a dream world. He becomes fascinated with crimes and sends anonymous letters to the police claiming responsibility. He boasts to a would-be girlfriend. He has lurid sexual fantasies. What will become of him? Will he drift? Or will his guilt claims have repercussions?

A film for German audiences. Audiences from other nations may be interested in making comparisons to understand how their local 18 year olds cope and don't cope.

BATTALA EN EL CIELO (Mexico, 2005, d. Carlos Regardas)

It might be useful to ask the reasons for the resounding ovation at the end of the screening. Enthusiastic and supportive Mexicans? An insightful portrait of contemporary Mexico City? A stylish piece of cinema? Or, more than perhaps, that the director was extending boundaries in depictions of up-front, in-your-face sexual sequences? Maybe, all of the above.

Similar issues were explored in the cinematically austere *Sangre* – and to clearer and more involving effect. Here we have another middle aged male sleepwalking through life, almost unfazed as the baby he and his wife have kidnapped dies, as he has sex with the daughter of the general he chauffeurs who works in a bordello. And why the sudden violence towards a woman he declares he loves? Mad passion? Is it that 'we kill the thing we love the most'? Is this a particularly Latin perspective on life that eludes more sanguine cultures? Again, maybe, all of the above.

What is particularly Latin is what the director describes as Mexicans' religion as not being spirituality but ritual. This comes to the fore when the central character assumes the role of penitent as he goes on his knees in pilgrimage to the cathedral of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe: sin, sacrifice, repentance, redemption.

Shot in a cinema verite style, with long takes observing the passing parade as well as the intimacies of the central characters, the film keeps us dispassionate about passion.

A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE (Canada, 2005, d. David Cronenberg)

David Cronenberg has been exploring all kinds of themes of violence for more than thirty years. He began with parasites and rabid plagues and broods, segued into more mainstream styles with *Videodrome* and *The Dead Zone*, but always veered towards the bizarre from *Dead Ringers* and *Naked Lunch* to *Existenz* and *Spider*.

Which means that some critics are going to scold him for now making a well-crafted American mainstream drama. Initially, one might think that this is going to be a kind of *Desperate Hours* where thugs besiege a family. It is not. Cronenberg's film is based on a graphic novel (and some of the violence is graphic also) where drawings are bold and dialogue is sometimes fierce. However, we are first led into lyrical, non-violent, happy times for a family. When the violence breaks out, it is not where we anticipated it.

Viggo Mortensen does a persuasive job as the loving quiet family man who surprises everyone. A good cast includes Maria Bello as his strongminded wife, Ed Harris as a suited gangster and William Hurt as a maniacal organised crime boss.

It is easy to poke fun at picket fence idealised family life in the American Midwest but, given some vicious options in the US gun culture, most of us would feel safer there.

L'ENFANT (Belgium, 2005, d. Jean Pierre et Luc Dardennes)

The Dardenne Brothers know Liege and its environs well. They know the life of the working classes and the unemployed. They have been in the territory of *L'Enfant* before, with their Cannes award-winning *Rosetta*. It is something of a surprise to see them return there after the powerful complexities of *Le Fils*. In fact, *L'Enfant* needs some of these complexities.

L'Enfant is rather a misleading title. The newborn child, Jimmy, is important to the plot, showing us the love of his young and naïve mother and the callow and irresponsible attitudes of his father. But, then the film focuses for the most part on Bruno, the father, a petty thief who traps himself in impossible situations. Bruno is not a likeable character, the cyclist whose pillion passenger snatches bags from helpless people in

the streets and then spends the money on jackets and arcade games. As a portrait of this young man and his assumption that society owes him a living, the film is effective if not particularly engaging. It is full of naturalistic sequences and detail that ring true – but perhaps the Dardennes can make a sequel. It would be much more interesting to see whether Bruno can really change and make something worthwhile of his life.

Winner of the Palme d'Or, Cannes, 2005.

LE TEMPS QUI RESTE (TIME TO LEAVE) (France, 2005, d. Francois Ozon)

Francois Ozon is becoming a prolific director, a film a year in recent years. And it is impossible to predict what he will come up with next. He has done the musical *8 Women*, the psychological crime thriller, *Swimming Pool* and the disintegration of a marriage, *5x2*.

With *Time to Leave* – more accurately and literally, *The Time that Remains* – Ozon says he is in process of making a trilogy about death. *Sous le Sable* was an effectively sombre film about loss and grief and he intends to make a film about the death of a child. In the meantime, this is the final months of a young photographer who has cancer.

Romain (Melvil Poupaud) is an abrasive man. He clashes fiercely with his motherly sister, alienates his boyfriend, has on again, off again moments with his parents. When he receives the news of his illness, he takes leave from work, stays alone, reflecting. The only person he tells is his empathetic grandmother, a warm performance from Jeanne Moreau. He does take pictures of his sister and children after he reconciles with her on the phone. He does help arrange a job for his boyfriend. Most strangely, he is asked by a kindly woman he meets at a café (Valeria Bruni-Tedeschi, star of *5x2*) to father her child since her husband is sterile. He does this, not in any calculating way. Rather, this surrogacy involves him with the human race in a way that he has not up till now. He does have something, someone who will mark his presence in the world.

Ozon is particularly sensitive to the emotions of his characters and the complexities of their relationships. It is true here. He includes an unusual scene in a church where Romain lights a candle and remembers a gross prank with his friend and a dawning of his sexual orientation. This is a film about mortality that affirms life.

MANDERLAY (Denmark, 2005, d. Lars Von Trier)

Could it be that Lars Von Trier is becoming more focused and disciplined? He even remarks that unwarranted provocation is ineffective – though good provocation is a challenge. He has always been a director with a challenge, especially about women and their exploitation by men. This was the experience of Grace, the gangster's daughter as she tried to serve people and do good in *Dogville*.

Manderlay opens with Grace (now in the form of Bryce Dallas Howard instead of Nicole Kidman) and her father (now Willem Dafoe instead of James Caan) leaving *Dogville* and stopping at an old plantation in Alabama: *Manderlay*. Grace does the same thing as she did before in *Dogville* but now she is not so tentative. She discovers the blacks are still living in a slave regime (it is 1933) and sets about putting things right because the plight of the blacks is the fault and responsibility of white Americans.

Grace is a complicated mixture of the dominant and the naïve. What she has to discover is that crusading liberalism can be too idealistic and may ignore the real experience and aspirations of those it claims it is trying to help. Liberal disillusionment can be a dramatic shock. As Grace works with the plantation blacks (always in danger of patronising them), she imprisons the whites and uses her gangster guards and lawyers to make sure the order is kept and that everyone comes to her classes which will change them for the better. As she found in *Dogville*, what she thinks is best is not what people want. She also misreads characters and is surprised when people turn against her.

These are only a few key points in *Manderlay*. It is a much better integrated film than *Dogville* (using the same techniques, especially the artificial stage floor for the locations and dividing the film into chapters).

Von Trier offers a challenge to both liberals and conservatives, especially those who would simplify issues into black and white. His cast is fine, with Lauren Bacall as the Mam of the plantation and Danny Glover as the chief slave. Once again, John Hurt narrates with a literate script that is descriptive, informative, ironic and philosophical. Once again, the film's final credits are over a broad collage of stills, this time illustrating American race relations. Von Trier's best.

CINEMA, ASPIRIN AND VULTURES (Brazil, 2005, d. Marcelo Gomes)

A small film based on the stories of the central Brazilian character, Ranulpho Gomes. The setting is 1942 in the drought-stricken outback of Brazil's northeast.

A young German who left his fatherland to avoid war travels the countryside selling the newly developed aspirin, showing film commercials in town squares to eager viewers and buyers. He gives lifts to people along the way, especially Ranulpho who wants to get to Rio for a new life but who works as Johann's assistant, sharing stories, friendship and minor adventures. These are interesting, sometimes comic and take audiences to an unfamiliar terrain.

Radio reports Nazi submarine activity against Brazilian ships and by August, Brazil declares war on Germany and its allies. Johann and Ranulpho have to make decisions as to what they will do. Johann goes with transit workers to the rubber plantations of the Amazon. Ranulpho heads for Rio.

Audiences who encounter this film will not be sorry if they see it.

BROKEN FLOWERS (US, 2005, d. Jim Jarmusch)

It is a pleasure both to watch and to listen to this film. With its African rhythmic musical score creating atmosphere, the film combines some serious themes with a light touch. It is often funny, sometimes satirical at American eccentricity, always genial.

After *Lost in Translation* and *The Life Aquatic*, we are getting used to Bill Murray being something of an icon of seemingly passive, laconic middle age. While he repeats this performance here, he varies it, often quietly brilliantly, with deadpan reactions to odd situations and simple eye and eyebrow movements that communicate volumes. It is a very clever and well-timed performance.

He is an ageing computer businessman who is compared to Don Juan, although his current girlfriend, Julie Delpy, is walking out on him. Unlike Don Juan, he has the opportunity to visit some of his past women, a quest for some kind of meaning to his life and affairs. He is urged to this by his computer-mad, detective fiction obsessed neighbour, Steven Wright.

These women include Sharon Stone, Frances Conroy, Jessica Lange and Tilda Swinton, quite a gallery of memorable performances, each with its sardonic comment on American ways, permissive, uptight, New Age, trailer trash.

Jim Jarmusch has never been so quiet and kindly in his films. It is smart, well-crafted and thoughtful, winner of the Jury Prize, Cannes, 2005.

FREE ZONE (Israel, 2005, d. Amos Gitai)

Amos Gitai is prolific, a film every year – and finding his way into festival competition every year.

In one sense this is a modest film, a brief story of three women, one American, one Israeli, one Arab. They interact over a period of twentyfour hours, clashing, moving together, clashing. Much of the action is close-ups and conversations in cars. There is a cinema verite feel about much of the camera work, experiences at borders, sweeps of landscapes and townscapes in Jordan.

The tone is set by a very long take opening the film where we watch Natalie Portman weep and listen to an Israeli song, an allegory of the chain of violence in nature and in humanity that repeats itself. The film ends with the chain happening all over again as the song's melody is played in the background.

There are a lot of pertinent observations in the screenplay about Israeli-Palestinian relations (for instance, how things would improve if Israelis learnt Arabic as Palestinians learn Hebrew). The film is a cry for peace and understanding as it takes its action from Israel into Jordan and into the Free Zone, the buffer between Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

PEINDRE OU FAIRE L'AMOUR (TO PAINT OR MAKE LOVE)

(France, 2005, d. Arnaud and Jean-Marie Larrieu)

The archetypal French movie has classy actors, beautiful locations (especially mountains), affluent homes, discussions about art and the arts, meals, relationship issues and, not necessarily, a happy ending. To Paint or Make Love fulfils most of these conditions.

Sabine Azema, Daniel Auteuil and Sergi Lopez are excellent performers. The scenery is breathtaking. The characters seem to have unlimited funds to do and buy as they please. Everything seems wonderful.

When they opt for the second part of the film's title, it seems just as casual and non-moral as anything else they do. Perhaps this is what is meant by Gallic insouciance. It is also romanticised insouciance as Daniel Auteuil wanders the mountains at the end and Nature Boy is sung as a kind of explanation of swinging behaviour: that all that matters is 'to love and be loved in return' – which is not exactly what is happening sexually.

THE THREE BURIALS OF MELQUIADES ESTRADA (US, 2005, d. Tommy Lee Jones)

One of the very interesting features of this film is its sympathetic look at life on the US-Mexican Texas border. Not that there is not a lot of prejudice shown, especially in some of the border patrol and police characters, but there is concern for the plight of the Mexicans trying to cross the border illegally.

Director and star is Tommy Lee Jones, quite a macho presence in many of his films. He is somewhat the same here. However, he plays a cattle man who befriends the illegal cowboy, Melquiades Estrada, and is so grieved when he is shot dead that he is compelled to do two things: to take the body to the Mexican village where Melquiades requested to be buried and to force the man who shot him to take part in this journey. The three burials of the title indicate the quick internments in Texas and the proper burial back in Mexico.

The screenplay is by Guillermo Arriaga who wrote Amores Peros and 21 Grams. Arriaga likes threes. The previous films had three stories or three central characters whose lives were intertwined – which made it a bit hard for the audience at first to work out who was who and whether they were being shown present or future. It is somewhat the same here with the three burials signalled by captions (as well as the central part, The Journey) and the plot moving from present to past without our sometimes realising it. Once we have that sorted out, we are ready to understand Melquiades as a gentle and good man, to appreciate his friendship with Pete Perkins (Lee Jones) and to be challenged by attitudes towards Mike Norton (well played by Barry Pepper), the man who shot Melquiades.

The film certainly creates the atmosphere of isolation in the border towns, the potential for boredom, tangled relationships and the trigger happy men who take on the jobs of surveillance.

However, the core of the film is the journey, a horseback ride through mountainous and sometimes desert terrain, carrying the body of the dead man (and trying to preserve the body for burial). There is a significant encounter with a blind old man who helps them but wants to die. The group meet the Mexicans that Norton had treated brutally but who now save his life. The journey becomes a pilgrimage and, finally, a journey of atonement and belated penitence for wrong done.

It looks like a Western but Western fans may find it too slow. Non-Western audiences will find that it ultimately works as an allegory of human nature, fall, sin and atonement. Quite an accomplishment for Tommy Lee Jones who won the Best Actor award in Cannes, 2005, while Arriaga won the Best Screenplay award.

CHROMOPHOBIA (UK. 2005, d. Martha Fiennes)

Chromophobia is not a word that falls trippingly from the tongue. It actually refers to an art work, a plasma screen piece that reflects colours according to different stimuli. But, maybe that is a red herring.

The film is really a contemporary drama where we are introduced to a range of characters who, we know, will eventually all be connected. This works quite well and offers the audience plenty to think about.

Performances are very strong and each cast member is given a substantial amount of screen time. The general setting is the affluent business world with political and newspaper connections. There is a sub-plot which concerns a Spanish migrant, her young daughter and a social worker.

Whether it is the screenplay or whether it is the strong presence of Kristin Scott Thomas, the centre of attention is most frequently on Iona, a modern neurotic wife and mother, who is into every fad and movement that one could think of. It is she who buys the Chromophobia piece – which seems more important to her than her emotionally neglected and clever son). Her husband is a hotshot business adviser (Damian Lewis) who is promoted by his boss (Anthony Higgins) and asked to look after the extensive portfolio of a wealthy Labor party peer and minister, a blind trust which covers financial and political corruption.

His father is a High Court Judge (Ian Holm) who has his own secrets. His university days' friend (Ben Chaplin) is an ecological journalist who is invited to a deer hunt but has his own ambitious pursuit of double dealings going on.

The sub-plot stars Penelope Cruz as the terminally ill prostitute mother and a very sympathetic Rhys Ifans is a social worker.

Rounding out the central characters is the young boy's godfather (Ralph Fiennes), an art auctioneer who has his own sexual problems and is the victim of violence.

Put that all together in a very British way, sometimes laconic (even when characters are desperate), sometimes frenetic (especially when the press scents blood) but generally very civilised by both the pretentious and unpretentious alike.

Martha Fiennes had previously directed *Onegin*. She has taken on quite a task here – and has made it both interesting and entertaining.

SCHLAFFER (SLEEPER) (Austria, 2005, d. Benjamin Heisenberg)

A lowkey drama that reflects the growing fears, even paranoia, subsequent to the spread of terrorism.

A young scientist is recruited by the Austrian secret service to spy on a fellow scientist, an Algerian who is suspected of being a terrorist 'sleeper'. Spying leads to friendship and socialising, especially with a waitress friend of the Algerian. Meanwhile, they collaborate on a science project for a paper to be published in a prestigious magazine. The young man conscientiously reports but eventually wants to pull out.

When the paper is successfully published, he feels that his contribution has not been acknowledged by their ever-busy boss. At the same time, there is a terrorist explosion in Munich and the Algerian is suspected. The young man has to face a dilemma: will he give an alibi for his friend or take revenge for his not being given credit for his research.

He says he does not pray except with his sick grandmother whom he cares for. The young man makes his decision and the final image of him is his reciting the psalm, the Lord is my shepherd.

NORDESTE (Argentina, 2005, d. Juan Solanas)

Life is hard in the northeast regions of Argentina. Workers live in poor conditions. Bosses are bullying and ruthless. Nevertheless, there is a strong sense of community. What is significant, as a nun who takes care of children, explains towards the end of the film, is that it is the world's capital for child trafficking.

The film opens with two strands. One is the story of Martin, a thirteen year old with strong potential but who is trapped in his poverty, living with his mother, Juanna, about to be evicted from their hovel home. The other story concerns a French businesswoman, Helene, who comes to Argentina to find a baby to adopt. She is played by prominent French actress, Carole Bouquet, in a passionate performance, both loving for the baby and imperiously angry when crossed.

The film creates the atmosphere of the town. The audience feels as if they have lived there and come to know the people, the routine of their daily lives and their problems. The film also reveals the double dealing of criminals who exploit the children as well as the social injustice which is connived in by the local police.

You can see where this is all leading, but the film finally leaves us with a seemingly inconclusive scene where we can speculate and hope about what will happen.

ZIM AND CO (France, 2005, d. Pierre Jolivet)

This is a very lively film. There are no long, meditative takes. This is all quick-paced editing, plenty of get up and go.

It is a film about twenty year olds, struggling with life, jobs, family limitations and tensions, police and racist harassment, life in modern day French provincial towns. The difference between Zim and Co and so many films about the problems of youth is that the characters are interesting and, despite their faults and mistakes, likeable. This is a film that combines realism and stark problems but is quietly and sensibly optimistic about human nature.

Zim is Polish/French. His friend Arthur comes from an African family where the father transfers his patriarchal notions to being more French than the French. The other member of the Co is Cheb who is from North Africa, but his family are genial and welcoming. There is also their waitress friend, Safia, who is Arab.

Zim gets into all kinds of trouble, sometimes his own fault, especially an initial road accident which leads to a judge demanding he get a responsible job to avoid a jail sentence. He is swindled by a man purportedly selling a car and that is not his fault. Arthur is the butt of racist jibes by the factory foreman. Cheb is busy trying to invent things.

By the end of the film, the audience is not in a state of depression about the world of youth today, as so often happens when we watch films that are grim slices of life. Zim and Co have a friendship and solidarity that means they could really make a good fist of their lives if they could.

Adrien Jolivet, son of the director, plays Zim persuasively. He also co-wrote the musical score.

DELWENDE, Get up and walk (Burkina Faso, 2005, d.

Like so many films made by Africans in recent years, Delwende begins in a village, portrays the details of village life, indicates a social problem compounded by patriarchy and traditional religious beliefs and superstitions, moves to a search in the city and then returns to the village for a resolution.

The issue in *Delwende* is the branding of women as witches and the dire consequences for the woman, especially if she is falsely accused.

The film begins cheerfully with celebration, song and dance. When Nokopo is accused of witchcraft because of a number of deaths in the village (there is an outbreak of meningitis in the country), the elders use old methods of blaming her and then ousting her. Her strong-minded daughter, who has suffered rape, decides to find her mother in a Ougadougou shelter and bring her back and change the traditions ('made by men, they can be changed by men'). The final image is of two strong women literally standing their ground for the truth.

Production and style is straightforward, a lot of scenes of walking. It is the urgency and sincerity that makes these African films important in their own countries as well as opening up African life to a worldwide audience. A commendation from the Ecumenical Jury in Cannes, 2005.

TALE OF CINEMA (Korea, 2005, d. Hong Sangsoo)

After his quite misogynist though cleverly structured film, *Woman is the Future of Man*, there is a bit of apprehension about *A Tale of Cinema*. No need. This is again a cleverly structured film but it portrays both men and women equally.

The first part of the film seems self-contained and offers a surprise to the audience. It is the story of a young student who meets his girlfriend again after two years. They share an evening together, eating, talking, walking, attempt at love-making after which he suggests they both commit suicide. Things do not go as planned.

The second part of the film focuses specifically on cinema, a poor would-be director and his infatuation with an actress. The two parts of the film are significantly inter-connected.

This is a more quiet Seoul than we see in the action and crime films that have emerged from Korea. Rather, these are more personalised stories with a cinema background where the intrinsic interest is in the characters and their problems. To that extent, it is a smaller and more modest production and well done.

THREE TIMES (Taiwan, 2005, d. Hou Hsiao Hsien)

The title does not mean 'thrice'. Rather, it refers to three different times: 1966, 1911, 2005. They are A time for love, a time for freedom, a time for youth.

Director, Hou Hsiao Hsien, has used vastly different cinematic styles in his film-making, from the extreme minimalism of a camera moving slowly backwards and forwards in *Flowers of Shanghai* to a more roller-coaster pace with *Millennium Mambo*. Here he is able to show his great flair by telling three stories and using both the slow and the fast styles – and a more gentle in-between.

Three Times is a tour-de-force of styles. It also shows the versatility of his actor and actress who play the central roles in the three stories.

The first is 1966 and comes from the director's own memories of pool halls in Taiwan, records playing like *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* and *Rain and Tears*. While there may be just too many and too long shots of pool games, this story is one of gentleness, falling in love, discretion and wholesomeness. It is an idyllic look at the period. A young man meets a hostess at a quiet pool club, goes to his military service, writes to her but finds that when he goes on leave, she has left. He looks for her. That's about it – but nicely done.

The shift to 1911 goes to the minimalist extreme. However, the director reminds us that this was the silent film era and so the film is shot with barely a movement of camera, all action within frame and captions instead of dialogue. The musical score creates the atmosphere. However, the décor and costumes are of the exquisite style, all interiors. While the background is revolution and uprising against the Japanese in

Taiwan, all the action is off screen. On screen concentrates on the etiquette of the household and the generous gesture of the journalist who pays the bridal requirements to save a young woman from being a concubine. This is sumptuous visual artistry.

It is a rude, very rude, shock to be suddenly propelled into a very unattractive 2005. Taipei is large, full of traffic, an anonymous city. The protagonists ride motor bikes, use computers and internet, work with digital photography, rely on mobiles and texting. Their jaded looks contrast with the freshness and vitality of 1966. There is not much of a plot: sex, tangled relationships between two girls, epileptic fits and blindness, gigs in clubs and more bikes. It is all presented in a visual style that resonates with MTV audiences but it reminds us of contemporary chaos compared with past genteel times and orderly times. The present is not very engaging.

ONE NIGHT (Iran, 2005, d. Niki Karimi)

Abbas Kierostami, the doyen of Iranian cinema, has a lot to answer for. He has shown a passion for long takes and is very fond of showing cars going up and down mountains at length. His experimental film, 10, took the camera inside the car and used ten long takes of conversations within the confines of the car.

Niki Karimi seems to admire this style. While she does have many scenes outside the vehicles, the core of the film consists of long conversations between the central character, whose mother does not want her at home while she has a visitor, and several men that she encounters as she passes the night wandering Tehran.

After acknowledging the style and its influences, audiences need to be very interested in the topics of conversation to stay with it. If one is not familiar with life in Iran, it may seem obscure and not engaging. However, the topics are the usual worthwhile themes of the roles of men and women, men dominating in Iranian society, the nature of love, of fidelity, of betrayal, of opportunity in Iran or abroad, of careers...

There is a melodramatic twist at the end of the film, but, basically, this is a night of looking at the different facets of life in a big city and listening to talk about issues.

ODETE (Portugal, 2005, d. Joao Pedro Rodrigues).

The publicity caption reads, 'Love can conquer death'. The way that it works out in Odete is not what audiences would be expecting.

Director Rodrigues is interested in gay themes as in his Cannes 2000 entry, O Fantasma. Odete begins with the accidental death of a gay lover (Pedro) and his partner's grief. However, the action centres on a supermarket clerk, Odete, who is desperate to have a baby but her boyfriend refuses. Something snaps and when she learns of the death of the young man, a neighbour, she creates a new life for herself, claiming a close relationship with his mother, taking his ring, throwing herself on his grave and then her hysteria creates a phantom pregnancy. Meanwhile the partner grieves, picks up one night stands, and is suicidal (to the frequently played melody of Moon River).

The encounter between Odete and the partner, Rui, is initially one of clash. Something of a friendship begins – but she moves into Pedro's room, wears his clothes, styles her hair and becomes Pedro. It is the kind of film that has a bizarre sexual ending between Odete as Pedro with Rui and the ghost of Pedro looking on – which is followed by the dedication of the film by the director to his parents.

JEWBOY (Australia, 2005, d. Tony Krawitz)

A short first feature set in Sydney. Yuri is a young Chassidic Jew who has been studying in Israel but returns home when his father, a Rabbi, dies. This is a story similar to those told about young men brought up in a strict, even rigid, environment. The desire to move outside and discover and test oneself becomes a powerful drive.

Yuri moves away from home, drives a taxi, meets a wide range of people, is bothered by his sexuality, makes friends but makes mistakes. This is a brief journey towards self-awareness that does tell us definitively what will happen to Yuri.

For non-Jewish audiences, there is a feeling of being quite outside the opening sequences, observing detailed ritual, sensing the prohibitions (especially against touch before marriage) and the effect that these have on different people.

The end shows Yuri and his guardian, Minnie, watching television, a symbol of fightback in struggle – a pity that the player is Mark Philippousis who fights back but tends not to win.

DON'T COME KNOCKING (US, 2005, d. Wim Wenders)

In a long career that started with road films in Germany in the 1970s, progressed to such crime dramas as *The American Friend* and *Hammer* and reached a peak in the mid-1980s with his Cannes Palme d'Or classic, *Paris, Texas* and his fantasy, hailed in Europe as his masterpiece, . Since then he has made many films, an excellent documentary like *The Buena Vista Social Club* or 2004's low-budget critique of the US, *Land of Plenty*. Wenders has lived in the US since the mid-90s and, finally, seems at home there. *Don't Come Knocking* is evidence of this.

He is reunited with playwright Sam Shepard with whom he collaborated in *Paris, Texas*. Wenders remarked apropos of this film that twenty years have passed, he and Shepard are older and don't take themselves so seriously. That may be but not only did Shepard write the screenplay this time, he also stars.

The film opens like a Western – and, in fact, a company is shooting a western with veteran action star, Howard Spence (Shepard). Whatever the personal crisis, his thirty years of waste, decline and collapse mean that he rides away from the set to find himself. He eventually and reluctantly does but not without some dead-end moves along the way. (In the meantime, a fastidious insurance agent played by Tim Roth in a very uptight impersonation, is tracking him to get him back to the set.)

The first stop he comes knocking to is home. We get rather a shock (actually more than she does) when he contacts his mother for the first time in thirty years. For older audiences, there is the bonus of seeing Eva Marie Saint, fifty years after *On the Waterfront*, as his rather cheerful mother. When she gives him some surprise information about a child conceived when he was making his most famous film in Montana, he decides to revisit Butte.

He then comes knocking for his old but neglected and scarcely remembered love. She is played in a feisty, cheerful surface, deep anger style by Jessica Lange (who has been with Shepard in life and on screen for more than twenty years). He is dismayed by his son's angry reaction and puzzled at first by a young woman carrying an urn with her mother's ashes. The audience twigs to what this means before he does.

There is an elegiac mood about *Don't Come Knocking*, making it a film that older audiences who know what life and crises can mean will appreciate. It is deeply humane and does not opt for too easy and pat answers. The younger audience might identify with the rage of the son (Gabriel Mann) and the wise simplicity of the young woman (Sarah Polley).

This is a modern western, using the landscapes and the symbolism of the West, a T Bone Burnett score and songs, a good cast and a rugged, lived in performance by Sam Shepard speaking his own lines.

CROSSING THE BRIDGE *The Sound of Istanbul* (Germany, 2005, d. Fatih Akin)

Fatih Akin is a German with a Turkish background. He achieved prominence with his hard-hitting look at Turkish migrants in Hamburg trying to cope with displacement, rigid traditions and physical and mental collapse and how they dealt with a return to Turkey, *Head On* (*Gegen die Wand*). His film won the Golden Bear in Berlin, 2004.

He has now returned himself to Istanbul because he was fascinated by the Turkish musical heritage there, from the popular songs of the 60s and 70s to rock and roll and the new movements. For those who are into contemporary music, this is a must. For those who are not, it's better left alone – except that the film does have a good amount of photography of the city.

SIGNIS FILM REVIEWS JUNE 2005

A LOT LIKE LOVE
BATMAN BEGINS
BOMBON, IL PERRO
HOUSE OF WAX
IN MY FATHER'S DEN
IMAGINARY HEROES
IT'S ALL GONE PETE TONG
MADAGASCAR
MILLIONS
MONDAYS IN THE SUN (LOS LUNES EN SOL)
MR AND MRS SMITH
PACIFIER, The
UNDEAD
UNITED STATES OF LELAND, The
UNDERTOW
WAR OF THE WORLDS

MILLIONS (UK, 2004, d. Danny Boyle)

It is very surprising to see a modern film that takes up religious themes as Millions does.

It is a feelgood film, helped immensely by the charming, naively innocent but shrewdly wise performance of Alex Etel as Damian, the younger brother of Anthony. They have recently lost their mother and have had to move house with their father (James Nesbitt).

Anthony says that Damian is weird. Damian seems weird because he sees things and people – and talks to them.

Damian knows all about the saints, can tell you their dates straight off and has no hesitation or embarrassment in talking about them. In fact, he sees many of them as they visit him in his cardboard carton cubbyhouse or at home. He knows he sees things, but he likes to talk to the saints, creating them as he imagines them, though the down-to-earth, smoking St Clare explaining about how she is patroness of television comes as a bit of a surprise.

Other saints who visit Damian include Francis of Assisi (as Damian sets free boxes of birds), Nicholas of Myra (who speaks in Latin and refers to his Santa Claus tradition), St Peter (Alun Armstrong) with a very interesting riff on the feeding of the five thousand as well as a shrug and pointing upwards, 'I'm on the gate', St Joseph who coaches Damian on how he should say his lines in the Nativity play and the martyrs of Uganda who explain to him the need for water in their country and how aid can help.

On a personal note, I had a great empathy with the film: two little boys whose mother had died (much the same age as my brother and I were when our mother died), trying to cope, deal with moves and changes, new schools, understanding their father.

Actually, we had lots of saints' language in those days – after all I am writing of 1947 and the 1950s. Our mother's anniversary of death was like a feast day. She was now a saint. It is the same with Damian. He asks the saints whether they have seen his mother in heaven. And it does not spoil the ending to reveal

what he might have hoped for, that his mother finally appears to him – and the sceptical Anthony also sees her.

This knowledge of the lives and legends of the saints is not commonplace anymore. *Millions* reminds us that we could do with a bit more knowledge of and affection for the saints. We glimpse a copy of a book called ‘Six O’Clock Saints’. That was obligatory reading for us back in primary school – they were even read aloud at boarding school before the weekly film screening. Joan Wyndham wrote many of these books. They delighted our imaginations. The IMDb biography of Frank Cottrell Boyce notes that he heard Martin Scorsese refers to *The Six O’Clock Saints* and his childhood. It means that *Millions* communicates a great deal of children’s responses to religion and faith.

There is a lot more to *Millions* as well – especially in terms of money. When Damian discovers a bag full of money, he thinks it is from God and he wants to distribute it to the poor. His eager but non-worldly-wise ways of doing this are part of the humour and the sentiment. Young Damian is an idealist: a creatively imaginative little boy whose face to the world is principled and personal generosity, coping with the money, criminals and police and doing the right and honest thing.

For British audiences the whole film is idealist. In fact, it is more than a bit of a make-believe story because the setting is the UK changing from sterling to the euro! Frank Cottrell Boyce has written many screenplays, quite a number for Michael Winterbottom. His versatile portfolio includes *Butterfly Kiss*, *Welcome to Sarajevo*, *Wonderland*. More surprising is the choice of director, Danny Boyle, best known for *Shallow Grave* and *Trainspotting* as well as *The Beach* and *Twenty Eight Days Later*.

Millions is a very nice film. It may seem too nice to more ‘sophisticated’ tastes. But, audiences who enjoyed the story of *Billy Elliot* and other tales of youngsters will not be sorry they saw *Millions*.

HOUSE OF WAX (US, 2005, d. Jaume Collett-Serra)

Allegedly based on the 1953 3D classic with Vincent Price, this schlock horror is more like a combination of *Friday 13th* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Some young adults camp in the Louisiana woods and come across mad twins. They also find a macabre museum with not only lifelike figures but actual waxed people – and the same with the whole remote town. The young people are terrorised and killed off (including celebrity Paris Hilton), but another pair of twins give the killers a run for their money.

The film ends as expected with an enormous conflagration as the literal house of wax melts and burns. Which means that it might be better to presume what happens in the first part of the film and then turn up for the apocalyptic finale.

IT’S ALL GONE PETE TONG (Canada, 2004, d. Michael Dowse)

Feeling a little guilty going to see this film as director Michael Dowse’s first feature, *Fubar*, is one of the few films that I left (and fairly soon after it began). I lasted all through this one but needed the press kit to find out what was behind the film. Pete Tong appears in a cameo, apparently a UK disc-jockey. But Pete Tong is also rhyming slang (in the Oxford Dictionary) for ‘wrong’.

So, this is the story of Frankie Wilde, a raucous DJ and his helter-skelter career, especially in the hedonistic capital of Europe, Ibiza. But, this was not enough for the writer-director who got his money and contract on the title alone. Doing the third draft, he realised that the greatest hardship for a DJ would be to go deaf. So, the film turns rather serious as Frankie goes profoundly deaf and has to look at his cocaine and decibel-wracked life. (This is symbolised by his confrontation with a threatening bearlike DTs imaginary creature.)

Paul Kaye gives a frenetic performance, playing music, partying, marrying, going deaf, finding a lip-reading instructor with whom he falls in love. It is all done in a ‘mockumentary’ style like *Spinal Tap*, except that this is not parody and opts for a golden sunset ending.

LOS LUNAS EN SOL (MONDAYS IN THE SUN) (Spain, 2003, d. Fernando Leon de Aranoa)

Over the years there have been several films about unemployment and its social and psychological effects on those put out of work by factory and industry closures. Here is a moving Spanish contribution, a multi-award winner and Spain's official Oscar nominee for Best Foreign Language Film.

It starts with workers battling the police but spends most of its running time inviting us to share the experiences of half a dozen middle-aged men. The film is frequently very affecting. The director sets up some wonderful interactions, full of anger, tenderness and loss of hope. The performances are also solid, led by Spanish star Javier Bardem. He portrays the rebel with an exasperatingly provocative attitude but who has a decent heart underneath. There is Lino, a fifty year old who goes to many, many interviews, even dyeing his hair to compete with younger applicants and trying to learn computers from his son. There is Jose, a quiet man who is growing more and more desperate while his wife works hard, late shift hours at a tuna canning factory. He feels emasculated and causes embarrassing scenes for her. The intricacies of this relationship are at the emotional core of the film. There is Amador whose wife has left him and who lives in squalor. The men's ritual for his death and ash scattering is a very Spanish 'Last Orders'. One of the men has made good and set up a bar where they gather (we don't see other customers), talk, feel sorry for themselves, argue and get irritated with Reina who taunts them because he has found work as a security guard.

It is in the detail of the sequences, the conversations in the bar, the temptations to take a stand against authorities where the film makes its impact. It does not resolve any of the workplace problems. The characters will still have to find ways of coping. But, this is a film of humanity, eliciting compassion from its audiences.

THE PACIFIER (US, 2005, d. Adam Shankman)

Vin Diesel as a child carer? Not for the xXx agent, surely, or for that space warrior, Riddick. Diesel might be fast and furious as an action star, but he is not blessed with attractive charisma. This is something of a handicap for this kind of feelgood, sentimental family comedy.

It starts with Diesel action, a Navy Seals rescue mission with explosions galore. This ends badly when the abducted scientist is killed and Diesel is assigned to look after his five children, who do their obnoxious thing at first but who, we know, will be cuddly and cuddled by the end. Come to think of it, Diesel's xXx successor, Ice Cube, had to go through all these motions with two infinitely more objectionable kids in *Are We There Yet*. For comparisons, Arnie was a lot more amiable and more ably comedic doing this kind of thing in *Kindergarten Cop*.

To be fair to Vin Diesel, he is a good sport for starring in this film and he finally smiles and laughs (something of a shock): reacting and laying down the law to surly teens, changing very pongy nappies, teaching martial arts to young girls, singing a Pete the Panda routine and dancing (well, jiggling) and actually directing the school version of *The Sound of Music*. So there!

There is a military espionage sub-plot with a couple of action sequences thrown in, especially for the climax.

The ethos of the comedy is tough American with a bit of authoritarian dictatorship being better for people than more democratic processes. And, ultimately, family is all, especially for a Navy Seal who never had a family and, after working miracles on all the kids in a minimum amount of time, now discovers what he has missed. Popular material, popularly done.

BATMAN BEGINS (US, 2005, d. Christopher Nolan)

Once upon a time, Batman was simply a popular comic. Then it became a crash-pow television series in the 1960s with all kinds of comic villains. When director Tim Burton made his very successful film, *Batman*, in 1989, critics and audiences around the world were very impressed. Here was a Batman that

combined the comic strip, the joking tone while also having something serious to say about caped and masked crusaders.

The popularity of this kind of serious, even darker side of Batman and his campaign against criminals in Gotham city continued with *Batman Returns* in 1991. However, in Burton's films, the star criminals, the Joker, the Penguin, Catwoman, were played by top Hollywood stars, Jack Nicholson, Danny de Vito, Michelle Pfeiffer. Michael Keaton's Batman seemed to take second place. He was also rather dour in his manner, morose at times, not exactly a character that most people could identify with.

So, Hollywood changed the tone and *Batman Forever* and *Batman and Robin* were far more colourful and flamboyant, the sets and costumes bright and showy with Val Kilmer and George Clooney more genial embodiments of Batman. While the public went to see the films, the critics turned up their noses.

And, apart from some animation series for television, that seemed to the end of that. No more Batman franchise.

It must have taken some courage for the producers of *Batman Begins* to start again. Their gamble has paid off well. This is a very interesting Batman film. It is geared much more to an adult audience than to a younger audience. While there is action and confrontations with criminal, *Batman Begins* also invites its audiences to think.

It is worth noting that this Hollywood venture was filmed in part in Britain, has a British director and most of the principal cast are British and Irish. Director Christopher Nolan had made an impression with *Memento* and *Insomnia*. His direction of a blockbuster is surprising and successful. He also co-wrote the screenplay with David S. Goyer who wrote and directed the rather brutal *Blade Trinity*.

One of the principal features that make *Batman Begins* the thinking person's film is its rational explanation of everything that happens, especially Bruce Wayne's early trauma in falling down a well and begin terrorised by bats, the brutal killing of his parents for which he blamed himself, the Asian martial arts training he perfected, the fact that he is a billionaire and so has money and leisure to pursue his crusade as well as have access to what became his costume, his car and his devices for scaling buildings and hang-glide. While he does resemble Spiderman in his confronting evil, there are no mysterious explanations for his transformation. His becoming Batman is his own choice, the working out of his psychological pressures and his choosing a symbol, the bat, which signified his overcoming his fears.

There is a great deal of talk about the nature of fear and also about justice and the condemnation of vengeance as motivation.

Christian Bale is the new Bruce Wayne, serious but able to show a lighter side when necessary. Liam Neeson is a strong martial arts master who becomes villain. Michael Caine is Alfred the butler. Gary Oldman is uncharacteristically calm and on the side of the law. Morgan Freeman always brings gravitas to his roles. Tom Wilkinson is a criminal chief and Cillian Murphy a young and rather sinister doctor. Katie Holmes is Rachel, Bruce's childhood friend, now become a DA.

The first part of the film is flashback to Bruce's devotion to his dedicated father within a context of grief and anger and his training to be a warrior. In the latter part of the film, there are car chases, fights and a threat to the water supply of Gotham which is solved in split second timing. So, there is something for everyone.

MADAGASCAR (US, 2005, d. Eric Darnell, Tom McGrath)

'Zany', I suppose, would be a suitable word to try to describe the latest animated feature from DreamWorks studios. It is also quite unpredictable.

Although DreamWorks had worldwide success with the *Shrek* films, some of their other animated films of recent years have been rather wanting. This was especially the case with last year's *Shrek's Tale*. The

children would have gone along to see it, hoping for another Finding Nemo, but what they got was a rather hip and 'in' kind of comedy written more for movie buffs: lots of in-references to other movies with the fishy characters drawn to look like the actors supplying their voices: Will Smith, Robert de Niro, even Martin Scorsese. It would be a rather movie-sophisticated child who would appreciate the connections.

It is something the same with Madagascar. However, they might find it funnier than Shark's Tale. I hope so, because Madagascar has been very successful at the box-office in the US, which means a lot of children have gone to see it.

The immediate question is 'why Madagascar?'. And the answer is, 'your guess is as good as mine'. Geographically speaking, the film is all over the place!

Actually, Madagascar is an intriguing sounding title, the name of a far-off destination that very few visitors get to. For Americans, it signifies 'the wild'. That is where a zebra named Marty in a New York City zoo dreams of going. He wants to get out of his confinement, to leave his job which consists of being an MC for the audience who have come to watch his friends perform. They are Alex, a lion who really doesn't know that a lion is meant to be fierce, who really enjoys the shows and the response of the people. There is also a large hippo, Gloria, who is a splash-artist and a gawky giraffe named Melman.

When the scheming penguins in the zoo make an escape break – they want to go to Antarctica – the friends find themselves on a boat and eventually tossed overboard. Where do they land, like Robinson Crusoe. On Madagascar, which, if you look at a map, is really a long way out of the way from the US.

Children may enjoy the antics of the zoo quartet, especially as they try to adapt to life outside the zoo. Alex for one is desperate to get home to the people and safety. Adults may enjoy the voices and the constant wisecracks, a lot of it sounding like improvised dialogue with the voice stars enjoying themselves. At times, it comes across as a bit of a vanity project for the stars to show off their comic skills.

It is a good cast. Ben Stiller, so often put upon in his films (like Meet the Parents) is Alex. Chris Rock does his stand-up comedy routines as Marty. Jada Pinkett Smith is Gloria and David Schwimmer is Melman.

The children will probably enjoy the antics of the lemurs who live on Madagascar and are continually threatened by the fierce hyena-like foosas. The king decides that these New York Giants will scare off the foosas and leave them in peace. Well, you know that is going to happen but first, Alex has to learn what it is like to be a lion, to discover his true hunting and carnivorous self. Fortunately for all on Madagascar, he learns to like fish!

The king of the lemurs is a star turn for Sascha Baron Cohen.

Oh, yes, the penguins turn up too after discovering that Antarctica is far too cold and blizzardy.

IN MY FATHER'S DEN (New Zealand, 2004, d. Brad McGann)

Now and again, you come upon a film that you have never heard of, don't know the director or many of the people in the cast and it makes a strong impression on you. This was the case for In My Father's Den, actually coming across it on a long Qantas flight (which gave me the time to watch it again). The brief description in the in-flight magazine pointed out that it was a New Zealand film.

In recent years, New Zealand film has meant The Piano, Whale Rider of, of course, the Lord of the Rings trilogy. However, though only a country with a population of around three million, New Zealand has had an effective film industry for some years as well as playing host, like Australia, to overseas blockbusters and smaller films. The forthcoming version of C.S. Lewis's The Witch, the Lion and the Wardrobe was filmed in New Zealand.

In My Father's Den is a more specialised film. It was made for an older audience, an audience that likes thoughtful, powerful, even challenging dramas. It takes its adult themes seriously and intelligently and is not looking for easy box-office. It is a co-production with the UK and some of the local lottery money has been allotted for production. It is a good investment.

A word of caution about the structure of the film. It requires attentiveness. The director, Brad McGann, has adapted a popular New Zealand novel from the 1970s by Maurice Gee. He has advanced the action to the present. But there are many strands, a plot concerning a son returning home for his father's funeral and several sub-plots concerning his older brother, concerning a young teenager and her aspirations to be a writer and to visit Spain and her mysterious disappearance.

However, the story is told in a great number of flashbacks – but not in the order you might expect. The effect is more like putting together a moving jigsaw puzzle, trying to find the pieces that connect with similar pieces. While this is more complicated, it makes the film more intriguing.

Ten years ago, Quentin Tarantino made this kind of storytelling part of the opening up of cinema in Pulp Fiction. The chronological end of the story takes place about two thirds the way through the film but we learn more about the character who has died. It is the same here.

British actor, Matthew Mcfadyen has appeared on television in Spooks and is about to be seen on screen as Mr Darcy in the new version of Pride and Prejudice. His character in In My Father's Den is Paul, a war photo-journalist, who has escaped his home town and his family. What he reluctantly returns to is an enclosed world of family secrets and lies. Not only is he caught up in them, he finds himself accused of crimes. As the audience follows his story, they gain a greater sympathy for him but realise that ugly incidents from the past must be faced honestly.

The title of the film refers to the hidden room that Paul's father retreated to. It is full of his books and music. But, there are also more sinister overtones to it.

The supporting cast includes Miranda Otto (Lord of the Rings, War of the Worlds) and young newcomer, Emily Barclay, who gives a sensitive performance as the young girl who discovers more secrets about her past.

By the end of the film, we realise that it is also a murder mystery and the solution is not what might have been expected.

BOMBON (IL PERRO) (Argentina, 2004, d.Carlos Sorin)

Here is a film with sub-titles that has attracted a wider audience than might have been expected. You don't have to be Argentinian to enjoy it.

It's a dog's life! Never truer than in this extremely amiable (well, not exactly 'shaggy') dog story. Director, Carlos Sorin took his audiences several years ago to Patagonia with three modest but effective short stories in Historias Minimas (which also included a story about a lost dog). We are now back again in what is for most people one of the most remote parts of the world. After Patagonia, there is Cape Horn and Antarctica. Sorin makes sure that we get a good look at it all, the mountains, the desert terrain. We also experience life there, the isolation as well as the small towns – which are still big enough to put on a dog show.

Juan (Juan Villegas) is trying to sell knives after being put out of work. When he is given a dog by a widow he has helped, he is advised to seek out Walter, an expert on pedigree dogs. The dogs we like are a matter of taste. Bombon is referred to as a champion and everybody admires him. Well, he seems to be something of a big brute with a touch of the uglies. For audiences who really enjoy their dog films, it is probably a good thing to recommend that very funny comedy about American dog shows and the eccentricities of their owners, Best in Show.

Actually, the cast look pretty plain themselves. In fact, one of the attractive things about the film is that the main protagonists do not look in the least like film stars. Juan is a simple, quiet fifty-something man. Walter is big, full of bravado. Maybe, he is a bit of a conman, but he knows dogs and is exuberant in his enthusiasm. When Bombon (Lechien) wins a prize and they celebrate at a Lebanese restaurant, Walter finishes up in jail after a brawl whereas Juan meets Susana, a middle-aged singer (no glamour either) who reads his fortune in the coffee grinds.

The dramatic crisis of the film is that Bombon won't service the dogs he is paid for breeding. Apparently, he has a weak libido though a champion in all other respects. It may seem a strange thing to say but there is an explicit unsimulated sex scene at the end of the film which audiences will welcome!! There is a happy ending.

Sorin likes people and he likes animals. He portrays them all with great empathy. He also has feeling for poorer people who have fewer chances in life. He seems to be saying that this is the lot of most people in this part of Argentina. They suffer from unemployment and hard financial times. However, his film is one of hope and humour. Winner of the award from the World Catholic Association for Communication, SIGNIS, in Troia, Portugal, June, 2005.

UNDERTOW (US 2004, d. David Gordon Green)

Critics could not have been more enthusiastic about David Gordon Green's debut movie, *George Washington*. They liked his second film, *All the Real Girls*. For his third, Green has chosen a southern Gothic thriller, a genre piece that he was personally interested in, and the critics can't forgive him for doing something he liked and they they he ought not do. And he made these films when he was only in his 20s. Better to appreciate the film for what it offers rather than what others think it ought to be.

On a poor farm, a widowed father, John (Dermot Mulroney) brings up his two sons, Chris (Jamie Bell), Tim (Devon Alan) in isolation with continuous hard work. Chris is a restless teenager with his eye on the daughter of a neighbour who keeps chasing him away and reporting him to the police. Tim is delicate and can't work. The first part of the film quietly and slowly develops the characters and the situation.

When John's brother, Deel (Josh Lucas doing yet another nasty type) turns up things take a turn for the worse and for violence with the boys finally on the run to escape their uncle. They are helped by a black couple and by drifters on the waterfront until the expected confrontation.

For those expecting action and pace, *Undertow* is not that kind of film. Rather, if we enter into the mood, we are drawn irresistibly into the current and moved along by the film's thematic undertow. The point of view is mainly that of the two boys, the older a good boy who wants to do the best by this brother, the younger trying to cope with being on the run.

Jamie Bell has made a few films since *Billy Elliot* (and, although taller and older, has not changed all that much in appearance) but this is a vehicle that he has to carry. Audiences will warm to him and be on his side. The adults are good as is Devon Alan as Tim.

Undertow is a modestly ambitious drama that takes us into the strange and sometimes violent atmosphere of the American south.

WAR OF THE WORLDS (US, 2005, d. Steven Spielberg)

At one stage, Tom Cruise's daughter, both puzzled and terrified by the frightening events, asks whether it is the terrorists. Perhaps that is one of the reasons Steven Spielberg decided to do an elaborate contemporary American version of H.G. Wells' classic novel.

Spielberg does not make this claim. At the time Wells published his novel (and it is a bit hard to try to appreciate how outlandish an alien invasion would have seemed to readers in 1896), Britain was concerned about warlike rumblings from Germany. When the small-budget film version came out in 1953, it was in

the middle of the Cold War. In 2005, the world seems a far unfriendlier place. There are many fears, including terrorist attacks, that War of the Worlds can play on.

Steven Spielberg certainly knows how to tell stories. He has always had a passion for exciting stories and War of the Worlds is one of them. Of course, he now has an abundance of computer graphic techniques to work with, to create all kinds of disaster sequences. And, to put it mildly, some of them are both spectacular and scary. But, he has also worked with more traditional techniques of models, getting the best out of the old and of the new.

Although it is a blockbuster movie, War of the Worlds is small-scale. It is small-scale in the sense that we are not shown the world picture and what this alien invasion means for the globe. Rather, the setting is confined to Bayonne, New Jersey, the highways along the Hudson River into Connecticut with a finale in Boston. The action is virtually confined to the one family, so that the audience shares the experience of the few rather than of thousands (though, of course, they are always there in the background).

His family are very ordinary. The father is a container lifter on the docks. He lives alone, estranged from his more middle-class wife and their two children. Parenting is not his forte and his seventeen year old son, Robbie, is surly and angry at him. His ten year old daughter, Rachel, is a mixture of common sense, fears and ailments (and when called on, quite a screamer). So, this is a terrifying experience that ordinary people endure, using their wits rather than weaponry (though there is some) or the military (who appear only briefly).

Spielberg also knows how to pace his film. It starts like any working-class story, on the wharves, then at home when his ex-wife asks him to look after the kids for the weekend. He doesn't waste any time introducing the frightening action. What makes the film all the more edgy is that, while the audience has been briefed by Morgan Freeman's narrative about what is happening, the characters know almost nothing all the way through. They are being pursued but have little idea by what or why. When there are some quiet moments after literally earth-shattering terrors, we think there couldn't be anything worse. And then there is.

Tom Cruise is not exactly your dock worker but when the action gets tough, we accept him for what he is and hope that he will not only save his cantankerous children but will learn to listen to them and love them. Jason Chatwin is Robbie. Dakota Fanning (who was referred to once as the whey-faced child with the frightening work-ethic) is both authoritative and fearful. Miranda Otto is the mother.

You know that Wells had a happy ending (as much as you could with all the destruction preceding it) and the film uses his theory for the defeat of the aliens – they could not adjust to the range of creatures in earth's atmosphere. However, along the fearful way, there is quite a lot to think about: family relationships, the human response to unexplained terror, both noble and savage, and how thankful we can be to be alive.

MR AND MRS SMITH (US, 2005, d. Doug Liman)

This is one of those films which those who enjoy refer to as 'a guilty pleasure'. So, this review is a guilty plea!

Some reviewers have taken the plot and characterisations very seriously indeed. But, that did not seem to be the point of the film. This is a soufflé tinged with gunpowder. To examine the behaviour of the central couple, the anonymous John and Jane Smith, Mr and Mrs, for moral judgment is to miss the jokeyness – and everything can be the subject of humour. Of course, it's the how it's all done is the ultimate criterion.

Like James Bond, whom everybody learned decades ago not to take as a serious dramatic hero, Mr and Mrs Smith have 'licenses to kill'. While every marriage has its secrets, this is a rather large one that each has been hiding from the other for 'about five years' as he says, 'exactly six' as she says. It is just as well that the film starts with the couple in marriage counselling sessions because when they are assigned, as you know they will be, to eliminate the other, then mayhem breaks loose. If you like it, that's the joke. What

do Mr and Mrs Smith do? Outwitting the other, of course. Spying on the other, of course. A huge lethal brawl – maybe more vigorous than we anticipated. Happy ending and reconciliation after discovering the pep in their lives. Naturally.

So, depending on your attitude towards the basic joke, the screenplay is very amusing (or not). Opting for the amusing stance, I thought that Brad Pitt excels at this kind of comedy (The Mexican, the Oceans' films – much better than running around Troy). He has good timing and communicates the humour cleverly, especially during therapy. Angelina Jolie looks and sounds smart and is given a wardrobe that ought to have made Mr Smith suspicious only he is not very observant about these matters. And Vince Vaughn turns in one of his better and funnier supporting friend roles.

Director Doug Liman made his name with a twenty-somethings identity and socialising comedy, Swingers, and went on to surprise people by making a good job of The Bourne Identity. This has the touch of a combination of the two.

A LOT LIKE LOVE (US, 2005, d. Nigel Cole)

Unless you are under thirty, A Lot Like Love is going to make you feel a bit old – more than a bit old. Here is Ashton Kucher again (Cheaper by the Dozen, Butterfly Effect, Guess Who) turning on the charm of little boy lost, the puppy and puppy love variety. Even if he irritates you no end (which could be more than likely), he still comes across as basically nice. Amanda Peet is the 'like love' interest until the end when (at long, long last) they realise they are made for each other. The film is made up of successive flashbacks, taking us to when they were about twenty and moving forward gradually by couple of year stages. This gives them the chance to have different clothes, hair styles, jobs as they remain friends until the penny drops that their 'a lot like' is actually love.

It is froth and fizz and does not aim to be anything else. It is romance with pratfalls – an easy pastime if you're in the mood (and not feeling too self-conscious about how old it makes you feel).

THE UNITED STATES OF LELAND (US, 2003, d. Matthew Ryan Hoge)

For a long time, especially since the 1980s and films like Ordinary People, American films have continually presented us with portraits of dysfunctional families and the effect this has, especially, on the sons. Leland P. Fitzgerald is one of those sons. As the film opens, he confides in the audience that he has done a terrible thing but that he truly does not remember doing it. In fact, he has killed his young mentally disabled friend. Leland is played by Ryan Gosling who created bizarre characters in The Believer and Murder by Numbers. (He also played the sympathetic lead in the romantic drama, The Notebook.)

The film is Leland's memoir, especially as told to a prison educator (who also sees a potential book in the interviews). Don Cheadle plays the interviewer who is fascinated by Leland's innocence and straight-forward wisdom in his perceptions of people and himself despite what he has done. He rightly challenges his interviewers moral standards and behaviour.

The interviews lead to flashbacks – but not in strict chronological order (the audience seeing the lead-up to the killing only at the end of the film. This means that the film is a jigsaw, characters seen through Leland's memories, though challenged by the interviewer. The boy's grieving family are central, especially X (Jena Malone), the addict daughter of the family who loves Leland and confides in him but is caught up with her dealer. Martin Donovan is strong as the boy's father. Chris Klein is the young man taken in by the family, in love with their other daughter (Michelle Williams) and compelled to a mad and desperate revenge on Leland.

Leland's parents are sketched in only: his devout and loving mother (Lena Olin) and his arrogant, successful novelist father (Kevin Spacey).

Casual viewers will find the film rather enigmatic and left to their imagination which may be too much of an ask. More serious viewers will find something more substantial to reflect on, especially about the United States in general and Leland's own America of brittle family life and moral expectations.

IMAGINARY HEROES (US, 2004, d. Dan Harris)

Dan Harris is a young screenwriter who achieved some fame with his screenplay for X Men 2. It is more than a surprise that someone who obviously enjoys writing about larger than life imaginary heroes should write the screenplay for this film which has a decidedly downbeat tone to it and focuses once more on the dysfunctional American family and the effect that it has on the sons. The title, instead of Imaginary Heroes, could have been Real Anti-heroes.

The narrator of the film is the younger son, Tim, who has always been in the shadow of his swimming champion older brother. Their father had devoted himself to training and pushing beyond endurance the champion son while the mother favoured the younger boy. Tragedy begins the film as the family are plunged into grief, the father emotionally catatonic, the mother tough and busy, the seventeen year old trying to find his identity, his strengths and a way out of his emotional confusion. Heroes are no help.

The film is well acted by Emile Hirsh (the spoilt boy of The Emperor's Club), Sigourney Weaver as the brittle mother and Jeff Daniels standing out in a quiet performance as the father.

Once again there are secrets and lies, perhaps a bit too overwhelming as the film tends to overextend itself and its sad events, but it is a reminder of what so many families have to deal with.

FILMS ON SCREEN, JULY, 2005-08-24

Peter Malone

This is a service of the SIGNIS Website, presenting reviews by Peter Malone of films that have been screening during the previous month.

CAR KEYS, The
CHARLIE AND THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY
DARK WATER
FANTASTIC FOUR
JAMES' JOURNEY TO JERUSALEM
KICKING AND SCREAMING
SKELETON KEY, The
SILVER CITY
WINTER SOLSTICE

SUPPLEMENT:
FILMS SCREENED AT THE ZANZIBAR INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

Reviews are included in case the films come your way for distribution.

BABU'S BABIES
CHRYSLIS
DRUM
EARTH AND ASHES (KHAKESTAR-O-KHAK)
GOVERNOR'S NEW CLOTHES, The (LES HABITS NEUFS DU GOUVERNEUR)
HARI OM
MAN IN BROWN SUIT

PROJECT DADDY
RAINMAKER, The (IMPIAN KEMARAU)
TUMAINI (CHILDHOOD ROBBED)
VERO SY HAINGO (VERO AND HAINGO)
WHEN IT RAINS HARD (PERUMASHAKKALAM)

CHARLIE AND THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY (US, 2005, d. Tim Burton)

Probably the best thing to start with is saying that here is a film for the holidays, one that parents (and grandparents) can happily take all of the children, except the littlies, to see and enjoy.

It is forty years or more since Roald Dahl wrote what is his best known children's story, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. It is a tale of Charlie Bucket and his family, a very poor family, who live not very far from the Wonka chocolate factory. Grandpa used to work there but was laid off years earlier when rival sweet-makers stole the recipes and put the Wonka factory out of business. However, even though no worker is seen going in or out of the factory, production is again in full swing (and the opening credits have an intriguing montage of chocolate-making, wrapping and labelling).

Well, most people will know that Willy Wonka, the eccentric owner is giving away five golden tickets for special children to visit his factory. Charlie would love to have one and, as everyone guesses, he does find one.

The film sets up the scenes with the Bucket family very nicely, cosily, even though their meals are meagre ('cabbage goes best with cabbage), the four grandparents are all crammed and cramped in the one bed and dad loses his job putting tops on tubes of toothpaste. But, the family is very loving and Charlie is a really nice boy.

The other finders of the golden tickets are definitely not nice. We know that they will get their comeuppance (as do the parents who have not educated them well): the greedy boy, the absolutely spoilt girl, the win-at-all-costs girl and the know-it-all boy. The film is definitely serious in reminding us what good children are like and how really awful bad children are.

Once the children begin the factory tour, the screen lightens with bright colours, lots of movement, music and song. The film is continually inventive as it shows Willy Wonka's creative chocolate-making and the design and machines in his factory. There are also some flashbacks (introduced for the film and not in the book) which explain Willy's strange mixture of aloofness and being a showman. His dentist father was severe and unloving – and forbade him all those sweets that would decay his teeth!

The film has been directed by Tim Burton who, for twenty years now, has both mesmerised and enchanted audiences with films that are truly fantastic – in both senses of the word. They are really good and they are full of imaginative fantasy. His fans will have their favourites, from Beetlejuice to Ed Wood or Sleepy Hollow. (For me Edward Scissorhands and Big Fish are marvellous stories about storytelling.)

Johnny Depp continues to surprise audiences. He can be an oddball swashbuckling pirate of the Caribbean or he can be the reticent J.M.Barrie in Finding Neverland. He has created Willy Wonka as a lovable eccentric who makes you laugh but takes a long time to really warm to. His Finding Neverland co-star, Freddie Highmore, shows us that an ideal child can be nice without being nauseatingly goody! Helena Bonham Carter and Noah Taylor are Charlie's parents and, while the film affirms parents, it also offers a great plug for grandparents. David Kelly (who was so entertaining in Waking Ned) is the grandfather who accompanies Charlie on his tour.

Roald Dahl would be pleased with this film. It captures the magical spirit of his imagination. It also captures his vision of goodness, especially for children and family.

FANTASTIC FOUR (US, 2005, d. Tim Story)

After all the films based on comic books, especially those published by Marvel Comics like Batman, Superman, Daredevil and X Men, Fantastic Four is a pleasant surprise. It will probably be best liked by a teenage audience – and fathers who might go along with their children may well find it an enjoyably guilty pleasure.

It cannot be said that the film is ‘fantastic’ in the ‘never-seen-anything-like-it-and-it’s-marvellous’ sense. Rather, it is more in the vein of original meanings of the word: that it belongs to the world of fantasy. It is a variation on popular science-fantasy themes.

In the past, Dr Frankenstein tried to create life and, instead, created a monster. This time, the four scientists are prepared to make themselves available for space research to learn more about DNA but find themselves transformed. There is a touch of the monstrous in what happens to them, but they are firmly on the side of good. What they do not realise is that their arrogant, wealthy boss (Victor Von Doom), has also been affected and chooses to become monstrous to gain absolute power.

What makes the four fantastic is that one can become invisible, another can turn into fire and their leader finds that he has the power to stretch all his limbs. (Someone sitting next to me whispered that she thought that she had already seen this story in another film – and, of course, these powers are similar to those of the Academy Award winning family of 2004, The Incredibles.)

Fantastic Four does two things quite effectively. It sets up the characters as (more or less) real and realistic people during the first half hour. There is Reed, the idealistic scientist who lives in his head. Susan Storm is a geneticist who has linked up with the wealthy Victor Doom (eventually the arch-villain). Her brother Johnny is an immature young man who is constantly attention seeking. Ben Grimm is the older, more serious pilot. This means that when they become fantastic, we identify with them as persons rather than simply comic strip characters.

On the other hand, the screenplay is pretty straightforward, fairly simple and plain in plot and dialogue. There is no intended depth as in the Spiderman films. There is no darkness and secrets as in the Batman films. Another thing is that everybody knows who the four are by name. They don’t have secret identities although they get the fantastic nicknames. In fact, they give press conferences and the media and the public love them.

We normally expect superheroes to save the world, either individuals in peril or endangered groups. Apart from a smash-up on the Brooklyn Bridge soon after their transformation where they do save lives, their mission in this film is trying to get themselves back to normal. When Victor capitalises on his becoming ‘metalised’ (for want of a better word), then the battle is the simple one between good and evil.

The cast is not particularly well-known. Rather, the producers have drawn on faces popular from television series. Welsh Ioan Gryfudd (Reed), now Americanised, was Captain Horatio Hornblower. Jessica Alba (Susan) was Dark Angel. Michael Chiklis (Ben Grimm) was The Commish and is currently the star of The Shield. Chris Evans (the rather genial John, despite his ‘I am’ attitudes) was in Opposite Sex. Australian Julian McMahon (Victor) (son of an Australian Prime Minister, William McMahon), now Americanised, is the star of Nip/Tuck. This is a production device to entice the television audiences away from the box to see their stars on the big screen.

No, it is not a great example of comic book films like X Men or Spiderman or Batman Begins. But, it has plenty of action, special effects and an entertaining confrontation between good and evil.

THE SKELETON KEY (US, 2005, d. Iain Softley)

If you judge a city by how it appears in the movies, then New Orleans is exotic, to say the least.

With its distinctive architecture and its special jazz sound, it is a favourite location for thrillers. With its voodoo traditions, it is also a favourite location for eerie and strange horrors. Just the place for a skeleton key.

It is all a bit different for Caroline (Kate Hudson) who hails from New Jersey. Nevertheless, she takes on a job of caring for an elderly man who has suffered a stroke (John Hurt). It takes some time for his wife (Gena Rowlands) to get used to her. In the background is the family lawyer (Peter Sasgaard). Al proceeds fairly well, but there are hints... A locked room of an attic which the skeleton key will not open. What seem like voodoo relics. Mysterious photographs. And, of course, deep and dark secrets.

Kate Hudson plays the nurse as fairly tough and intrepid. By the end, you see why. Gena Rowlands has the chance to do her variation of old Gothic horror. John Hurt's role is almost wordless (showing what a good actor he is through non-verbal communication).

It is all hokum – unless you are a superstitious type and can be taken in by 'hoodoo'. Not particularly memorable, but classily done.

THE CAR KEYS (LES CLEFS DE BAGNOLE) (France, 2003, d. Laurent Baffie)

In a way, you have to grit your teeth as you begin to watch this Gallic comedy. You know the ending. The car keys are lost and the star/director reveals where he will find them. With any suspense out of the way, we begin to wonder what the film could be all about. The answer is that it is all about making a film about pitching a film about a man who loses his car keys. Needless to say, the many producers who appear at the start of the film, many of them very well-known, like Claude Berri and Alain Sarde, turn the project down. He also asks most of the principal French actors, from Daniel Auteuil down (so to speak) and they really turn him down. With his friend, Daniel, he begins the film and we hope that it is going to be interesting and funny.

In a way, it is, but not nearly as interesting or funny as Laurent seems to think or hope it is.

What he does is show us how to make a film. He explains a great deal about technique and illustrates it – and often this is quite amusing. At one stage, he does a brainstorming session in a café and lists all the ingredients that would make it commercial. This is quite a list and includes animal and children, sex and a bank robbery, a helicopter rescue. You name it. Gerard Depardieu's name was not on the list but he turns up anyway, selling cheese.

By now, you know whether you have the patience to sit through the whole film, whether you are on the wavelength of the comedy or whether it might be more entertaining watching something else.

SILVER CITY (US, 2004, d. John Sayles)

For some audiences, John Sayles is an American cinema hero. While he has written a lot of screenplays that are genre pieces (and obviously enjoyed working the conventions of piranhas and alligators), his personal work has been very different. Sayles has created a body of films for almost a quarter of a century that study human nature (Return of the Secaucus Seven, Passion Fish), take on social themes (Matewan, Men With Guns), life and death issues (Limbo, Casa de Los Babys) or look at different states of the US and cinematically dissect their ethos. But, he always does it through an interesting and entertaining story rather than a documentary or a film essay.

This time it is the turn of Colorado (after Texas in Lone Star, Florida in Sunshine State). Silver City is a planned retirement village to be built on an abandoned mine site. The setting is a state governor's election and, as the film opens, a body surfaces on a lake while an environmental commercial is being shot featuring a candidate who is the son of a rich state senator. This opening leads us in all directions: moneyed interests, political manipulation, old families and the skeletons in their closet, Hispanic illegals and the dealers in workers, idealistic editors who have lost their jobs and run subversive websites, journalists and private detectives.

Sayles has a very large cast of character actors. He gives them all their chance to perform, even in brief cameos, and create rounded characters. Danny Huston is the mediocre private eye who unravels the mysteries. Maria Bello is his former partner, journalist in her own right in partnership with a values-free lobbyist. Richard Dreyfuss is the campaign manager. Tim Roth the website manager. Many Sayles regulars are in the film including Kris Kristofferson and, especially, Chirs Cooper. Cooper is very good as a rather intellectually and verbally challenged candidate who is a disaster without his cue cards and not much better with them. (There is a tongue-in-cheek note at the end that any resemblance to members of the Bush administration is unavoidable.)

Audiences know where they stand with Sayles. You are in for a well-told story, well-acted, an analysis of American society from a critical stance. And this he does very well.

JAMES' JOURNEY TO JERUSALEM (Israel, 2003, Ra'anana Alexandrowicz)

An unexpected pleasure – though a rather caustic critique of modern Israeli materialistic goals (which are, of course, shared by so many cultures).

The opening credits offer a chant about pilgrims going to Jerusalem accompanied by brightly coloured paintings. These suggest something of an African myth, a jaunty and cheerful fairytale. But, this is not to be. James (Siyabonga Melangisi Shibe), a Zulu who has been sent to Jerusalem by his village before he becomes their pastor, is a really good young man, full of ideals and hopes. When he finds that immigration interns him and he is bailed out (because of this apparent goodness) by black market labour organisers to work and pay off his debts, he is puzzled, resigned but earnest and hard-working. He even befriends the crusty old father of the boss who does not want to relinquish his fallen down house and shambling garden to million dollar developers.

But, so the screenplay says, no one should be a 'frayer'. That is, no one should be manipulated by others – in, fact, you should do the manipulating! This is the temptation that James succumbs to (egged on by fellow workers and the local reverend who is prone to want James' donations) and which he has to face if he wants his integrity back (and a visit to Jerusalem which always seems to elude him).

This is a film where Israelis are criticising themselves, holding up a model for good living who can transcend the material temptations. But, because James is so nice, you tend to watch this critique while smiling.

DARK WATER (US, 2005, d. Walter Salles)

Enough to give a highbrow critic a heart attack!! What is renowned director Walter Salles (Central Station, Motorcycle Diaries) doing directing a Hollywood studio film? And what is he doing a remake of a Japanese film? And what is he doing making a ghost and horror story. These are the kinds of questions asked by critics who think that a director is 'selling out' doing this kind of thing (when they are writing themselves in popular tabloids). Having got that out of the way, what about the film itself?!

It's pretty good. For those who saw the original Japanese thriller (from the same director as The Ring films), it is interesting to see how the screenplay makes the transition from Japan to Roosevelt Island in a very rain-sodden New York City. For that even larger group who have not seen the original, it will be an eerie pleasure to watch Dark Water. It is scary, not in the sense that you jump or sit at the edge of your seat all the time, but rather in that the film creates its atmosphere of mystery and uncertainty and sustains it right through – without benefit or distraction of any blood, gore or grizzly action.

Walter Salles has declared his interest in genre films which he enjoyed when he was a boy. He also remarks that ghost stories are intrinsically interesting because anyone who believes in ghosts is admitting that they do acknowledge that everything does not end with the grave but that there must be some kind of existence, some life after death. This is part of what William Wordsworth called 'intimations of

immortality'. Salles has brought his non-US sensitivity to the story and his high quality craft to ensure that this is a good-looking production.

The focus of the film is a woman (Dahlia) whose mother neglected her as a child and who, by contrast, loves and is protective of her daughter (Ceci - Cecilia). Even if the film was not a thriller, it would be a successfully strong drama of the bonds between mothers and daughters. The two take an apartment in a run-down block only to find leaks and stains in the roof, strange noises above and a story of a missing girl who may be with either of her separated parents.

Ceci goes to the local school but is increasingly caught up with her imaginary friend, Natasha. Meanwhile, Dahlia is having to cope with separation from her husband and the increasing puzzle of the apartment and its plumbing disasters. Finally, there is an explanation of what has been going on, but it takes us into the realm of ghosts, of mothers and of mother's self-sacrifices for love of their daughters.

Jennifer Connolly is on screen almost the whole running time of the film. She is a strong and persuasive performer. The versatile John C. Reilly is very good as the seemingly genial but unreliable manager of the apartments. A British contingent of Tim Roth, Pete Postlethwaite and Dougray Scott complete the supporting cast as Dahlia's lawyer, the handyman of the apartment and Dahlia's angry husband.

KICKING AND SCREAMING (US, 2005, d. Jesse Dylan)

(As an initial aside, Jesse Dylan, music video director and director of American Pie 3: The Wedding, is the son of Bob Dylan – not sure if his father would really want to rush out and see his son's movies!)

The plot is practically The Bad News Bears, The Mighty Ducks etc all over again, except that this time the coach is as inept as the rag-tag team we know are eventually going to win the competition! It's just a matter of watching to see how the victory is accomplished.

Along the way, there are the usual crises, training sequences, gradual success and the final showdown. Where Kicking and Screaming is a little different is that the sport here is soccer, not the usual sport for an American film. Another difference is that Will Ferrell is a gawky adult, who was an accident prone child, the despair of his sporting goods store owner and coach supreme, played in his genially gruff style by Robert Duvall.

There are loads of pratfalls, barbed father and son conversations and some one-liners. Real-life coach Mike Ditka portrays the next door neighbour whose mission in life is to upset Duvall and who takes on assisting the team to thwart his neighbour. Ditka comes across as a good character actor.

The subject matter is fairly limiting in its audience appeal. The treatment is conventional at best – and often seems somewhat lame. Which means that its drawing appeal is probably to boys, 8 to 12 say, who are not really good at sports but would like to be – and to their fathers who want to re-live sports years through their sons.

WINTER SOLSTICE (US, 2004, d. Josh Sternfeld)

A small-budget feature screened at festivals and made with the assistance of the Sundance Festivals. Not essential viewing, but audiences who catch it and like family dramas may find it quite satisfying.

The winter solstice is the dead of winter, the deepest cold when we look forward to spring and new life.

The Winters family here are in a cold season in their lives. Jim, the father (Anthony La Paglia), works as a local gardener and landscaper. The older boy, Gabriel (Aaron Stanford) is restless. The younger boy, Peter (Mark Webber) is unsettled and not doing well at school. The reason for this is the death of their mother in a car accident five years earlier which Peter escaped.

SUPPLEMENT:

FILMS SCREENED AT THE ZANZIBAR INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

Reviews are included in case the films come your way for distribution.

PERUMAZHAKKALAM (WHEN IT RAINS HARD) (India, 2004, d. Kamal)

This is certainly a rain-filled film. It pours down. Of course, it is a symbol for grief, a grief that is almost as unrelenting as the rain.

This is serious Indian drama, not at all in the Bollywood vein. There are some songs, but they are like a voiceover and have lyrics which are appropriate for the action of the film. It is highly emotional drama, perhaps somewhat overcharged for non-Asian audiences, but emotion that is powerfully heartfelt.

And the serious theme? Religious tolerance. Also reconciliation.

The immediate focus is on a Muslim family looking forward to the favoured son returning from Saudi Arabia where he works for a family wedding. The news comes through that he is in prison, charged with killing a fellow-worker. The victim is a Hindu.

The wife of the arrested man is distraught (it is she who is so demonstrably and continually grieving). With the support of the rest of the family, she decides to approach the widow who has the power to sign documents that will pardon her husband. The Hindu family, especially the mother of the murdered man are implacable, fiercely so. However, as the widow has the chance to observe the lamenting wife and think through the consequences of her action or non-action, she undergoes a compassionate change – with dire results for herself from the same implacable family.

This drama of forgiveness and reconciliation on a personal level is an allegory for understanding and reconciliation between Muslims and Hindus, especially for a united future. And, with the image of two daughters of two different faiths playing together, the message is one of hope.

IMPIAN KEMARAU (THE RAINMAKER) (Indonesia, 2004, d. Ravi Bharwani)

To make an impact on its audience, especially an audience unfamiliar with Indonesian cultural and religious traditions, this film needs its sub-title: a poem of hope, dreams and illusions.

It is certainly a poem. Its narrative is difficult to describe. Rather, a meteorologist hoping to study the weather over a village and indicate when the clouds can be seeded for rain intersects with a village singer who also acts in what one might call a geisha manner and her servant who cares for her mistress and an ox. The young man lives in the modern world of technology: his scenes are more realistic. The singer both sings and serves the men of the village in a solemn (slow) and dignified ritual: leisurely paced scenes. The maid takes on the languorous mood of her mistress, or else is busy caring for and washing the ox. Interwoven with the characters are some performances of the Indonesian puppets, the Wayang. As the three different characters and the moods cross, as pace changes, as beautiful, painterly photography and tableaux are edited together, the poetic, dreamlike nature of the themes is developed.

Towards the end there is a hanging due, it seems, to the influence of a falling star, an ill omen. But who dies is unclear. Is it a dream also? Or, has the meteorologist dreamed it all? Or has he died and come alive again – because there is speculation about the past and the future (the theme of illusion). There is very little hope as the man and the woman may never meet again and, back in the real world, the scheme for making rain is revealed as phony political promises – and all that is rained down on the villagers are pages of propaganda.

This is a film for those who like their cinema as art and enigma.

PROJECT DADDY (Kenya, 2004. d. Judy Kibinge)

An opportunity to see a film from Kenya that reflects the life of young, affluent Kenyans, certainly upwardly mobile, in Nairobi at the beginning of the 21st century.

Actually, the film reflects the life of young affluent 20-somethings in many parts of the world, irrespective of local cultures. The screenplay for Project Daddy is very similar to the spate of popular Hollywood movies between 1997 and 2002, made by African Americans for a largely African American audience, starring Taye Diggs or Omar Epps.

The central character is a strong young woman who has an influential position in a bank. She is living with her fiancé, who is unacceptable to her rather patriarchal father (whose alternate suitor no one in their right mind would want to marry). The couple clash over his moodiness (to do with her demand that he have an HIV test) and then his flirting at a club when his test results are clear.

She decides at 29 the main thing she wants is a baby, irrespective of the father. She parties (rather gauchely) without success and then tries internet dates (with a collage of oafish would-be suitors). Her friend, who separates from an arrogantly demanding husband, is born again and takes Mumbi along.

You will have guessed the ending but that does not matter. The moral of the story is be yourself, work hard and be rewarded and make a match with the love of your life.

CHRYSLIS (KAYA TARAN) (India, 2005, d. Sashi Kumar)

Chrysalis is a surprising film to come out of India at the beginning of the 21st century. It is not in the Bollywood tradition at all, although there are a number of songs in the background which cater for Indian tastes in having songs in their films. The lyrics also comment on the action and themes. The main reason for surprise is that one of the central characters is a Catholic nun. The film is also a plea for religious tolerance.

The initial setting is Delhi, 2002, and discussions about Indian legislation concerning conversions and the prohibiting of proselytising (this led to some outbreaks of violence at the time and the killing of some Christian foreign missionaries). The film initially has characters discussing these issues, exhibiting some prejudices and a young journalist being commissioned to write an article on conversions. He seeks out a wise man and listens to arguments about religion and belief. However, he is haunted by strange memories which lead him on a quest to know about his past and to find his own religious path.

His journey leads him to a convent in Meerut. Sister Agatha is unwilling to talk with him as Catholics (including the local bishop and Fr Thomas who has been in the city for a quarter of a century) are wary about conversions. However, Sister Agatha relents and tells the journalist the story of the nuns saving a Sikh woman and her little boy when they seek refuge at the convent at the time of the assassination of Indira Gandhi and massacres of Sikhs). While this issue is serious, there are some entertaining scenes as the little boy is happily adopted by the community which consists of aged nuns in retirement. (This is done is a combination of humour and reverential awe for nuns – audiences might remember the 1960 Conspiracy of Hearts where nuns give refuge to Jews during World War II.)

Most audiences will be taken aback when there is a fantasy sequence after the boy's Sikh hair is cut and he is concealed in a coffin for escape. The nuns are presented in an Indian ritual, filmed from overhead. They are dressed as if they are part of a chrysalis. As they pray, the coffin opens and a middle-aged Guru, presumably Sikh emerges. A symbol of interfaith collaboration, shared beliefs and hopes?

The quest ends with the young man finding his identity and his faith – and being fearless about it.

For those interested in interfaith dialogue, well worth catching.

KHAKESTAR-O-KHAK (EARTH AND ASHES) (Afghanistan/France, 2004, d. Atiq Rahimi)

A film from Afghanistan in the aftermath of Taleban wars and American invasion and bombings. The film concerns itself with bombings and the destruction of villages and the deaths of innocent civilians – but does not specify who are the initiators of the bombings. It does not matter since the film is a powerful denunciation of indiscriminate bombing and killing.

An old man and his grandson are walking in the middle of the desert to seek a lift to go to visit the mine where the old man's son works as a miner. He wants to tell him about the disaster for the family. They are stranded while they wait for the truck to the mine. As they wait, they encounter a little girl with whom the boy plays and her shell-shocked mother sheltering in the shade of a tank. A kindly storekeeper gives them food and credit as well as stories about the upheaval in the cities and the ambitions of his military son. There are drivers who collect sheep and goats who have trodden on mines. There is a seller of wooden toys. Though their lives have become somewhat aimless, they have some sense of purpose.

The film is beautifully photographed in widescreen. It is also full of deep humanity. The old man is so convincing, it is difficult to believe he is acting. His grandson has been deafened by the bombs but thinks that everyone has become mute.

The style of the film is slow in the Iranian manner, but its cumulative effect is strong.

TUMAINI (CHILDHOOD ROBBED) (Tanzania, 2005, d. Beatrix Mugishagwe)

One of the first Tanzanian features. It is clearly designed for the wide Tanzanian audience and draws on the styles of the telenovella. The makers know their audience well and tumaini received an enthusiastic response at its Zanzibar Film Festival screening. The film is a Tanzanian look at Tanzanian problems.

Tumaini is a fifteen year old girl whose father dies from AIDS and whose mother is infected. After her death, she and her brother and sister, despised by their cousins as 'AIDS orphans' are exploited by their uncle and aunt, although they have the love and care of their grandmother. Already the film deals with the key issue of HIV infection and the willingness and unwillingness to face this epidemic in Africa. The film then takes on quite a number of further problems, the orphans to AIDS, runaway children and the towns' street kids, prostitution and pimps before it returns sadly to its HIV theme.

The film is emotional, of course, relying on its popularly drawn characters in identifiable situations to make its points. It seems about to end quite a few times in the latter part of the film but chooses to conclude on a happy ending, blended with romance and realism (and the African discussion of the use of condoms in the epidemic context) – but it still reminds its audience of reality as it glimpses the ghosts of those who have died and the camera tracks again past their headstones.

MAN IN BROWN SUIT (South Africa, 2005. d. Sara Blechor)

A brief thriller, patterned after the American film and television police investigations and the solving of a mystery. It follows these patterns quite effectively, especially the time limits set by a serial killer and the attempts to prevent the next killing.

One of the standout features is that the officer placed in charge of the investigation by the Zero Tolerance unit is a black African woman. She pursues her goals efficiently and effectively. Her male team comprises both black and white detectives, especially an Afrikaner who has a personal concern in solving the case and who is imprudently involved with the television anchor covering the killings. An Afrikaner assistant is also significant in the solving of the case – and the film follows her back story which includes her going to her rich family in the country for a wedding and her own lesbian relationship.

The other very interesting feature is that the killings centre on the writings of a fanatic Boer who wrote books about the times when black power would come and how the whites would eradicate the blacks and a significant figure, a man in brown suit, would rid the country of blacks.

The film should travel beyond South Africa because of the familiarity of its cinema and television styles, but also because of the handling of the issues of fanatic whites at the beginning of the 21st century.

LES HABITS NEUFS DU GOUVERNEUR (THE GOVERNOR'S NEW CLOTHES)

(Democratic Republic of Congo, 2005, d. Mweze Dieudonne Ngangura)

Written and directed by one of Congo's veteran directors, this is a moral tale in the form of a musical and a fable. It is actually an interpretation of Hans Christian Andersen's The Emperor's New Clothes. African audiences have enjoyed it. It may not travel so well. However, it is an interesting experiment and allegory.

Tribal conflicts are at the basis of the film, their names plays on words on Serbs and Croats. The seriousness of internecine tribal conflicts is still in audience's minds remembering Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda. This film has a hero who belongs to one tribe, his wife to another and his son to both. What happens when he becomes President, pressurised by greedily locals who represent multi-national business and is the target of jealous military leaders?

The cast are always moving into song – technically, this is unsatisfying as the songs are not smoothly edited into the action. However, the intended audience has appreciated the music (by the famous Papa Wemba) and the message.

BABU'S BABIES (Kenya, 2005, d. Christine Bala)

There are not many Kenyan feature films. This one lasts an hour and will find a niche on television but it is an entertaining as well as critically thought-provoking comedy.

Babu lives in Nairobi while his wife wishes they were back in the country. He is a courier and has to pick up a parcel by 2.00pm for an important board meeting. He operates on casual time and allows himself to be persuaded to deliver some stolen coffee to some dealers, to use his vehicle as a taxi service. It is the latter which proves to be his undoing. Someone has abandoned a baby in his minibus.

Babu and his associate, Jimmy, try various ways to get rid of the baby, Jimmy is quite callous. Babu, on the other hand, has children. As the day goes on, he takes more and more care of the baby – running the risk of losing wife, family and his job. There is a nice twist at the end which brings a smile to see virtue rewarded even if actions were more than a little shady.

The film immerses us in Nairobi life and its social problems while it also makes us laugh and feel sentimental.

HARI OM (India, 2004, d. Bharatbala Ganapathy)

Hari Om is a rickshaw driver, though he dreams of being an actor or a model. Not very likely – especially when he gets into impossible gambling debts and becomes the victim of the crime boss's thugs. However, the film is not quite as predictable as that might sound.

Enter an arrogant French jewel merchant who sees India as a place for money-making but really just a mess – and has no self-consciousness about loudly expressing himself accordingly. His girlfriend wants to experience India which she loves. Now it becomes predictable. Who is to be her guide? None other than Hari Om trying to escape the thugs.

They experience all kinds of adventures which serve as plot devices for an Indian road movie but which also provide opportunity for a pleasingly prolonged look at the beauty of Indian landscapes, of the architecture and of life in cities and villages. It also gives the opportunity for a wise man to tell a guru like story so that audiences experience the mystic side of Indian culture.

The end has the touch of farce with a car and rickshaw chase – but it all concludes nicely. It is not a singing and dancing Indian film but a popular comedy adventure which is also aimed at an overseas audience.

DRUM (South Africa/US, d. Zola Moseka)

Here is a very interesting journey into South African history in the mid-1950s.

Drum was a cultural and popular magazine that began to take on issues that were more and more political, its reporters doing investigative journalism and providing a forum for critique of the apartheid regime. This film follows one of its black journalists on a personal journey of awareness, full of danger and potential disaster.

The film is challenging insofar as the hero is not a saint. His infidelity to his patient wife leads her to urge him to do something authentic in his work. This eventually leads him to pose as a worker on a farm and experience the harsh conditions, including a whipping. He gets himself arrested and exposes the severe and humiliating conditions for black prisoners. The magazine sells well but incurs the wrath of the powers that be and the police who are unscrupulous, even using the black gangsters who want their faces on the cover of the magazine to do their dirty work.

The film is South African but the makers have Hollywood experience and this shows in the craft that has gone into the film. Again, a Hollywood star has been employed, Taye Diggs. Usually in light romantic comedies on the big screen or on television, he gives one of his best performances as Jason Flemyng has a good role as the magazine editor who encourages his writers but is subject to pressure and threats.

The atmosphere of Johannesburg and, especially Sophiatown, which at that time was a locale where black and white could mix but which was soon to be taken over, are effectively re-created for an absorbing and saddening drama.

VERO SY HAINGO (VERO AND HAINGO) (Madagascar, 2003, d. Patrick Vergeynst)

Vero and Haingo offers an opportunity to see some of the film-making of Madagascar. This is a short feature film (73 minutes) that reflects life on the island nation and is a message film about current social problems. Made with the support of such organizations as UNICEF, it focuses on children and the dangers of child exploitation. The didactic tone is reinforced by written messages at the end.

Father is unemployed, mother busy at home with their five children and the housework. Older daughter, Haingo, can't concentrate on school. Younger Vero is conscientious and wants to win a spelling bee. Haingo is led by her cousin into a life of prostitution, the parents benefiting from the money. Pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases are central issues as well as the exploitative attitudes of the men. Of course, this kind of film needs, if not a totally happy ending, at least an uplifting one.

The film serves as a storytelling glimpse of Madagascan life.

FILMS ON SCREEN, AUGUST 20005

This is a service of the SIGNIS Website, presenting reviews by Peter Malone of films that have been screening during the previous month.

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THE ADVENTURES OF SHARKBOY AND LAVA GIRL IN 3D (US, 2005, d. Robert Rodriguez)

Writer-director Robert Rodriguez had great success with his children's adventures in his Spy Kids series. The third episode had interludes using a 3D processes. This time he has drawn on the stories and dreams of his very young son, Racer Max, and elaborated them into fantasy adventures and dreams, with the adventures on the planet, Drool, in 3D. Normal screen and colour is for ordinary life.

The central character is Max, a quiet boy who is bullied at school and fears his parents are going to split up. However, in his journal, he recounts his dreams about a boy who lost his father in an accident at sea and who was rescued by sharks and brought up by them (including growing gills), Sharkboy. His friend is Lavagirl who can set fire to and melt anything.

Racer Max must have seen The Wizard of Oz because Max and his class are caught in a tornado and he is whisked off to Drool. Sharkboy and Lavagirl are his companions. They are pursued by Mr Electric (who is their Hispanic teacher, Mr Electricidad) through many adventures until they confront the chief bully, Linus.

Rodriguez keeps the action flowing fast and sometimes furiously, taking magic short cuts through ice and snow in the form of cake, icing and cream, and relying on everybody having positive dreams that will get them through the crises.

The whole adventure comes together with Max being able to accept himself, his parents reconciled, the bully and teacher being on side – and Sharkboy and Lavagirl going off on further adventures.

Aimed at the young audience brought up on action cartoons on television, this should prove a success – the 3D is a novelty but has the effect of darkening the action so that it is something of a relief to come back into broad daylight.

ANTARMAHAL: VIEWS FROM THE INNER CHAMBER (India, 2005, d. Rituparno Ghosh)

This is a chamber piece of cinema making. The detail of decor and costume is meticulous. The focus of an almost two hour film is very much interior. This can have a claustrophobic effect on an audience who would like to escape the palace - something most of the characters cannot do.

This is the opposite of Bollywood entertainment. It is a serious portrait of a wealthy household in 1878. Queen Victoria is empress of India. A local ruler (who is gross and illiterate in manner) wants to ingratiate himself with the British powers and decides that the face of the Queen should be used as the face for the statue of a deity whose feast is being celebrated. In the meantime, his first wife is sterile and he is trying to impregnate his second wife so that his mini-dynasty will not die out. He is controlled by priests who bring in a young sculptor to make the statue.

While the audience has to concentrate on such an intense interior experience, the film is beautifully made with interesting historical themes.

BAD NEWS BEARS (US, 2005, d. Richard Linklater)

While there is always a place for a re-make (always hoping that the remake will do something different or special with the original material), Bad News Bears is not an immediately obvious candidate for re-doing. After all, there have been so many variations on the theme over the last thirty years (from Mighty Ducks to Kicking and Screaming), that it runs the danger these years of being too well-worn.

Anyway, here it is again (after the original, with Walter Matthau had two sequels of its own). The plot is still the same. The range of awkward kids is the same (well, they come from a greater racial mix this time). The obnoxious coach is the same (Greg Kinnear). There are the practices, the rivalries, the tensions within the group, the increasing victories and the final match – which actually supports the theme that playing the game is more important than winning. As with Walter Matthau in the past, one reason for seeing the film is Billy Bob Thornton as the alcoholic coach. This is a far less flamboyant performance as an obnoxious and crass-mouthed interacter with kids than Thornton's Bad Santa. His timing is good. His remarks sardonic. But, at heart, this is a nice and sentimental story of making good.

Director Richard Linklater usually makes talkative relationship films (Before Sunrise, Tape, Before Sunset) but is taking time off to relax with a studio production – he must love baseball too.

BEWITCHED (US, 2005, d. Nora Ephron)

A really pleasant surprise.

With the fashion for remaking popular television series of decades past for the big screen, expectations are often low. Can a series really be updated? Will it keep the spirit and entertainment value of the original? How will it cope with audience nostalgia, the memory of the past? According to the press notes and the quotes from the cast, Bewitched must be one of the most widely seen series and one that delighted so many people.

Director Nora Ephron has a very good record in making popular romantic comedies. She made both Sleepless in Seattle and You've Got Mail. Writing with her novelist sister, Delia, she creates an atmosphere that combines sentiment and humour. With Bewitched, they have an even better idea for bringing the series into the 21st century. It is a 'what if...?'.

What if the studios were re-making Bewitched for television to revive the fortunes of a star whose career is in trouble and he insisted on casting an unknown as Samantha (to keep him securely centre-screen)? The even better 'what if...?' is the idea that the unknown actress really is a witch. How would 'real life' resemble the series? So far, so good.

The next great idea is the casting. Will Ferrell has had a successful career as a comedian and an impersonator on the popular Saturday Night Live. His transition to the movies in such enjoyable films as

Elf and Anchorman means that he can do both serious and funny - and his funny can be both charming and obnoxious. The Ephron sisters give him plenty of opportunity for his comic talent.

However, the star is Nicole Kidman. She has been a star, in Australia twenty years ago as a child actress, and in the last decade proving she is very versatile. Think *Moulin Rouge* and her Oscar-winning performance as Virginia Woolf in *The Hours*. Here she is at her delightful best.

She resembles the original Samantha, Elizabeth Montgomery, in looks, in the comic light touch and in her ability to wiggle her nose before some magic moments. She is Isobel, a young witch who is trying to escape her family and community, eager to become human and normal, not relying on magic tricks and spells to get along. Because her self-esteem is so low, she wants to get a job. Ferrell sees her wiggle her nose and she is cast.

One should add that Michael Caine has a very good role as Isobel's suave warlock father and Shirley MacLaine is an actress with an overpowering ego who portrays in the series. (We are shown a scene with Agnes Moorhead to remind us of the old days.) Caine has a lot of good ironic lines and MacLaine (who has been an enthusiast for experiences beyond this realm) parodies herself.

What is surprising is how often there are good laughs right throughout the film. Sometimes it is funny lines (often at the expense of television and American taste). Sometimes it is slapstick pratfalls. Sometimes it is the humorous situations, especially when Isobel discovers that the star that she wants to fall in love with because he needs her is on an ego-trip and she exercises her arts and spells. Ferrell has a good scene where he is supposed to say a line about his love for a dog and goes through a variety of funny variations.

Bewitched is not going to be on anyone's list of the greatest films of all time. However, it is a very pleasing way of passing 100 minutes.

BONHOEFFER (US, 2003, d. Martin Doblmeier)

If one were asked who is the best known German who resisted Hitler and Nazism, the answer would probably be Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He is respected as a theologian, admired as a pacifist, questioned as complicit in the assassination attempt on Hitler and revered as a martyr.

This film is an absorbing documentary on Bonhoeffer, using the voice of Klaus Maria Brandauer (*Mephisto*, *Out of Africa*). Martin Doblmeier's research has led to substantial archival material from the 1930s and 1940s being incorporated into a work which is both biography and study. We are taken through the details of Bonhoeffer's life through photos, narration and commentary. We are also taken through the political and religious history of Germany from World War I to the end of World War II, a momentous thirty years. The background of Germany which led to the rise of National Socialism and the emergence of Hitler as chancellor is well-known but seen in connection with a man who was opposing the regime on humane and evangelical grounds means that we look at the history with a more critical eye.

It should be mentioned that Bonhoeffer travelled overseas, lecturing in the United States, so was able to look at what was happening in Germany from the outside as well as the inside.

The German churches were slow to criticise Hitler. The Catholic church hoped that he would allow some freedom. The Lutherans and evangelical churches focussed on the German experience and its needs and were hopeful because of Hitler's initial promises.

Bonhoeffer's Gospel spirituality is one of the main focal points of the film. He thought that traditional preaching on the Sermon on the Mount made us more aware of how sinful we are and, therefore, we are unable to live up to the ideals, whereas the message of Jesus in the Sermon is that we are meant to live it fully. But, Bonhoeffer had great faith in the church. It was the physical manifestation of Christ in the world - and it existed only when it existed for others. Bonhoeffer's question was not whether the Church would be free but, rather, would the church stand by the victims of Nazism. This kind of thinking led to his pacifist stances.

Taking the Sermon on the Mount seriously meant that the key to spirituality is discipleship. Bonhoeffer explained that without the cross there was only 'cheap grace'. The Gospel highlights the Cross in our lives. This is 'costly grace'. In writing his ethics, he focused not on rules but rather the situations in which the will of God is concealed among the possibilities for action. Choices require faith.

Bonhoeffer supported the Jews in the persecution that led to Holocaust. His response to the oppression by Hitler led his interpreting his pacifist views as resistance. Finally, he came down on the side of the attempt to be rid of persecution by supporting the plot against Hitler. Imprisoned, he was humiliated and shamed in jail and finally hanged.

Bonhoeffer was a man who saw the 20th century at its worst and saw it within his own culture and religion - and chose costly grace.

THE CAVE (US. 2005, d. Bruce Hunt)

With a title like The Cave, you know what you are in for. And that is exactly what you get, competently crafted for scares, action and thrills.

The setting is Romania, the Carpathian mountains (and we know who used to live there). Under one of those churches with frescoes on the outside is a mysterious series of caves with new species of creatures. (The press notes quote experts as saying that such caverns were found in Romania in the 1990s.)

After a prologue in the 1980s, where greedy church robbers get their comeuppance, an expedition with every modern gadget and computer program, comes to explore. You know there are going to be frightening creatures. You know that most of the cavers are going to be killed off (a bit unfair with the Australian being the first one to go!). You know that a man and a woman will survive (though you may be wrong on which man) and you know there will be a sinister ending to remind us that the menace will continue. And so it does.

Depending on your interest in caves and methods for scaling walls, climbing and crawling and your capacity for battles with creatures, you will enjoy the film or find yourself unengaged.

CRASH (US, 2005, d. Paul Haggis)

Here is a solid drama with important themes that would be of interest to adult audiences. However, Crash contains a number of very angry characters who express themselves forthrightly in rough language that may not be to everyone's taste.

Some months ago when Crash was released in the United States, a Daughter of St Paul, Sister Rose Pacatte, with whom I work on books creating a dialogue between the scriptures and films, wrote to suggest Crash for the volume we are presently working on. It is a book on The Beatitudes and the Seven Deadly Sins. It seemed a strong film to illustrate weakness and sinfulness in human nature but with the possibilities of forgiveness and redemption.

As noted, Crash is a film about anger. It is also about pride, covetousness, greed, lust, sloth and envy. In fact, the film is a serious reminder that we are all affected by original sin, that we are affected by personal sin, both sins of our own and sins of others, and there are serious consequences.

An initial voiceover tells us that in cities, people bump into each other all the time, that they have the experience of literally touching and being touched. However, in Los Angeles, nobody walks. People all drive and avoid human touch. The voice wonders whether people crash just to make human contact. The film has a great number of characters and they soon start bumping into each other, sometimes with dire consequences, sometimes with hope.

The immediate issue that alerts us to the film's seriousness and, indeed, can put the audience on edge, is that of racism. Like many modern cities, Los Angeles is a melting pot of peoples and cultures. While respect for different people is a continual hope, this does not always happen in practice. African Americans and whites clash abusively. Asians are insulted. People of Middle East origins are taunted about their lack of clear English and humiliated. The result is smouldering rage and outbursts of irrational violence.

Sandra Bullock, as a wealthy and arrogant District Attorney's wife, states at the end of the film that she had erupted against blacks who hijacked her car but that that was not really the cause of her anger. She says she wakes up angry every day.

Of course, she probably has the least reason for anger. A black television director (Terence Howard) submits meekly to taunts and is shamed as a bigoted police officer (Matt Dillon) manhandles his wife (Thandie Newton) when they are pulled over for no real reason. The partner (Ryan Phillippe) later does a good deed for the director but is soon a violent victim of society's subconscious racist suspicions. On the other hand, we see the bigot caring for his ailing father and involved in rescuing a woman from a crash.

Don Cheadle is a competent police officer, having an affair with his partner, trying to care for his erratic mother, too busy to care for his delinquent brother (Larenz Tate) and being offered promotion by authorities if he complies with a cover-up by Internal Affairs.

While there are angry sequences, there are some moments of real beauty and goodness: the rescue from the crashed car and a tender scene between a locksmith and his five year old daughter which precedes one of the most frightening scenes where a frustrated Arab draws a gun on the locksmith.

The film was co-written and directed by Paul Haggis who was screenwriter for Clint Eastwood's Oscar-winning film, Million Dollar Baby. He has created a serious portrait of flawed human beings, not shirking the ugliness of their malice, but ultimately reminding us that we cannot judge people on surface evidence. Haggis also enables us to leave the cinema believing in forgiveness and hope.

DELO OSVOBAJA (LABOUR EQUALS FREEDOM) (Slovenia, 2005, d. Damjan Kozole)

Since the 1990s, the Slovenian film industry has been building up. The previous film by director, Damjan Kozole, was a hard-hitting look at the fate of exploited migrants to Western Europe. This time his focus is at home, in the city of Ljubljana - although he is making comment on the economic repercussions of Slovenia's becoming a member of the European Union. Factories are closed. Machinists lose their jobs. The social and psychological consequences of unemployment, especially marriage breakdown, are the themes of this very effective 71 minute feature which was completed in only six weeks.

It is not that there is anything new. The topics are familiar. However, Damjan Kozole, is a strong filmmaker and his cast are excellent, especially Peter Mujsevski as Pero, the middle-aged married man, father of a daughter, who has been laid off.

Peter looks like your very ordinary worker type (think Ernest Borgnine as the butcher, Marty). But he is a good man, faithful and loving, a man who does not deserve this fate. He suffers loss of self-esteem, depression and is unable to provide for the comforts his working wife expects. It is she who breaks up the marriage.

Actually, the film offers some hope. Fate takes another turn and smiles on Pero - and he looks up the personals in the paper and meets a simple, good-hearted widow. That is where it ends, not in feeling dismal but with hope in a realistically difficult world.

THE DUKES OF HAZZARD (US, 2005, d. Jay Chandrasekhar)

To be fair to the makers of The Dukes of Hazzard, they intended to make mindless entertainment. Everyone will agree that they have succeeded with the mindless! For anyone wanting to see two yobbos give up being self-absorbed for a moment and become absorbed with cars, speed, chases and crashes (plus

more than a peek at Jessica Simpson pretending to be coy to distract the law), then, of course, this is it. Another momentary distraction of interest is Burt Reynolds's hairpiece. And, Willie Nelson's corny joke-cracking hillbilly.

Suffice to say that this is loud, macho, adolescent, boorish (except for the funny line when the two Dukes, played by Johnny Knoxville who seems just along for the rides and Sean William Scott who acts as if he really believes in his character and the show, say to a group of menacing African Americans who call them Georgia Hillbillies, 'we prefer Appalachian Americans'). And that is all it intended to be – except to get the box-office cash from the loud, macho...

FEVER PITCH (UK, THE PERFECT CATCH) (US, 2005, d. Peter and Bobby Farrelly)

If Hollywood was going to do a remake of the popular novel by Nick Hornby (About a Boy, High Fidelity), would they ask the Farrelly Brothers to do it? The answer would probably be a resounding no. The Farrellys started their successful careers with such broad (very broad) comedies like Dumb and Dumber, went slightly up-market with There's Something About Mary and Me, Myself and Irene. Admittedly, they were much more gentle in their recent comedy, about Siamese twins, Stuck on You. Although there is a sickness sequence near the beginning of Fever Pitch, you would not pick this as a Farrelly Brothers film. It must be that they, like all Americans, just love baseball.

Originally, this was a British football story with Colin Firth as the fanatic teacher-fan. Now, it has been transferred to Boston, the team is the Red Sox. The film makes much of their long (very long) running streak of defeats, the devotion of their followers as well as their resignation to losing. (And by serendipity, as the film was being shot, the Red Sox actually won the league championship). Instead of the rather uptight Firth, we have Saturday Night Live's Jimmy Fallon (who made a strangely alienating impression in Taxi with Queen Latifa). Here he is better cast as the fan who never really grew up, whose life is baseball – whose church, as he says, is baseball.

The point, of course, is: how can you be a lifelong fanatical supporter when there is more to life than baseball (impossible as that might sound to the fan). Here, life comes in the form of workaholic and ambitious Drew Barrymore. They both fall in love and have to find out where baseball finds its rightful place in a marriage.

For non-Americans, especially those who have observed baseball in many a film but who would not travel to a field of dreams, this film is not as involving as the makers would hope. But, with its light touch and comic aspects, it makes a cosy romantic comedy.

THE FLYER (South Africa, 2004, d. Revel Fox)

Once a period of racial integration has begun, films emerge about the social consequences. Many African American features explore the criminal leanings and activities of so many boys in the 'hood. In recently, this has happened in post-apartheid South Africa. Some years ago, there was The Wooden Camera, a hopeful story that acknowledged the violence that gangs are prone to but highlights the fact that, when children are offered an opportunity to develop a talent and a purpose, they can gain a life. The Flyer has a lot in common with the plot of The Wooden Camera.

Keir and his friend Spies get into a lot of trouble. A chance encounter with a man who asks for his bag back from Keir when mugged leads to the man finding Keir again and making him work to pay back the money he stole. The man is a former trapeze artist who has become a trainer because of an accident to his leg. Of course, we know what is going to happen: the boy is fascinated, has ability, blossoms as he grows up, meets a girl, encounters Spies when he gets out of jail, is pressurised into helping his friend in a crime, becomes a champion.

That, again of course, does not matter much. We enjoy seeing how this hopeful plot plays out and sharing the emotions of Keir, as well as realising that he could lose it all.

The Flyer is didactic in an earnest and emotional way - offering worthwhile encouragement to boys in similar situations to Keir. The Flyer is a nice crowd-pleaser.

THE 40 YEAR OLD VIRGIN (US, 2005, d. Judd Appatow)

Steve Carell had a wonderful scene-stealing role in Bruce Almighty as the television anchor whose delivery was ruined by Jim Carrey. He also did a funny turn as a weatherman in Anchorman. Americans have seen him do stand-up comedy and star in the US version of The Office on television. Americans would not be surprised to see his versatility in this film. For non-Americans, it may be a happy surprise.

Audiences with an eye to moral tone might well hold their breath wondering what a sex comedy with this title is going to deliver. It should be said that some of the jokes stretch the envelope, as they say, and have a potential for offending sensibilities. On the other hand, I was taught a long time ago, that everything finite, everything human could be the subject of humour, otherwise we put it on a pedestal and it becomes an idol. Given that proviso about the verbal humour, this film is quite surprising in its values stances.

While his friends who work in the electronics shop with him in the San Fernando Valley, mock his celibate life and are determined to do their best to change the situation as might be expected, the points that the film makes are that celibacy and virginity can be choices, that these choices should be respected, that we certainly struggle in finding authentic love and relationships and many wallow in sex, that ultimately we need to find the right person, commit in love to that person and rejoice in children. Underlying this comedy and its raunchiness are what we call traditional values. It would be a pity to get lost in the superficiality of the sex jokes and so miss the deeper point.

Steve Carell, who co-wrote the screenplay, has the opportunity to play Andy as a somewhat Forrest Gump-like innocent, play the innocent trying to impress and shock the boys at poker, play a sensible man who makes choices – and do a whole lot of impersonations of nice and obnoxious characters along the way. He and his workmates, Paul Rudd, Romany Malco and Seth Rogen, also do some improvising on their journey from lewdness to ordinariness.

Catherine Keener is the middle-aged woman who sees what is true and good in Andy.

Along with The Wedding Crashers which also combines the ribald with old-fashioned love, The 40 Year Old Virgin touched a nerve with American audiences who gave them box-office success – and not just for the sex jokes.

FRATRICIDE (Germany, 2005, d. Yilmaz Arslan)

This is very strong stuff and well worth seeing. Director Yilmaz Arslan migrated to Germany decades ago, but his concern about Turkish issues is still powerful. While the setting is Germany, the people are the Kurds. It is the Germany of Kurd migrants who have been sent by their families to earn money to send back to their impoverished homes. It is less the Germany of the Germans who do not seem to make up much of the world of the Kurds, negligent and oppressive authorities.

The focus of the film is a young man who has been financed for his trip by his brutal pimp brother and who earns some money as a barber operating in the toilet of a bar. He is a principled young man, especially when he encounters a young boy who needs guidance and protection. The film shows the bonds of friendship between these two with great sensitivity and feeling and gives a humane core to the rest of the grim story. The young boy, Ibo, is one of the most engaging screen presences and won an award at the Locarno festival.

Accidents happen simply as the result of casual taunts and lead to violence and blood feuds. They are steeped in the cultural and religious traditions of the homeland, vengeance begetting vengeance with little possibility for escape.

The film has some moments of visceral violence that will startle, but it is a film that makes a plea for attending to the cries of refugees and the poor.

THE ISLAND (US, 2005, d. Michael Bay)

For the first hour of this long action-drama, audiences might be wondering what has happened to director, Michael Bay. He is one of the foremost exponents of slam-bang cinema, chases, explosions and crashes. It worked best in *The Rock*, was tongue-in-cheek with the *Bad Boys* movies, went serious for *Armageddon* and too serious for *Pearl Harbour*. *The Island* starts with serious.

After an hour, we are reassured that this truly is a Michael Bay film. And once the chases start, they continue and continue. The protagonists have providence on their side because in ordinary circumstances they would have been killed within minutes. Memories of the old serials come back with their cliffhangers at the end of each episode. You think there is no way out of this tense trap but next week you find there was a safety net or some trick that keeps them going. Here, they fortunately escape from the most highly qualified security company that money can buy: they get on a lorry with huge metal girders that they can successively and successfully dislodge and stop the fleet of police cars in pursuit; they find a bike that flies just in the nick of time but crash and land on the huge company logo seventy storeys up, are fired on (but this is where they get a literal safety net). And so on. Plausibility is not a major factor in Bay's films.

But, if this kind of thing appeals, he certainly takes you along for quite a ride.

It should be said that the first hour concerns genetic engineering, the creation of clones for wealthy 'sponsors' to have a source for organ replacements when they get ill. So, another variation on the Frankenstein theme with Sean Bean as the scientist playing God. The special effects and sets for this institute and its laboratories is impressively elaborate.

Two of the 'products' which are virtually human are Ewan McGregor and Scarlett Johansson. It is they who have to spend so much time being chased. Djimon Hounsou, who is usually so nice in his screen roles, plays the security head – could he possibly be so ruthless and heartless!?

The Island will eventually take its place amongst the list of bigger-budget films on bioethics. In the meantime, it's on Michael Bay's slam-bang list.

MA HAMEH KHOUBIM (WE ARE ALL FINE) (Iran, 2005, d. Bizhan Mirbaqeri)

A first feature by animator and documentarist, Bizhan Mirbaqeri. This film has a narrow focus on an important theme. What if a stranger arrived at the door one day with news of the eldest son who left the country six years earlier and has not been heard of for three years? What if the stranger asked the family to make a video which could be taken to the son? How would mother and father react? especially if the father is 60 and terminally ill, the mother one of those who dotes on the missing son to the neglect of the rest of the family? and, if the older sister resents the absent brother and his abandoned wife and daughter are dependent on his family? and, if the younger son makes the video, sometimes photographing without the others being aware, sometimes getting formal talking heads? What would the family learn about themselves? Anything? Nothing?

The film recreates daily life in a household, sometimes calmly and sometimes more agitatedly through the lens of the video camera. All sorts of tensions appear as well as the bonds. Finally, the young son does his interview, an opportunity to comment on the reality of the situation and the unrealities of the mother's reassurance that 'we are all fine'. The young son also voices the frustrations of Iranian family life, of prospects for success at home and the compelling temptation to move away, to cut oneself free.

An experience that is both emotional and thoughtful.

MASAHISTA (THE MASSEUR) (Philippines, 2005, d. Brillante Mendoza)

One of the great mysteries of the Philippines (and of its film industry) is how much it is preoccupied with sex and sexuality. Is it something in the long history of the people of this country? Is it the hispanic

heritage? What has it to do with the Catholicism of the country? For a people who are, on the surface, religious and publicly cautious (even a touch puritanical) about sex, why is it so prevalent a theme? And, not just sex, but prostitution both heterosexual and homosexual?

There are no answers in this brief film, just some more illustrations, though the director has given some thought to the structure of his screenplay. As in a number of films, going back to the country's most noted director, Lino Brocka and his *Macho Dancer*, *Masahista* focuses on a young man, Iliac, who works in a gay brothel, this time a massage parlour. There are some explicit sequences and we learn more about procedures in the parlour than we probably need to know.

Where the film is different and broadens its horizons is in paralleling Iliac's work with the preparations for his father's funeral (dressing and undressing, rituals pertaining to bodies, the living and the dead). The scenes are intercut, spelling out the comparisons and contrasts and Iliac's behaviour with his client and with his family, two different worlds. In highlighting the poverty and parlour money going to support families, there are a few religious images - but no priest attending the funeral.

One of many films about the sordid Philippine gay world of the suburbs, but suggesting some social themes for pondering.

ME AND YOU AND EVERYONE WE KNOW (US, 2005, d. Miranda July)

There are a lot of small-budget films these days, generally put under the heading of 'independent cinema'. These are the films not made by the studios but by directors, often struggling, sometimes with the help of such organisations as the Sundance Festival. They are obviously not meant to be blockbusters. Rather, they tend to be portraits of small communities, dramas of lower-key interactions and relationships that can erupt in violence. Many audiences who come across these films expect them to be more 'entertaining' and find them too serious.

Miranda July, writer and director of this film and its main actor, has a history of multimedia art and performance art. Her character here, a lonely young woman more desperate for relationship than she realises, does video work and voiceovers which she hopes to exhibit. Her encounters, especially with a shoe salesman, lead us to more and varied characters, his two sons for instance and their next-door neighbour (three young children) and the repressed gallery owner. This means that this is a drama of interconnections that may or may not lead to anything. As such, the film is well-made, with characters' oddities and foibles to the fore. (Some alarm bells may go up with aspects of the sub-plot of the two boys, one a sex episode with two experimenting teenage girls, the other with the very young boy exchanging some crass messages in a chat room which evokes issues of pedophilia.)

Miranda July avoids judgments on her characters, portrays them seriously and comically, and lets the audience decide.

THE MIGHTY CELT (UK, 2005, d. Pearse Elliot)

This film has a good feel about it.

In its quite brief running time, it shows us something of contemporary Northern Ireland, the growing prosperity and the mood for peace rather than troubles and war (despite the remnant of diehards how remain bitter). But, that is not the main emphasis. This is a story of a boy and dogs. It is a story of family. Above all, it is a story of hope despite hardships and cruelty.

While the featured stars are Robert Carlyle as a former IRA soldier on the run but settling home again, Gillian Anderson as the single mother of Donal and Ken Stott as a harsh greyhound trainer, the film belongs to young Tyrone McKenna as 14 year old Donal. He is completely convincing as a sometimes slow but very good-natured lad (though not above some smoking and swearing) who proves that portraying sentiment is very different from sentimentality.

While the aftermath of the troubles haunt the adult characters and reminders of the violence are scattered through the film, this is a film that advocates peace. Robert Carlyle is at his best becoming a father-figure to Donal, especially persuading him that there is no future in revenge and guns. Gillian Anderson is a long way from the X Files, convincing as a lonely woman who remembers the war with anger but who has brought up her son well.

For those who like boy and dog films, this is one is very good despite some sad and sudden brutal scenes. The Mighty Celt might be a legendary hero of the comic books, but it is a great name for a champion greyhound racer who is trained with skill and devotion by Donal.

We are drawn into the life of the characters and, even though we get to know them for a comparatively brief time, they are memorable.

LA NEUVAINÉ (THE NOVENA) (Canada, 2005, directed by Bernard Emond)

Many explicitly religious films fall short of expectations because they exhibit a too earnest proseletysing zeal or depict aspects of piety that many audiences find puzzling, incongruous or simply alienating. La Neuvaïne succeeds in portraying simple faith with great respect and without being patronising. It is also able to portray lack of faith in God in contemporary secular society with sympathy and understanding.

Writer-director, Bernard Emond, is an anthropologist by training. He has worked in Inuit television and has made short films, documentaries and some feature films. He declares that he is a non-believer but he affirms the long tradition of Catholic faith in his native Quebec. He is also concerned that today's Canadians in the province of Quebec are in danger of cutting themselves off from this religious tradition and losing this heritage.

In the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, the church of Quebec reacted quickly to change in the Catholic Church and many Catholics found themselves rejecting so much of their religious upbringing and practice, eager to throw off what they saw as ecclesiastical authoritarianism. Some of the clearest cinema expressions of this reaction are found in Denys Arcand's 1988 Jesus of Montreal. His Decline of the American Empire (1987) and its Oscar-winning sequel, The Barbarian Invasions (2003) should be seen in this perspective.

Emond clearly inhabits the world that Arcand suggests. However, he brings to La Neuvaïne the simplicity of film language that marks the films of Robert Bresson, a plainness and an austerity of style that communicate directly but suggest deeper meanings, especially some opening to what we might call 'the transcendent'. To continue the cinema connections, it could be added that the central character of La Neuvaïne, a non-believing doctor, would be at home in her search for meaning in her life in Kieslowski's Decalogue.

The title is something of a challenge. Novenas, even amongst Catholics, are not in vogue everywhere as they once were. They are a feature of popular religious culture. Nine days of continued prayer for a special intention, even some kind of miracle, has been a popular practice over the centuries. In La Neuvaïne, Francois, a young man who personifies goodness in a kindly but down-to-earth way, helps on a farm, works in a small supermarket in a provincial town. When told that his grandmother is dying (she has brought him up since his parents were killed in a car crash when he was very young), he decides to make a novena for her recovery. He goes on a daily pilgrimage to the shrine of St Anne to invoke her assistance. The shrine has a priest, in his vestments, always available in a kind of shop-front to bless the pilgrims. (The credits indicate that the shrine is under the care of the Redemptorists who will be glad of the attention given to their ministry.)

The central character is Jeanne, a highly professional doctor who has experienced the long illness and death of her child. There is no place for faith in her life. She has also taken care of a battered wife and her daughter and experienced the anger of the violent husband. Her recuperation takes her to the vicinity of the shrine and a sympathetic encounter with Francois.

La Neuvaïne does not push the religious experiences of its characters and does not push religion at its audience. Ultimately, there are no obvious miracles and no obvious conversions. Rather, the audience appreciates Francois' straightforward faith and piety - and sees that Jeanne's kindness towards his grandmother as she dies, is a real answer to prayer. The audience appreciates the change in Jeanne, that she can continue her healing work as a doctor - she has to respond to a sudden emergency outside the shrine as a man suffers a heart attack - and can minister to the grandmother. Deeper possibilities for hope emerge.

Throughout the film there are interludes of voiceover as Jeanne quietly discusses her non-faith with a probing questioner. It is only at the end, when she stands watching the priest in the blessing room, that we appreciate she has been exploring her life and its meaning with him.

La Neuvaïne was entered in competition in the Locarno Film Festival, August 2005. It received serious attention, packed houses and favourable reviews. This surprised many festival-goers: that a secular audience would be so moved by religious themes, even explicitly Catholic themes. It won the ecumenical award for the quality of its film-making and the skill in its presenting its religious and values content, the best actor award and a special award from a jury of young people.

ON A CLEAR DAY (UK, 2005, d. Gaby Dellal)

Days are not always clear in Glasgow. In fact, this film begins with two very sad days for Frank (Peter Mullan).

The first is his memory of the day when one of his twin sons was drowned as a very young boy. The grief has stayed with him and, without his always realising it, he has blamed himself. But he has also unwittingly blamed his surviving son and this has alienated them both.

The second day is a day of celebration at the Glasgow docks as a new ship is launched. (The producers were allowed to film an actual launch which adds to the impact of the sequence.) However, for Frank, it is a harrowing day. He has been sacked. He cannot bring himself even to watch the launch. Instead he sees a colleague injuring his hand to get more compensation.

Fortunately, at home he has a loving wife, Joan (Brenda Blethyn), although she cannot bring herself to tell Frank that she is going for her bus-driving licence (nor about her test failures). The film raises the question, so relevant and heart-rending in recent decades: what is a retrenched middle-aged man to do with his life?

Frank has some friends from work. Eddie (Sean McGinley) has opted for a more menial job of cleaning. Danny (Billy Boyd) is a nice brash young man with mixed prospects. Norman (Ron Cook) is a good friend but considered a bit of a softy. Time off gives Frank more opportunity to go to the baths and swim, something he is good at and loves. Sometimes, he sees his grandchildren at the baths, though it takes him a long time to come to terms with his son after he realises he must.

If swimming were your talent and you had any amount of time, what would you decide to do? Swim the English Channel? Not very likely. But, of course, this is what the film is about.

There is a really pleasant atmosphere about this film despite the hardships. Ultimately, it is a film of hope (even of inspiration) for men like Frank and their families. It is not without its bawdier side as the men joke with each other, but it is all in good humour.

Director, Gaby Dellal, brings a feminine sensitivity to this story of a middle-aged man. She encourages performances that give some depth and richness to friendships as well as the regrets of how a tragedy can overshadow family life. She also keeps us interested as Frank goes about his training, the laps, the swims in the ocean, the details of preparation for the Channel attempt.

Clearly, the swim itself is built up as the climax of the film and, while we never really doubt that Frank will achieve his goal, he has enough struggles on the way that would make any sensible swimmer give up. But,

of course, this swim is a symbolic gesture for Frank. Despite his sadness, his disappointments in his family, in his work, he has found what seems an almost impossible goal which is not only worth striving for but must be achieved. We don't begrudge him the happy ending and his clambering to shore to meet all his family and his friends.

Peter Mullan is a convincing screen presence. Brenda Blethyn has played the supportive wife often before but does it well. A lot of the feel of the film and the humour comes from Frank's three friends and the Scottish Chinese owner of the local fish and chip shop who acts as coach.

Feel-good but not sentimental.

A PERFECT COUPLE (UN COUPLE PARFAIT) (France, 2005, d. Nobuhiro Suwa)

Towards the end of this very long cinema experience (so it seems), the husband says he is fed up. He has only had to live through this focus on a breaking French marriage. We have had to watch it and are far more entitled to be fed up.

This is the kind of film where knowing reviewers refer to the dialogue as Pinterish. But Pinter works so much better in the theatre than on screen. I began to wonder how many critics had coined the word 'interminababble'!

Since the film was so hard to watch (the lighting being very dark except for a scene in a cafe and two in the Rodin museum), I found I was distracting myself by planning a review. I wondered whether there was a difference between dialogue which was 'mundane' and that which was uninteresting', 'inconsequential', 'banal'. [Then I was distracted by wanting a dose of mindless action.]

I have always liked Valeria Bruni-Tedeschi and remembered that she appeared to great advantage in 2004 in a much more interesting analysis of a marriage break-up, Francois Ozon's 5x2. Japanese director, Nobuhiro Suwa, expects his audience to be prepared to give him continued concentration on very long takes, on silences and on the dialogue which is mundane, uninteresting, inconsequential or banal according to tolerance. The film certainly has its own style which will appeal to those who value 'festival audience' films and have a high capacity for endurance. It won the Jury prize at Locarno and acclaim for its being pure cinema and avoiding clichés.

THE PERFECT MAN (US, 2005. d. Mark Rosman)

Just as well you were not at the press preview for this film. If you wanted to catch grumpy old men in action, denouncing Hollywood rubbish, then that was the place to be. As they became more vociferous, they really seemed to be assuming that The Perfect Man was actually made for them and they were affronted.

Of course, The Perfect Man was made for an audience of teenage girls (and, probably, their mothers). To be judging it along the lines of, say, Citizen Kane is really beside the point.

So, The Perfect Man centres on a sixteen year old and her younger sister with their single parent mother. They have been on the move for years since mother wants to leave as soon as a relationship fails. The unlikely (we hope) premise of the film is that daughter and her friends create an ideal man (who is away in China) who corresponds with mum. Eventually, of course, things get out of hand as the perfect computer plan goes awry in real life – until the happy ending. (Clearly not a plot for old-age reviewers!!!)

This is another Hilary Duff movie for the teens. It is a Heather Locklear movie for parents. Unfortunately, the perfect man is played by Chris Noth whose performance, one could charitably say, is very wooden. Even in a dysfunctional age, we all want things to be nice and perfect.

RED EYE (US, 2005, d. Wes Craven)

Here is a film which delivers exactly what it promises – very entertainingly so.

If you would like a suspense drama, try *Red Eye*. It is directed by Wes Craven better known for *Nightmare on Elm St* and *Scream*. This time he has turned away from horror, although in the second part, he capitalises on his skills as the strong heroine confronts the intruder in her house.

This *Red Eye* is a flight from Dallas to Miami. The passenger is Lisa (the vivacious Rachel McAdam), a manager at a luxury hotel. It is better not to spoil the suspense by simply saying that the plot draws on the war against terrorism and leads us on step by step as Lisa tries to deal with the crises. She uses her wits (even though she is not keen of flying) to try to foil the plot and shows a remarkable amount of good sense and energy. Brian Cox is her father, central to the plot.

Also starring is Cillian Murphy whose career is on the rise. After appearing in such a diverse range of films from *28 Days Later* to *Girl With Pearl Earring*, he was the young villainous doctor in *Batman Begins*. On this performance, he may become the versatile Gary Oldman of the next generation.

While the plot is contemporary, *Red Eye* is something of a satisfying old time suspense thriller that keeps moving rapidly, close-up while on board the plane, pacy editing while on land. Even though the film is under ninety minutes, it establishes characters, motivations and covers all its plot strands credibly.

THE RISING - THE BALLAD OF MANGAL PANDEY (India, 2005. d. Ketan Mehta)

Here we have film-making on the grand scale, Indian style.

The opening tells us that when history meets folklore, legends are born. *The Rising* recounts the history of the power of the East India Company in India, one of the most powerful corporations in world history, and a mutiny by the sepoys which led to an India-wide mutiny. From the Indian perspective, it is seen as the first war of mutiny, the first major step that led to Mahatma Gandhi and Indian independence on August 15th 1947.

In these days of international invasions, international peace-keeping forces and of international terrorism, any film with a subject like this can be both provocative and thought-provoking. This is especially true when Britain is one of the major targets of resentment and we are presented with a portrait of arrogant, greedy, unscrupulous and racist capitalists of the East India Company. World powers not understanding local customs, especially religious customs and their deep convictions - and the presumption that they are merely superstitions that can be over-ridden by authority and what authority thinks is reason and common-sense - will mean that many audiences will be thinking of the leading superpower, the United States, and its actions in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as other parts of the world.

That is the context in which this film has been made and released.

As film, it is certainly beautiful to look at. Indian landscapes, natural beauty, cities and architecture have never looked better. The re-creation of life in the mid-19th century, especially for the wealthy British away from home, has its spectacular moments. There is also an atmospheric score, pounding at emotional moments.

The title indicates that we are getting a hero's eye version of events, the point of view of sepoy, Mangal Pandey, a loyal soldier, well-disciplined who saves his commanding officer. However, deep down there is a humane man who reacts to the ill-treatment and cruelty presumptuously handed out by the Company. When cartridges are introduced for the new Enfield rifles, cartridges dipped in pig and cattle fat, the sepoys are asked to literally bite the bullets, something sacrilegious for both Hindus and Muslims. Officers lie to the sepoys, but once the truth is out, the stage is set for mutiny, with Mangal Pandey as a significant leader. One knows how it will turn out - immediate disaster for the mutineers but a long range peace for India. However, the East India Company, which had ruled India for a hundred years with its own army, is brought down and India is brought under British political rule.

Aamir Khan is a dignified and strong presence as Mangal Pandey. The ballad shows us his gradual 'conscientisation' from soldier to revolutionary. Toby Stephens has a strong role as Gordon, friend and foe of Mangal.

[For those who enjoy movie parallels, think Braveheart - especially at the execution when Mangal exhorts the crowd, not to 'freedom' but to 'attack'.]

THE SISTERHOOD OF THE TRAVELING PANTS (US, 2005, d. Ken Kwapis)

Not exactly the title that leaps to the top of the list for review and recommendation. But, here it is.

The novel (which already has two sequels) by Ann Brashares was published in 2001 and remained on the US best-seller list for over a year. Obviously, a candidate for a movie. One of the writers adapting the novel is Delia Ephron who co-wrote the comedy, Bewitched, as well as You've Got Mail. The film has sound credentials for a romantic comedy.

In fact, The Sisterhood is much more. The question is: who is the target audience? Since the four central characters are sixteen year olds, then younger teenage girls is one answer. But, the answer will also have to include parents. In fact, the recommendation would be for parents and their daughters to watch the film together and see what issues arise and have a good discussion. With not a crass word to be heard and a PG rating, grandparents and aunts, especially, might feel easy about going along as well.

And, the travelling pants?

That is soon explained. One of the four girls, Carmen, narrates how their mothers attended pregnancy classes together, how they grew up as friends and have bonded, always supporting each other. They are about to have their first summer vacation away from each other. When they go giggle-shopping, as girls this age inevitably seem to do, they find a pair of jeans which mysteriously fits them all, despite tall, skinny, plump and ordinary. They pledge a sisterhood, articulate their rules and agree that each of them will have the jeans for a week. They expect happy results.

The film intercuts the four summer stories, nicely pacing them so that we are equally interested in all the stories – and has a nice visual refrain for each week as the pants go through the mail.

Lena (Alexis Bledel) is of Greek origin. Shy, she finds the extended family in Greece rather overwhelming. When she is rescued after falling into the sea by a student helping with fishing, she is attracted, despite a family feud, and gradually gains more self-confidence.

Carmen (American Ferrara) has a Puerto Rican mother. Her father left years earlier. She decides she wants to spend the summer with him. He wants to surprise her with his wedding to Lydia who has two children. This, of course, is the story of rejection and favouritism, racism and anger.

Bridget's (Blake Lively) mother killed herself, her father is distant. She goes on summer camp to Mexico, puts all her energies into running and soccer matches and throwing herself at the young coach. This is the story of loneliness and problems of sex.

Tibby (Amber Tamblyn) is a rebel (with dyed hair streaks), resentful of having to babysit her much younger sister, working in a supermarket for the holidays and trying to make a video on losers. When she helps a twelve year old who has fainted, Bailey, she finds the young girl wants to be with her and help with video interviews. This is the story of breaking through hard exteriors for emotional expression and connection.

The young actresses bring their characters to life (although Jenna Boyd as Bailey almost steals the show with her young Julia Roberts' look and acting like an audition for a remake of Erin Brockovich in twenty years' time). Audiences can readily identify with them.

This is a very positive film about bonds of friendship. It raises issues of identity, relationships, family, hurt, sexuality and handles them with sensitivity and sound insights into values.

SOMMERSTURM (SUMMERSTORM) (Germany, 2004, d. Marco Kreuzpaintner)

Summer Storm, according to the director, Marco Kreuzpaintner, is substantially autobiographical. This is a film of a 26 year old director coming to terms with his sexual orientation. He is also trying to overcome homophobic attitudes in his audience by presenting his themes in the context of ordinary life rather than in a hot-house. Not that his main character, Tobi (Robert Stadlober) does not feel that he is in a hot-house situation, infatuated with his best friend, in denial of his orientation, pushed together with a girl who likes him and trying to keep up a pose of disdain against homosexuals. This is compounded when he goes on a rowing training camp (he is the team leader) and finds that a team of gay oarsmen, The Queerstrokes, are to be their main opposition in the competition race.

While the film traces other characters in the group, especially Tobi's best friend and object of his affection without realising it, the audience is invited to share Tobi's intensity of feeling, his emotional curiosity with the new group, his sexual encounter, his being urged by his girlfriend to be honest with himself and others and his finally coming out.

The director has opted for a gentle, sometimes romanticised approach to his plot and characters which runs the danger of being sentimental and sometimes overwrought. However, he does bring out into the open the trials and traumas of rites of passage that some young men have to undergo.

SPIRIT TRAP (UK, 2004, d. David Smith)

The plot isn't bad. What if students went into an old house and discovered a ghastly secret past and some ghosts who wanted revenge which leads to a falling out among the students? Familiar enough, but always good for a re-run. While Spirit Trap does have some suspense and some interesting detail, there are a lot of plot-holes along the way, some lapses of continuity (well, many of them eventually become part of the plot about who is ghostly and how time is actually passing – or not) which make the film sometimes more puzzling than frightening. The performances aren't the greatest either. Billie Piper is the nervous student with a secret. Luke Mabley is absolutely obnoxious as a suave-seeming but violent drug dealer. Sam Troughton is the old-fashioned style hero.

There is some hokum with ouija games, a mysteriously stopped clock, appearances and disappearances of ghosts and a somewhat gruesome re-creation of the ghastly secret events.

UNLEASHED (France, 2004, d. Louis Letterier)

It is very hard to put together the Jet Li of his Hong Kong films and his fine lead role in Zhang Yimou's Hero with the Jet Li of his Hollywood and western action thrillers like Kiss of the Dragon, The One, Cradle 2 the Grave. These latter are potboilers of the most basic kind – one is tempted to say, after looking at some of the brutally staged fights, of the most base, violent kind.

Unleashed seems to be two films which gradually converge. The foremost story involves Li as a kind of wild child brought up in Glasgow (a rather strange setting for this story with not many Scots accents to be heard) as a lethal fighter, for rich patrons to attend a fight club to the death. His guardian is played by Bob Hoskins with few holds barred. This is an ugly, thuggy film.

Then there is the other film where Li takes refuge with a kindly blind piano tuner and his stepdaughter. Li can at last see another kind of life as well as discover the dastardly death of his mother and why he has been a prisoner in Glasgow. Since the blind man is played by Morgan Freeman, he brings great dignity and presence (and his fine voice) to a film that you wouldn't expect to find him in.

Of course, the two strands come together again for a last bout of violence. The trouble with this kind of entertainment (unlike Jackie Chan who opts for martial arts and fun) is that it is so often brutal and ugly.

FILMS ON SCREEN, SEPTEMBER 2005/1

This is a service of the SIGNIS Website, presenting reviews by Peter Malone of films that have been screening during the previous month.

ARISTOCRATS, The
ARSENE LUPIN
ASYLUM
BECAUSE OF WINN-DIXIE
BUSINESS, The
CINDERELLA MAN
DEAL, The
DEUCE BIGALOW, EUROPEAN GIGOLO
DYING GAUL, The
EXORCISM OF EMILY ROSE, The
FACTOTUM
FOUR BROTHERS
GOAL!
GREEN STREET
HWAL (THE BOW)
KINKY BOOTS
LAND OF THE DEAD
LONGEST YARD, The
LORDS OF DOGTOWN

THE ARISTOCRATS (US, 2005, d. Penn Jillette and Paul Provenza)

For some audiences, this will be an offbeat comedy. For others, it will be a test case for limits on language and themes on the screen. It is very easy to empathise with the representative of one of the American churches who found it both repellent and very funny.

As George Carlin explains in his narration throughout the film and, as about 100 stand-up comics re-tell the joke, elaborating it ever more crassly as they proceed, The Aristocrats is a classic joke that combines vulgarity with an ironic punchline. The Aristocrats is a particularly American take on a stage name for the joke's group who run a gamut of obscene behaviour. For non-Americans, The Sophisticates would work better.

The question the film raises is, of course, how far can you go? While any content is possible for humour, it is always the 'how' of telling the joke that can cause the problems. The question also comes up about offending people. Is it OK or not to offend people? What about people with delicate sensitivities? What about people with more earthy and robust sensibilities? Where do community standards come in?

The 'offence potential' of The Aristocrats is not visual but verbal. The descriptions of the aristocrats gets more and more scatological, focussing on sexuality, bizarre and taboo relationships and bodily functions, as the joke is re-told. Many well-known names and faces give their rendition of the joke.

Whatever the merits of or objections to The Aristocrats, the makers have provided a 90 minute compendium that is available for workshops and seminars on censorship which should get participants going.

ARSENE LUPIN (France, 2004, d. Jean-Paul Salome)

Arsene Lupin seems to be the equivalent of Sherlock Holmes in late 19th century French popular novels. However, he is not a detective. Rather, like Raffles, he is a skilled and suave burglar, a gentleman-thief.

The author of the many Lupin books, Maurice Leblanc, published his first in the series in 1905 – and in 1908 created a confrontation between Holmes and Lupin. Leblanc died in 1941.

Over the decades there have been several film versions and many Lupin series for television. This film is a lavish re-creation of the late 19th century and the period before the outbreak of World War I. No expense has been spared to make it look good, costumes and décor and the transition from a horse and carriage world to that of the bicycle and the car.

A prologue set in 1884 introduces us to Arsene, the son of a martial arts trainer in an aristocrat's house. Arsene's father falls foul of the master for robbery but not before he has urged his son to be a skilful thief. He is then found dead after a police chase.

The adult Arsene (Romain Duris) is shown charming the ladies and surreptitiously relieving them of their jewellery, even in the middle of elegant soirees. He is also expertly acrobatic in his escapes. When he meets the daughter of the house, his childhood playmate, Clarisse (Eva Green), at his mother's deathbed, he falls in love but also decides it is time for revenge on her father. He returns as a fencing instructor and is soon caught up in all kinds of plots.

A secret group of Royalists are plotting to remove the government. A gentlewoman thief and spy (Kristin Scott Thomas) is condemned to death by the group but rescued in the nick of time by Arsene who is beguiled by her. They are observed by a wily member of the group (or double agent) who has his own dark secret to be revealed at the end (Pascal Greggory), and what follows is a series of escapades, robberies, duels, betrayals.

It should be said that it is all done with a spectacular touch but also a light touch, a kind of 19th century swashbuckling tone. By the end, however, it becomes very serious as Arsene, the gentlewoman and the agent confront each other. And just when you thought it was all over, there is a tongue-in-cheek episode in 1914 involving assassination attempts on archdukes.

Clearly, an entertaining romp for French audiences. Entertaining for those who enjoy Gallic insouciance!

ASYLUM (UK, 2005, d. David Mackenzie)

Asylum is a misleading title for this drama – it makes it sound too much like the title of a horror film, which it is not. Rather, the setting is the late 1950s where a doctor (Hugh Bonneville) is appointed as deputy head of an asylum. His wife (Natasha Richardson) eventually finds the isolation too much and, while she loves her son, she becomes more estranged from her husband and becomes involved with a seemingly charming patient (Marton Csokas). The patient is under the care of the longtime senior doctor (Ian McKellen).

This is a rather downbeat drama – after all, it could scarcely have a happy ending given the dramatic situation. Audiences will be more interested in the characters and their interactions. Asylum offers quite a meaty role for Natasha Richardson, getting the opportunity to play ordinary, flirtatious, obsessed, threatened, shamed and grieving. Ian McKellen has no trouble in being ambiguously charming and sinister while Marton Csokas (resembling Russell Crowe and originally from New Zealand) is passionately doomed as the artist patient.

On reflection, the content and treatment are what we expected. Director David Mackenzie won critical acclaim with his previous film, *Young Adam*. The screenplay has been co-written by successful playwright Patrick Marber (*Closer*).

BECAUSE OF WINN-DIXIE (US, 2005, d. Wayne Wang)

A film about a dog and a girl, designed for wholesome family viewing.

This is a very American story told with American feelings and sentiment. The temptation is to advise non-American audiences that they might find it more than a bit twee.

Jeff Daniels is a preacher whose wife has abandoned him and left him with his young daughter, Opal, (Anna Sophia Robb who is self-assertive in the Dakota Fanning style which some adults might find overbearing and offputting). Opal rescues a big, abandoned dog which she names Winn-Dixie. The story recounts her love for the dog (especially when it is terrified in storms and when it runs away), her pressure on her father to keep it, as well as to find out stories about her mother. She meets an old black woman, Cicely Tyson, a sympathetic librarian, Eva Marie Saint, a good young man who has been in jail, two scruffy brothers from school and a young friend called (truly) Sweetie Pie (played by Dakota's younger sister, Elle).

Altogether, this is a string of nice stories that help Opal to grow up and for her father to come to terms with his wife's abandoning them. It all ends with everyone at a nice party.

[Director Wayne Wang usually makes tougher films for adult audiences.]

BLINDED (UK, 2004, d. Eleanor Yule)

When you hear the word Gothic ascribed to a novel or a film, it usually suggests that the film is dark with a touch of intense horror or terror, set in a highly contrived and exotic location (even if it is in the middle of England) and takes place in the 18th or 19th century. A Gothic tale is often emotionally overwrought.

In this sense, *Blinded* is a bit of a contradiction. It is a Gothic tale with a remote setting, tense and emotional with a violent atmosphere. However, it is set in Scotland and it takes place in the present. It makes you realise how highly wrought (or overwrought) dramas are much more credible when they are set in the dark past rather than an up-to-date present.

A mysterious stranger from Scandinavia (well, he is an itinerant worker from Denmark) goes to work at a remote farm (well, you get there by car but it is off the main road). The owner of the farm is an embittered and angry man (Peter Mullan) with a younger and sheltered wife (Johdi May) and his ancient mother (Phyllida Law). If you have any Gothic awareness, it won't take much effort to know that mischief and probably mayhem are now brewing in terms of love, sex and betrayal, deaths and murder. And so it comes to pass.

Blinded is a very dour film, grim with hidden secrets, using blindness for a symbol of unexpected cruelty as well as guilt and atonement. It is the antithesis of a Hollywood movie with a happy ending.

THE BUSINESS (UK, 2005, d. Nick Love)

The business here is drug importing and dealing. It is a greedy business, a tough and rough business that destroys friendships, degrades and destroys lives. That would be the moral of the film if its central character really believed it. At times he sounds as if he does, but he has had a taste of what is optimistically called 'the good life' (which simply means plenty of money that gives you the power to do anything you want in a luxury context) but his final remarks at the end of the film as he drives off into a hoped-for new sunrise are cynical and give the lie to it.

Not that *The Business* is not well-made. Like *Sexy Beast*, it leaves a squalid London to bask in Spanish sun and good weather. On the southern coast near Gibraltar, English 'businessmen' can become filthy rich pretty quickly (and import via secret drops of drugs through nearby Morocco). Spanish authorities connive when it suits them – and are ruthless when it doesn't. Fortunes depend on luck and connections.

Writer-director, Nick Love, knows young British adults (*Goodbye Charley Bright*) and knows thugs (*The Football Factory*). His star Danny Dyer appeared in both films and is central to *The Business*. Despite Dyer's interviews with the press describing himself as caught up in drugs, promiscuity and violence after being a successful child actor, he still comes across on screen as basically a good young man, not quite as

bad as the screenplay portrays him. Tamer Hassan as the more genial owner of a club and mastermind of The Business combines charm and shrewdness, except when he becomes an addict himself and his prosperity vanishes. On the other hand, Geoff Bell as a jumped-up criminal looks and sounds truly frightening (as he is as a football hooligan leader in Green Street).

There are enough headlines and newspaper stories to suggest that what we see is quite true – but it is, ultimately, something of an ugly and cynical film despite the Spanish clean and clear air.

CINDERELLA MAN (US, 2005, d. Ron Howard)

Cinderella Man is advertised as a boxing film, but it is much more than that. It is a film about the Depression. It is also the story of a good man who has a second chance at success in his life and becomes a hero and role model for people who suffered in the United States during the 1930s.

The star is Russell Crowe. Despite the news about his real life tantrums, he shows himself once again to be an actor who can completely immerse himself in his role. He has made only six films in the last seven years, five of them Oscar-nominated, winning for Gladiator. Looking back at them, we can see that he has chosen roles which show the nobility of the human spirit and heroism. He was the older whistleblower exposing the tobacco industry in The Insider, mathematician John Nash in A Beautiful Mind and a principled captain of a ship in Master and Commander.

Here, Crowe is an everyman character. There is a frequently quoted line from Marlon Brando in On the Waterfront about his frustrated boxing career: 'I could have been a contender'. Crowe portrays a contender from the waterfront.

He is James J. Braddock, a successful boxer at the end of the 1920s. He is happily married with three children. He is a Catholic, though when he experiences hardships during the Depression, he tells his devout wife he is 'all prayed out'. There is a nice touch at the end when he faces his tough bout against world heavyweight champion, Max Baer. His friends and supporters from his New Jersey neighbourhood gather in the local church and the parish priest sets up the radio there for everyone to listen in.

Braddock was not a wealthy man but he lost his stocks and shares in the Wall St crash of 1929. This reduced his family to living hand to mouth while he tried to get work on the docks. An occasional fight brought some income, but the film shows just how hard it was for families to survive day by day with little food, light and gas bills overdue and no credit at the local shops.

His victory in a demonstration fight that he was not expected to win led to further success and the chance to fight for the title. If you do not know whether Braddock actually won or not means a very suspenseful climax to the film, audiences identifying with him against the clownish and brutal Baer and with his wife listening anxiously.

Renee Zellweger is a versatile actress. While she appears as the supportive wife, she brings strength and conviction to her role. Paul Giamatti (so good in Sideways) steals his scenes as Braddock's coach and agent.

Boxing is not everyone's sport and some of the fight sequences may be a bit graphic for everyone's taste. However, it is the spirit of Braddock, whom writer Damon Runyon dubbed 'Cinderella Man' because of his rise from poverty at a later time in his life, that carries us through the film.

Two years ago, the racing film Seabiscuit, was popular viewing. This was another Depression hero, a horse which was not expected to win races but who, after severe injury, got back the strength to win. This is the spirit of the battler and Seabiscuit encouraged people at a time of struggle. Cinderella Man shows us how well the public respond to a good man who overcomes difficulties, who is willing to try even though he may not win. Braddock was this kind of hero. The film also shows us that he was a man of principle and integrity.

THE DEAL (US, 2005, d. Harvey Kahn)

The Deal is a contemporary business world thriller, a conspiracy drama with industrial espionage, illicit arrangements and cover-ups. It is an interesting thriller though the screenplay is much the same as you might see in a well-made television series episode. It relishes the intrigue behind the scenes of boardroom meetings but also has a liberal, sometimes heart-on-sleeve applauding of justice causes and personal integrity.

Christian Slater is a whiz-kid consultant who is head-hunted for an oil distribution project. His company is delighted as its profits have been slipping. He persuades an earnest environmental campaigner with a business degree (Selma Blair) to come and do better for her beliefs by working in Wall Street. Of course, despite their knowledge, they are somewhat naïf in the ways of the business world and presume integrity where there is none. The deal is so important to the bosses that they have no hesitation in murdering colleagues who are on track to expose them. The scenario has the US at war with Arab states, the stopping of oil supplies and connections with the Russian Mafia. To this extent, the film is predictable, although there is a twist of honesty at the end.

Robert Loggia is the smooth-talking but ruthless company head. Colm Feore (so often a villain) seems the enemy but proves to be more honest at the end.

DEUCE BIGALOW, EUROPEAN GIGOLO (US, 2005, d. Mike Bigalow)

For those who have been waiting eagerly and patiently for Rob Schneider to reincarnate his character, Deuce Bigalow, Male Gigolo, the wait has finally ended – with very few bangs and some whimpers.

This 82 minute film is really an extended sex joke, somewhat provocative because of its subject, but not really much of a joke. There are some laughs (mainly at Europeans slanging the US) but the film begins with leers and continues in that vein. Some of the jokes and the slapstick are really very corny and/or very crass, some of which would embarrass a ten year old trying to tell them.

Deuce, whose potential gigolo charms and talents are not very evident in Rob Schneider's presence and performance, finds himself in Amsterdam where, to his amazement, drugs and prostitution are legal. Someone disagrees and is killing off the great gigolos of Europe (the publicity says this is a riff on the film Who is Killing the Great Chefs of Europe but there is little taste here). The venue and heroics (like Kevin Costner saving Whitney Houston at the Oscars in The Bodyguard) are the annual awards for the gigolos – where, ultimately, there is a bang.

Most of it is snigger comedy with Eddie Griffin supplying the more blatant side of things and Jeroen Krabbe, perhaps happy at being able to make a film in his native Holland, takes it all very seriously (despite the crass situations he is put in) as a police inspector with a mission. No awards for this one.

THE DYING GAUL (US, 2004, d. Craig Lucas)

Early in this film about film-writing, Campbell Scott's Jeffrey, an intense and acquisitive Hollywood producer, explains to the writer (Peter Sarsgaard in yet another different and finely tuned performance) that audiences go to movies to be entertained, not to learn, and that no one will pay to see a movie entitled The Dying Gaul.

He is probably right - in this case. And those who do venture out to see it will have demands made on them, especially in terms of realism (or not), memories and reflections on memories (many of them portrayed by dialogue in an internet chat room). The film is not predictable.

We also have to reflect on the explanation given of the Roman statue of the Dying Gaul. Gauls were enemies but a Roman sculptor created a masterpiece sympathetically depicting an outsider, an enemy. In this film Jeffrey finishes in that pose. Is he the contemporary Dying Gaul and, if so, why?

Craig Lucas (Broadway playwright and screenwriter of *Longtime Companion*, *Prelude to a Kiss* and *The Secret Lives of Dentists*) has written a very literate script that demands attention. While he mocks Hollywood (and its need to change a homosexual story to a heterosexual one – which does not happen in this film), he looks closely at affluence and success, at relationships, both homosexual and heterosexual as well as family, at betrayal, secrets and lies and at deep hurt. He is well served by the performances also of Scott and Patricia Clarkson as Scott's wife.

Not an easy film but, because it raises so many questions and its plot is so elliptical, it is always intriguing.

FACTOTUM (Norway, 2005, d. Bent Hamer)

Writer Charles Bukowski. Born in Germany, he was brought to the US as a child. He brought a European sensibility to the tradition of the Beat Generation and the kind of outsider to mundane America as was William Burroughs. Bukowski's addiction was not drugs but alcohol – he disliked prison because it had the wrong kind of bars!

Bukowski and his fictional alter egos have been portrayed (quite convincingly) by Ben Gazzara in *Tales of Ordinary Madness* and Mickey Rourke in *Barfly*. Bukowski is the embodiment of the educated bum, a mixture of sleaze and philosophy. As portrayed here by Matt Dillon, he is more clean-cut (by comparison) and, to that extent, less convincing. However, what Dillon does convey is the possibility that this alcoholic professional writer could actually succeed in getting work published, despite his antagonistic attitudes and presumptions.

However, *Factotum* is based on several stories and this screenplay meanders from one episode to another, one drink to another, one attempt at relationship to another (with Lili Taylor and Marisa Tomei). Maybe, Bukowski's characters and experiences are intrinsically interesting, but not particularly here in *Factotum*.

FOUR BROTHERS (US, 2005.d. John Singleton)

Director John Singleton broke into the film world in the early 1990s with his hard-hitting tale of African American families in Los Angeles, *The Boyz'n the Hood*. He is still in a hood, this time in a very rundown Detroit. In the meantime he has explored black themes in *Poetic Justice*, *Higher Learning*, *Rosewood* and *Bay Boy*. He has also done two very commercial action shows, the remake of *Shaft* and *The Fast and the Furious 2*.

This is a fast-paced drama with action and emotion. It is also an uncomfortable film. It is a film about the law and vengeance, the taking of justice into one's own hands, especially under emotion pressure. Four fostered men, two black, two white, are shocked at the gunning down of their mother, in a seemingly random killing in a store hold-up. The men are out to find and kill the killers, despite warnings from an old friend now on the Detroit force.

Actually, the vengeance part is quickly dealt with but the screenplay takes us beyond the killing to a very tangled web of civic corruption and gangster heavyhandedness that makes the revenge theme much more complex. It is the same with the characters of the four brothers themselves. They look to be basic stereotypes of street smart men from tough neighbourhoods: the oldest, a short-fuse emotional and violent white ex-prisoner (Mark Wahlberg); a big and tough black man (Tyrese Gibson); a black man who found a place in union work and trying to build up his own business (Andre Benjamin); a wannabe white rock star (Garret Hedlund).

The death of their social campaigner mother (Fionnula Flanagan), a woman admired by everyone brings the men together, creating tension but reinforcing bonds. They burst out in understandable anger finding it hard to forgive or forget. Yet, they live by a code of loyalty and what they understand as decency. It is too easy to dismiss this film as a kind of vigilante actioner. There is more substance to the characters and issues (especially involving corrupt police and a frighteningly menacing gangster played by Chiwetel Ejiofor).

On the other hand, some critics from more stiff upper lip cultures were very uncomfortable with the explicit emotionality of the characters who are not embarrassed to wear their hearts on their sleeves, even when they are tough.

GOAL! (US/UK, 2005, d. Danny Cannon)

A celebration of English football which most audiences will enjoy.

The media often paints an ugly picture of bad sportsmanship on the pitch, the prima donna tantrums of exorbitantly highly-paid players, the hooligan behaviour of supporters. In recent times, films like *The Football Factory* and *Green Street* portray alarming violence of 'the firms' and their brutal clashes. *Goal!* takes a very positive tone yet it does not shirk the negative issues.

There are not many football films. In the 80s there was an entertaining World War II escape story with Sylvester Stallone, *Escape to Victory*, where the prisoners played football (and Pele starred as one of them). There was *The Miracle of Bern* two years ago where film-makers re-created the glory days of German football (soccer to those outside the world of football). Now, we have the English celebration. It is a likeable film, one of those emotional rags to riches and championship sagas that may be fairytales but do come true so often with those who are very talented in sports.

The film has been written to appeal to the widest range of football enthusiasts. The hope is that it will draw the American football fans (not the fans of American football, a very different sport). With a Latino hero, it is clearly going to be a winner amongst Hispanic audiences.

Most of the time, dreamers go off to America to fulfil their hopes. This is a really serious contender for movie surprise of the year! This time someone from Los Angeles leaves it for his dream, going to England and, more specifically, to the wet and wild city of Newcastle and its football club.

Goal! opens with illegals crossing the Mexican border. Then it shows a poor family making a life in LA by working in mansion gardens. The father knows that this is the world his family is confined to, no wealth, no opportunities except to buy a truck and set up an independent business. And that's it. His older son, Santiago (Kuno Becker) has a great talent for football. When an English former scout (Stephen Dillane) notices him, he backs him and persuades him to come to Newcastle to try out.

The screenplay does not give Santiago a dream run. His first play is in pouring rain and sloshing mud that he has never experienced in LA. Some of the Reserves are bullies with nasty insults to Santiago. The coach (a persuasive continental European performance by Romanian Marcus Iures) seems aloof. However, Santiago is presented as a decent and principled young man, well brought up by his grandmother and pleasingly polite, even when his team-mate takes him to boozy, sexy clubs. He is tempted to give up but doesn't – and people appreciate him and support him.

For those who love the game, they will feel right at home even if they are not Newcastle supporters. Quite a lot of match play sequences. The film uses the actual city and stadium locations as well as the turbulent sea-front very effectively. We are drawn into identifying with Santiago. We really want him to succeed, to win over the coach, for his father to acknowledge that his choices are the right ones.

Kuno Becker is a very personable young man (and a popular star in Mexico) and has no trouble in getting us on his side. Anna Friel has a nice role as the team's nurse and his girlfriend. Alessandro Nivola gives a flamboyant performance as the equivalent of an ageing Wayne Rooney (or substitute whichever player has proven himself a job role-model) who, in this world of dreams and hopes, can actually come to his senses and do the right thing. If only...

GREEN STREET (UK, 2005, d. Lexi Alexander)

No, definitely not an environmental documentary. The working title was 'Hooligans' and that would communicate instantly the topic and tone of the film. While *Green Street* sounds rather nice, it actually

refers to a very British phenomenon, the gangs, called 'firms', who are fanatical followers of football (soccer) teams. The Green Street firm are London's West Ham fanatics. The enemy is the Milwall firm.

This is the second football hooligan film in a year. In fact, Milwall was the centre of attention in 2004's The Football Factory. These two films are complementary (definitely not complimentary). Green Street is written by a German woman, the director

Green Street intends to draw in non-British audiences by casting Elijah Wood (it is a bit like Frodo goes to the football and is corrupted). He is a journalism student at Harvard, son of a big-time, busy and neglectful editor, who is framed as a drug-dealer. He goes off to see his sister (Claire Danes) who has married an Englishman (Marc Warren). His brother (Charlie Hunnam) is the leader of the Green Street firm. The rather diminutive American is flattered at the attention he receives (despite a lot of mocking Americans), is surprised at the adrenalin rush he gets in participating in the danger and the violence. He is hooked.

Meantime, there is a bad history between West Ham and Milwall. The ageing leader of that firm saw his young son killed in one of the set-to's and harbours hatred and revenge. As you would guess, he gets his chance with some disastrous consequences. These melees are all the more frightening because of the truly menacing and brutal presence of Geoff Bell (who appeared to the same effect in The Business) as the Milwall leader.

Like The Football Factory, this is a grim and unflattering look at a worldwide phenomenon. But it is a British phenomenon with causes international ruckuses, many fights, injuries and some deaths, leads to passport withdrawals and serious policing. Whether Green Street explains hooligans or not, it does give an alarming picture. (For fans who want to keep football on a pedestal, it would be much, much better to see the optimistic Goal!).

HWAL (THE BOW) (South Korea, 2005, d. Kim Ki-duk)

Kim Ki-duk has built a strong international reputation in the last six years as one of Korea's pre-eminent directors. He is not afraid of unconventional themes. His film, The Isle, was beautiful to look at but was a study in sado-masochism. He has ventured into the world of crime and gangsters. In recent years, he has reached a wider audience with his meditative Spring, Summer, Autumn, Spring and his imaginative ghost story, Binjip (3 Iron).

His themes and style come together in The Bow. Set entirely at sea and on a boat, it is a portrait of an old man who has kept a foundling on the boat for ten years and is about to marry her when she turns seventeen. He plays a quaint stringed bow – which also serves for arrows when a growing number of his rich business clients who come aboard for fishing make advances on the girl. He also uses the bow to shoot arrows at the side of the boat where the girl rides on a swing, a method by which they are able to tell fortunes.

The inevitable happens when a young man comes aboard. The drama concerns the reactions of the old man, the changes in the girl. What happens is not quite predictable and makes for dramatic intensity in the resolution. Ki-duk offers images of the Buddha and wedding ceremonies which give his film not only an exotic beauty but invite religious as well as mythic interpretations of what is happening.

KING'S GAME (Kongekable, Denmark, 2004, d. Nikolaj Arcel)

It is meant as a compliment when this film is described as a small-scale Scandinavian Woodward and Bernstein story. This is a film about journalism and politics, about dirty tricks and integrity.

The author of the novel on which the film is based, Niels Krause-Kjoer, a political journalist, served as a spin-doctor to the Danish conservative party for a year in 1997. Since leaving politics, he has written a number of books and lectures at universities. He has consolidated a strong reputation which makes the characters and events in The King's Game credible – and, he says, are based on his experiences as well as what might well have happened.

The tone of the film is Scandinavian but audiences will have little difficulty in making the parallels with political happenings in their own countries.

The setting is an election, the leader of the opposition injured in a car accident, the manoeuvring of an ambitious deputy and the press liaison to discredit his main rival (a liberal woman) and a succession of leaks and manipulating journalists. The audience identifies with an earnest reporter who is given the political round, fed a story which he uses and who then follows up to unravel the plot and unmask the villains.

At first the screenplay is quite critical of journalists and the cosy relationships with politicians. But, it is the media proprietors and editors who are mainly at fault because of their deals with the powers that be. And, so, it is the duty of honest journalists to expose corruption and work for justice.

The film is well-plotted, the characters and situations credible and, because of the tension of the move towards election day, the screenplay generates suspense. Anders W. Berthelsen (Italian for Beginners, Blinded) makes the earnest journalist a sympathetic hero and Soren Pilmark is more than sinister as the scheming politician. This is a solid and intelligent drama that will interest adult audiences.

KINKY BOOTS (UK, 2005, d. Julian Jarrold)

An entertainingly feelgood film from the UK which leads its audience into familiar and unfamiliar worlds, makes them laugh and suggests tolerance and understanding. Perhaps clues to describe it could be 'a 21st century version of an Ealing Studios factory comedy via Priscilla Queen of the Desert and The Full Monty'!

Two British worlds collide and co-operate. The first is the shoe factory world of Northampton which has fallen on hard times (especially with cheap imports from Eastern European countries). The second is the world of London's Soho clubs, especially those that feature Drag Queen performances. How do they come together? Through Kinky Boots.

Many audiences will empathise with the changed economic conditions in the UK's manufacturing industries which lead to layoffs and redundancies. One of the answers is to find different niche markets. When Charlie Price (Joel Edgerton) tries to defend a woman being attacked in a London lane, he finds he has come to the rescue of Lola, who sings at a local club. Her stiletto heels can't support her weight distribution. So, Northampton moves into production of elaborate boots for transvestites and drag queens.

This is a 12A film with hardly a swear word, so the treatment of the themes is mild and benign. Lola (Chiwetel Ejiofor) is really Simon who had many problems with his gender and his father's rejection. Ultimately, he finds a place designing in the factory. Charlie had problems being expected to fulfil his kindly father's dreams. Kindred spirits, despite some heavy prejudice on the part of Charlie (and even more so from his fiancée), they are able to understand each other and work together.

There are plenty of flamboyant songs and choreography, especially for a grand finale showing off the boots in the Priscilla vein. There are many scenes of factory workers plying their craft, proud of their manufacturing skills. In this sense, the film is a win-win film (except for Charlie's success-oriented fiancée – but there is a loyal worker who can take her place). It is very cheerful. It is funny, with some pathos – and hope.

LAND OF THE DEAD (US, 2005, d. George A. Romero)

George Romero can't leave the dead alone! He re-created the zombie movie in the late 1960s with his small-budget, black and white horror film, The Night of the Living Dead. He made two sequels in the 1980s, Day of the Dead and Dawn of the Dead and so staked his claim to be the master of the living dead genre (and there have been several sequels and re-makes from other directors, including a recent Dawn of the Dead).

The Living Dead films have served as allegories of American society of the time. This is the case here, especially as it had release in some countries around the world just as New Orleans was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. The images of a desolated Washington with the poor struggling to survive and a rich coterie exploiting the situation and menaced by the living dead are a reminder of human vulnerability and that disaster can strike suddenly and the consequences devastating.

A group of mercenaries, led by Simon Baker, have a mission to destroy the zombies, especially as they menace the survivors. However, the dead are starting to react to stimuli, almost to think for themselves. Their leader moves them across the river towards the city. The mission is double-edged as a rogue mercenary (John Leguizamo) is trying to rob from the callous businessman who is profiteering from the situation (Dennis Hopper), so fighting the enemy and fighting within the ranks.

Romero uses a lot of the conventions of the genre with some people being made zombies, with attacks that are frighteningly ugly – and some touches of cannibalism – but this is not as ‘in your face’ as many recent horror films. In fact, some diehards might be disappointed that it has the lighter and less grizzly touch. But, as always, the appeal is to the horror fans.

THE LONGEST YARD (US, 2005, d. Peter Segal)

Back in the 1970s, Robert Aldrich used to make some hard-hitting dramas that succeeded because of his tough style. The Longest Yard (re-titled The Mean Machine for non-American audiences who do not know or understand American football) was another star vehicle for Burt Reynolds who starred as a disgraced player fallen on hard times who is pressured by the prison warden to coach a team that his guards can play against and defeat. The Longest Yard has inspired two remakes in five years: Mean Machine, a British drama that pitted former footballer Vinnie Jones against David Hemmings and, now, keeping the original title, a vehicle for comedian Adam Sandler to challenge James Cromwell. And, over thirty years on, Burt Reynolds is there with a better than usual role as the prison coach. (Many of us won’t be around for the version thirty years from now with Sandler guest-appearing as the coach!)

This is a football movie, so don’t expect punches to be pulled. They aren’t, neither are the kicks and shoving. This is a prison movie, so don’t expect the usual fights amongst the inmate gangs, the sadistic behaviour of the guards to be pulled either. This is a 2005 movie, so don’t expect the language to be polite or the locker-room jokes to be tidied up. (Cloris Leachman, who is almost 80, turns up in a particularly crass and thankless role.)

That said, this is a testosterone sports film where it is tough to build up a team, where the clashes are grinding, where authorities are corrupt and unscrupulous, where comeuppance is also the name of the game.

It is also a comedy of sorts, especially with Adam Sandler drawing on his hangdog look persona and Chris Rock doing a lot of his usual patter (and able to get away with all kinds of racial humour). But, Sandler has been trying to develop his image in recent years to both romantic hero and stronger screen presence. It is a bit hard to accept him as a champion footballer, especially with Burt Reynolds alongside looking absolutely convincing. And James Cromwell and William Fichtner have proven themselves in many films as adept villains.

LORDS OF DOGTOWN (US, 2005, d. Catherine Hardwicke)

Stacy Peralta, Tony Alva and Jake Adams were the founders of competitive skateboarding in the 1970s. They collaborated on these feature film of those early years although Peralta had won acclaim for his documentary covering the same material, Dogtown and Z-Boys. Memory tells me that the documentary was far more interesting than this film, although Peralta is the screenwriter for Lords of Dogtown and he is one of the central characters.

No problem if you are fascinated by skateboarding but it is not the most gripping of sports to watch. If not...

In fact, for those not in the know or in the vein, it is not very interesting at all. The characters don't attract sympathy. Their behaviour is erratic and willful. In fact, for the uninitiated watching the film, it is like a long-term confined incarceration with a group of rebellious adolescents, high on kinetic energy and high on insensitivity. The characters in real life must be happy with the results. They all collaborated in the making, Tony Alva (about whom Jay Adams remarks that he is in competition with the sun for centre of the universe) was choreographer for the skateboarding, Peralta wrote the script and Adams advised Emile Hirsch who portrays him. Skip Engblom (played by Heath Ledger whom Engblom asked to play him) seems a perpetually stoned surfer who set up a board business and the first team, also contributed.

Perhaps the whole thing is too in-house and viewers feel they are kept on the sidelines. Consumer advice for a PG-13 rating in the US was accompanied by more specific advice than usual: Drug and alcohol content, sexuality, violence, language and reckless behavior – all involving teens.

FILMS ON SCREEN, SEPTEMBER 2005/2

This is a service of the SIGNIS Website, presenting reviews by Peter Malone of films that have been screening during the previous month.

MAN, The
MUST LOVE DOGS
NIGHT WATCH
OLIVER TWIST
PRIDE AND PREJUDICE
RAG TALE
REVOLVER
SARABAND
SERENITY
THREE DOLLARS
UPSIDE OF ANGER, The
WHEN WILL I BE LOVED?
WORLD WITHOUT THIEVES

THE MAN (US, 2005, d. Les Mayfield)

At only 83 minutes, this comedy is not setting itself up to be the laugh triumph of the year. Rather, it is a modest comedy/thriller, a variation on *The Odd Couple*, setting the pair in the middle of a police investigation of gun-running in Detroit.

Eugene Levy is a talented comedian. He can do deadpan with the touch of the ingenuous perfectly. He is a master of the double-take. Just check out his performances in *Best in Show* or *The Mighty Wind* or even his naïve father in the *American Pie* series. Here he is a genial, if earnestly single-minded and proper, salesman for dental products from Wisconsin in Detroit for a convention. He is mistaken for an agent for illegal arms sales.

The person who should have been at the rendezvous is Samuel L. Jackson as an intense, humourless, take-no-prisoners cop. He has no hesitation in press-gang methods and the poor salesman finds himself caught in the middle of a set-up and a sting. So, the comedy is the contrast between the good salesman and the relentless cop. It involves being shot, car chases, confrontations with ruthless criminals, being sick, arguments, impersonations as well as a visit to the cop's ex-wife and daughter and going to her ballet performance – and, of course, despite all odds, mission accomplished.

Jackson plays his role as professionally as he does in any serious drama and, therefore, serves as a strong foil for Levy's distress. The main villain is once again, of course, British (Luke Goss).

It wouldn't matter if you missed it but, of its kind, it is an amusing Odd Couple scenario.

MUST LOVE DOGS (US, 2005, Gary David Goldberg)

If you wonder what on earth a film with a title like this could be about, then a reminder that Personals columns (and on-line dating services) have this kind of pithy indication of tastes and interests of the advertisers. When Sarah (Diane Lane) secludes herself after her husband leaves her, her sisters take over and put a notice on a web-site, including this canine requirement. As usual, there is a comic collage of all the unlikely and unsuitable types who answer such ads.

In the meantime, boat-builder Jake (John Cusack) is moping because his wife has left him. This is not a suspense thriller or mystery, so it's a matter of watching how these two eventually come together, their attraction and their clashes. In other words, an information technology era romantic comedy.

Fortunately, Diane Lane is at her best and, though not glamorous, most attractive. John Cusack has done this kind of genially bewildered gentleman before. There is a big cast of Sarah's Irish Catholic extended family (who reflect the current bypassing of the religious and moral heritage – 'blame the nuns'), especially Elizabeth Perkins as her controlling older sister and Christopher Plummer, nicely patriarchal, as her father. Stockard Channing turns up as a seeming gold-digger who tailors her on-line messages to suit her imagination rather than reality.

This is one of those comedies where everyone does something stupid, comes to their senses, faces reality with a bit more honesty and tries to do something better with their lives. Its success comes mainly from the audience-friendly performance of the two stars, especially Diane Lane.

NIGHT WATCH (NOCHNOI DOZER) (Russia, 2004, d. Timur Bekmambetov)

The publicity for Night Watch highlights its breakthrough status in its native Russia, the huge box-office popularity, especially among young audiences, and the hopes that it will lead to a new phase of significant Russian cinema. Two sequels are planned, Day Watch and Dusk Watch, all based on popular novels by Sergei Lukyanenko, who adapted his writing for the screen.

Night Watch is the antithesis of the long, beautifully mounted and languid Russian dramas of the past, films for reflection and contemplation. There is very little time here for contemplation. The director was helped for one of his previous film by that master of the quickie genre film, Roger Corman. It is no surprise that he acknowledges his debts to Tarantino, Cameron and the Wachowskis. But, he also stresses that his film is imbued with Russian atmosphere and concerns, so different from those of the US; that Russian audiences will identify with the locations and the problems of the characters.

And to describe the film? For readers of Steven King or, especially, Dean R. Koontz (Phantoms or Odd Thomas, for instance) and for aficionados of the Star Wars films, The Terminator series and The Matrix, this will be different but familiar territory. After a battle sequence set 1000 years ago when the forces of good and evil call a truce and try to keep a balance as they walk unseen in the world of humans, the scene is set in present-day Moscow for the coming of a more powerful Other, who can choose between good and evil (remember Terminator's John Connor and Star Wars' Annikin).

With style, flash and verve, Night Watch moves us through a world of witches, seers, vampires, The Gloom and Night Watch hunters. You have to pay attention as to who is who and who is good and who is bad as it rushes along. The film builds to a climax but the climax is the beginning of the sequel.

While the Russians have liked it, American money is going into the sequels, especially the third film – a cult trilogy is in the making.

OLIVER TWIST (UK/France, 2005, d. Roman Polanski)

Oliver Twist is probably the most widely known of Charles Dickens' novels. One of his earliest, it was published in serial form in 1837, the year Queen Victoria came to the throne. The 1830s saw reform of laws concerning the poor and their support and the introduction of the parish workhouses for orphans. While reform might have been the 'buzz-word', the reality of life for the poor was still harsh. Dickens, a parliamentary journalist, took social reform causes to heart and made them the core of so many of his novels.

In the climate of current awareness of the abuse of children and, in so many countries, their exploitation, the story of Oliver Twist is still relevant.

For older filmgoers, there are the powerful memories of David Lean's 1948 classic with Alec Guinness's memorable portrait of Fagin. For both older and younger audiences, there are the memories of the film and stage versions of Lionel Bart's musical Oliver with so many of its hummable tunes and their lyrics commenting on Dickens' characters: Pick a Pocket or two, I'd do anything, Consider Yourself... These images influence our appreciation of any new version.

Playwright Ronald Harwood (The Dresser, Oscar for The Pianist) has streamlined the plot (omitting the story of Oliver's mother and Dickens' delight in coincidences). Director is Roman Polanski who has stated that he wants this to be a children's film, a child's view of Fagin and his gang, a touch of fantasy that is larger than life. With marvelous sets, costumes and Rachel Portman's Dickensian score, he has created a nineteenth century London that feels authentic.

Polanski is no stranger to English literature, aside from such classics as Repulsion, Rosemary's Baby and Chinatown, he has directed Macbeth and Thomas Hardy's Tess for the screen.

Two problems face a director of the Oliver Twist story. The first is how to present Oliver himself. John Howard Davies for Lean and Mark Lester for Oliver were both genteel little lads with a woebegone look and manner. The danger is that Oliver becomes too sweet and, even, insipid. Here, Barney Clark's Oliver is much stronger. We are given quite a few sequences in the workhouse and the funeral parlour where his actions show some inner fire. He is always well-mannered and appreciative with an innate goodness. But he is strong.

The other problem is how to present Fagin, especially his Jewish identity and manner. Dickens himself is said to have toned down his portrait after receiving feedback that it could be construed as anti-semitic. The same was said, and continues to be said, of Alec Guinness' performance. While Ben Kingsley as Fagin continues the tradition, Harwood and Polanski (both Jewish) have emphasised his kindly behaviour towards Oliver (which is how Oliver sees him) as well as his ruthlessness in setting up Oliver to be killed by Bill Sykes.

Jamie Forman is less frightening than Robert Newton or Oliver Reed but his Bill Sykes is no less menacing. Leanne Rowe is younger than the usual Nancy and a reminder of how young girls were trapped in prostitution at that time. A fine group of British character actors fill out the supporting roles, chosen not for their film star appearance. Rather, the contrary, many of them look quite eccentric, even grotesque – which Dickens would have liked.

While the film has a PG rating and many of us saw Lean's film when we were young, the subject matter and some of the treatment as well as the violence at the end might make parents wary about whether younger children might be frightened by it. It is meant to be a compliment to Polanski's talent in bringing Dickens to life to say that they might well be frightened.

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE (UK, 2005, d. Joe Wright)

This most popular of Jane Austen's novels is best-known for its many television versions, especially that of 1995 with Jennifer Ehle as Elizabeth Bennet and Colin Firth as Mr Darcy. Last year, the plot was adapted

(but followed the novel closely) for the very entertaining Bollywood-style extravaganza, *Bride and Prejudice*. Strange as it may seem, this present film is only the second version for the big screen. It is sixty five years since Greer Garson and Laurence Olivier were Miss Bennett and Mr Darcy.

Each version needs a good reason for superseding its predecessor. The question is, what does this 2005 version have to offer?

First of all, audiences will find it entertaining. Its recreation of the period, the era of war with Napoleon, is different. Instead of lavish Regency costumes and décor, director Joe Wright has opted for an earthier style. It is not glamorous. Rather, it reflects the social standing and family incomes (and lack of them) of families who were not considered part of 'society'. The Bennett family is not necessarily uncomfortable. But, with five daughters who need husbands to support them (according to the law, daughters could not inherit so estates went to male cousins like Mr Collins), matchmaking was a full-time occupation.

The director also opted for filming on location rather than in studios. A wide selection of homes throughout Britain were chosen. Ordinary homes with the touch of the farm served for the Bennets. Grandly elegant houses were used for Mr Darcy's home and that of Lady Catherine de Burgh. The buildings and interiors are impressive but the film also capitalises on both gentle and rugged locations in Derbyshire.

One of the key features of this version is that the actors are much the same age as the characters in the novel. Elizabeth Bennett is about twenty and Mr Darcy in his late 20s. Greer Garson, for instance, was at least twelve years older for the 1941 film and Laurence Oliver was in his early 30s. Colin Firth was, in fact, 35 when he played the part. This time Keira Knightly is almost twenty and Matthew McFadyen twenty eight.

This means that Elizabeth is a mixture of mischievous girlishness and intelligent shrewdness. Keira Knightly (who has risen quickly to stardom from *Bend it Like Beckham* to the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series) is pretty and pert. While she discovers she has been harshly prejudiced against Mr Darcy, it is the potential for maturity rather than maturity itself that the actress conveys. Matthew McFadyen is a very good Darcy. He alienates Elizabeth as well as the audience with his pride and his prejudices but, as he better understands himself and his feelings, we can understand how Elizabeth is attracted to him. Some of the intense interchanges between the two are quite powerful.

Mrs Bennett and her nerves have always been scene-stealers and Brenda Blethyn seems an obvious and good choice to play her. Surprisingly, Donald Sutherland plays the put-upon Mr Bennett. He is both genial and cowardly and the performance reminds us that he is to blame for not intervening in his daughters' upbringing and his wife's obsessive planning. He is not just simply the martyr to Mrs Bennett's hen-pecking.

Most of the rest of the cast have cameos. Rosamund Pike is a mopy Jane, Jena Malone a giggly and flirtatious Lydia. A standout is Tom Hollander as Mr Collins in his wilfully obtuse proposing to Elizabeth as well as his obsequious attitudes to Lady Catherine de Burgh. She is played with grand hauteur by Judi Dench.

A more down-to-earth and realistic interpretation of Jane Austen's world.

RAG TALE (UK, 2005, d. Mary McGuckian)

No, not the clothing industry. This is a satirical take on those daily rags, the tabloids.

A word of warning. Just as cinemas often have to indicate outside that a film may have strobe and flashing light effects which can have a damaging effect on some audience's sensibility, those showing *Rag Tale* may need to warn viewers that they are in for two hours of a visually rocky ride that may be upsetting and unbalancing. *Rag Tale* has been filmed digitally and edited in an almost breakneck pace, short takes and all angles, offering a literally over-busy impact of life in the editorial offices of the tabloid.

The archetypal newspaper play and film has been *The Front Page*, filmed many times since the early 1930s. Wisecracking journalists kept up swift patter, trying to outsmart each other, get a breaking story, get tangled in their emotions. The dialogue in *Rag Tale* is the same, British style. This means that the dialogue is fast and at all angles as are the visuals. *Rag Tale* is the visual equivalent of the verbal *Front Page*.

The whole piece is disconcerting. But it is often telling in its merciless caricatures of editors, owners, the hacks around the office and the conniving secretarial staff. It is also disconcerting as it wades in poking fun at institutions, political leaders and the cynical attitudes prevailing against governments. The Royal Family are frequent targets which some may agree with but others think unfair. Prince Charles and Camilla – and the sale of Buckingham Palace – are recurring themes.

Director Mary McGuckian (Irish) has made *Words on the Window Pane* and *The Bridge at San Luis Rey*. She intends to make more films like *Rag Tale*, attacking other institutions. She encouraged the cast to improvise during this film which means they are intense and involved in their performances.

Rupert Graves has a strong role as the philandering, unscrupulous editor, Jennifer Jason Leigh as his lover, then rival. Malcolm McDowell is the proprietor, making us wonder which media tycoon he is meant to be! The rest of the cast is very strong and includes Ian Hart, Bill Paterson, Kerry Fox and Simon Callow.

It is not the last word on tabloids. Rather, it is a bit like a tabloid feature itself: quick, smart, topical, shallow, aggressive and, above all, illustrating publishers' double standards for public and private morality.

REVOLVER (UK, 2005, d. Guy Ritchie)

When a director is well-liked and appreciated, critiques of his/her films are often more about the director than a review of the film itself. This is even truer when the director is disliked. Guy Ritchie has been treated in this way. He directed an unexpected hit with *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* which led the way for umpteen imitations which irritated the critics. He did his own follow up, *Snatch*, which led to unfavourable reviews. Then he married Madonna and started a family which did lead to further criticism. Then he made a film with her which was virtually unreleased, *Swept Away*, and that was considered the end of him. Now he has made *Revolver* which has received some of the worst reviews anyone would not want to see.

This is by way of prologue to saying that I found *Revolver* very interesting. My hunch is that the public will not like it, will find it far too difficult to understand and, as they say, stay away in droves. The other hunch is that if it had been released under the name of, say, an unknown Eastern European film-maker in an art-house cinema, it would have received respectful and possibly rave reviews for its innovation, for its blend of fantasy and reality and for its psychological explorations!

Revolver is something of a misleading title. Yes, there are guns in the film. Ritchie, however, wants the title to have more existential overtones, that everything that happens comes round again. That is probably the clue. This is an existential, psychological drama set in the world of criminals.

The criminal world is a mixture of London's Soho and Las Vegas. There are \$12 notes. Half the cast is British and have British accents, half are American with American accents. This is an invented territory that should give us some clues to the unreality we are watching. The other clue is that there is constant voiceover and commentary by the central character, Jake Green (Mr Green in echoes of *Reservoir Dogs*). He is played by Ritchie's friend, Jason Statham, who in films like *The Transporter* series plays very stolidly indeed. He is much better as Mr Green. Ray Liotta gives what seems at times to be a hammy performance until we realize who he really is.

It would be interesting to pinpoint the moment in the film where the audience realizes that everything is happening inside the head of Jake Green, that he is not only schizophrenic with paranoid fears but that his psyche is multiple personality. It is this key element which could baffle audiences thinking they were watching a straightforward gangster movie (although the successful *Fight Club* did something similar).

So, for those who like the film, which is stylishly photographed with some tricky angles and editing, and are able to accept its sometimes overwrought manner and rhetorical dialogue (especially at the end when the personalities start arguing with each other), there is plenty to think about in terms of action, responsibility, self-delusion, self-destruction and identity. At the beginning Ritchie also includes captions with quotations about enemies, war and confidence tricks and re-inserts them throughout the film.

For those who are not put off by the negative reviews, intriguing.

SARABAND (Sweden, 2003, d. Ingmar Bergman)

Perhaps you, like me, needed to check on what a Saraband really was. Press notes remind us that it was 'an erotic dance for two that was very popular at royal courts in the 17th and 18th centuries. But it was prohibited in Spain for being indecent'. Many classical musicians composed Sarabands.

This is a film by Ingmar Bergman, a reminder of why he is such a great film-maker, both writer and director. It was filmed for television and screened in Sweden at the end of 2003. It has been released theatrically in other countries.

In 1973, Bergman made a six part series for television, which was then edited for cinema release, *Scenes from a Marriage*, starring Liv Ullmann and Erland Josephson. Thirty years later he has Marianne (Liv Ullman) explaining her photos and memories to camera and feeling the impulse to visit her ex-husband whom she has not seen for those thirty years. Johan (Josephson) is now in his 80s, crusty, extremely hostile to Henrik, his 61 year old widower-son who lives nearby but devoted to his granddaughter (Karin), a cello player.

The film consists of ten chapters, *Scenes*, including a psychological saraband between Marianne and Johan, as in the earlier film.

It is a pleasure to watch the two veteran stars (with their histories of appearing in so many of Bergman's films) and appreciate their skills in performance as well as creating vivid characters often only through dialogue, facial expressions and gestures. The meeting lasts longer than intended and Marianne becomes involved in the intense interactions and unhealthy relationship between Henrik and Karin. Each of the scenes is controlled but powerful and, underlying the restrained and pessimistic surfaces, extraordinarily passionate.

There is so much to reflect on, from marriage, love and infidelity, divorce to loneliness, ageing, protectiveness and breaking free to questions of meaning in life and the transcendent (including a moving sequence with Marianne and Henrik in a church, a reminder that, whatever his disavowal of Christianity, Bergman has always been preoccupied with it and with deeply religious issues). *Saraband* is there with his best films.

SERENITY (US, 2005, d. Joss Whedon)

Though very popular, *Star Trek* is still an acquired taste. The short-running series on US television, *Firefly*, was also an acquired taste, too late to save it but strong enough to get the green light for a big movie.

Serenity is a space ship in a universe where human behaviour, despite the technology, is not too much different from our own, five centuries hence, used for raids but embroiled in a parliamentary attack in the galaxies. There are the overtones of *Star Trek* with an MTV style which should prove engaging for younger fans. However, the complicated plotline is not served so well by the television visual style nor the granite-jawed (on wooden performers!) deadpan TV soap opera acting-style. British Chiwetel Ejiofor stands out, acting-wise, as the villain.

Loud and brash, violent and flashy – reassuring many of us that it is probably better living now than in this future.

THREE DOLLARS (Australia, 2005, d. Robert Connolly)

David Wenham plays Eddie, the hero of Robert Connolly's film, *Three Dollars*, adapted by director and writer from Elliot Perlman's novel. He is a good man.

Robert Connolly produced that powerful film, *The Boys*, directed by Rowan Wood. It too starred David Wenham. However, in *The Boys* Wenham portrayed one of the most evil characters you could find up there on the screen. Released from gaol, he comes back home and spends the day with increasing and relentless malevolence affecting the life of his brothers, mother and girlfriend. A friend said that she had seen the play of *The Boys* on stage and David Wenham's performance was so palpably menacing that she felt uncomfortable being in the same room as he was at the reception afterwards. He is a persuasive actor.

He then experienced a Sea Change and became the likeable Diver Dan. He also became considerably holier, though very down to earth, when he portrayed the robust saint, Fr Damien, in Paul Cox's *Molokai*. He donned friar's robes as a special Vatican assistant to Hugh Jackman's Van Helsing hunting Richard Roxburgh as Dracula!

It is not easy to portray a very good man on screen. Often he just seems too good to be true. That is no effective role model. James Stewart could do it – and did it often. Henry Fonda in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Wrong Man* could do it as well. David Wenham is not an icon like those two Hollywood greats. But, in *Three Dollars*, he is a man who is recognisably decent and good but who is your average man in the street, a genially Ocker Everyman.

In flashbacks, he appears more extraverted when he was a young student than he does as a consulting engineer in middle age. He is shown as fairly down to earth (literally as he has to examine the toxicity in the soil on a property to be developed near Horsham). On the other hand, he liked asking questions and checking out possibilities when he was younger. And the crisis concerning the moral issues in the toxicity matter now makes demands on his conscience.

The point to Eddie's good Everyman is that he is a feeling man. Eddie is a loving man, devoted to his sometimes depressed wife Tanya (Frances O'Connor) and to his daughter. He can be tempted by a house guest, but has the moral strength and respect to resist. He does more than he needs to in examining the soil, going back to check his findings and his speculations (and later being charged by his mean-minded boss for going over his budget). He is a man who believes that he should try to do the right thing by people.

One of the themes of *Three Dollars* is that no good deed is not rewarded and that these good deeds have their blessed consequences, that while there might be six degrees of separation, there might be far fewer degrees to join us in connectedness.

He is kind to an alcoholic he meets near his house, stops and talks. Huge repercussions for this kindness at the end of the film, even to saving his life as well as opening his eyes to the plight of the poor and homeless. He gives some coins to a street beggar – and later is lent his coat when he is down and out. He also comes to the old man's rescue when racist thugs bash him on a railway platform. He helps an elderly lady who has fallen in Flinders St, going out of his way to get her something to eat and to buy some aspirin - and just reaching his appointment by the skin of his teeth. The only time he misses out (because he is so preoccupied with his daughter's diagnosed epilepsy) is buying some food for a neglected old man in the hospital corridor who just wants something to eat – and gives him three dollars. At the end of the film, three dollars is all he has in the bank.

Eddie makes no big deal about acting on his feelings. He takes this for granted. Tanya helps him realise again that doing the right thing is leaking his report to *The Age* and, despite mortgage, medical bills and general lack of funds, leaving his secure job in the department. No matter what, he has his wife and daughter.

It is interesting to note that this is a theme that emerged in 2004 in Tom White. In that film Colin Friels' Tom drops out of his security, job and family at the beginning and wanders the St Kilda streets to discover his empathy for ordinary and for marginalised human beings and to act on his Feeling function. Perhaps Tom White was on his journey towards becoming a Three Dollar Everyman.

It is good to see and encouraging to reflect on that Australian film-makers, without fuss or flourish, are creating some rightly decent male role models in our increasingly materialistic world.

THE UPSIDE OF ANGER (US, 2004, d. Mike Bender)

A guess would be that many reviews offered the quip, 'if this is the upside of anger, how much more miserable could the downside be?'.

This is a film about women's anger, about Terry and her four daughters. The youngest, Popeye, is making a video collage of images of anger and tells us in the introductory voiceover that before her mother became angry and resentful and alcoholic, she was a sweet woman, a nice woman. The film does not show us this side of Terry at all. What we see is a woman who has been deserted by her husband with his secretary, not even trying to cope, letting the anger consume her from inside. That superbly intense actress, Joan Allen (The Crucible, Nixon, Pleasantville, The Contender, Yes) is distressingly self-destructive as Terry.

Kevin Costner has the kinder role as former baseball champion, now DJ and talk show host, who steps in to support Terry. Costner returns to his former charm and makes a pleasing balance to Joan Allen and shows himself a thoughtful father figure.

The voiceover is by the youngest daughter, Evan Rachel Wood (Thirteen, Down in the Valley). The focus is also on Erika Christensen's Andy who disappoints her mother in not going to college, getting a job at the radio station and starting a liaison with the older producer. Kerri Russell and Alicia Witt are the other two daughters. All do good work in their roles.

When you eventually think that the anger is irredeemable there is a plot twist that makes all the characters as well as the audience do a re-think and reassess the effect of consuming anger and its futility.

WHEN WILL I BE LOVED (US, 2004, d. James Toback)

The films of James Toback could be called 'specialist'. He has delved into seamy situations and out-of-place and cantankerous characters for more than 30 years. His most acclaimed film, Fingers, with Harvey Keitel (re-made in France by Jacques Audiard as The Beat my Heart Skipped) has kept critics and some audiences going back each time there is a Toback film. This one may stretch audience sympathy and patience to the limit.

Press notes say that the film (only 80 minutes) was not completely written when shooting started. It gives that impression, of being made up as it goes along with arbitrary events, long conversations, mixed motivations, all of which is not particularly engrossing. Neve Campbell is there (with cameos from Barry Primus and Karen Allen as her parents) who seems to be setting out on an academic career – discussing it in a long walking scene with Toback himself. However, her spiv boyfriend (Fred Weller) is involved in scams to make films (there's a thought) and pimping a wealthy businessman to his girl. The film opens with a touch of prurient nudity and ends with violence. One could suggest to James Toback that the answer to the question in his title is 'not yet'.

WORLD WITHOUT THIEVES (China, 2004, d. Xiaogang Feng)

A beautifully crafted and photographed film which invites its audience into the remote regions of China and takes them and the characters on an adventurous train ride. It is a journey which has touches of the comic, of the romantic and of the tragic.

The central characters are almost all thieves. Li and Bo are con artists who have spent years on successful swindles, especially luring older businessman into making sexual advances and videoing these for extortion. But things have changed. She wants to stop. He does not.

Into their lives comes a good and naïve young man who carries a large amount of money earned by his building work at a Buddhist monastery. He becomes a target of Bo but also of an organised gang who work the trains.

What would it be like to have a world without thieves? No gangs and their unscrupulous attacks? A world where thieves reform and are kind to people, restoring their goods? A world like that of the young man where people are all good and he cannot really imagine evil?

Enertaining, funny, sad, and wistful for goodness.

FILMS ON SCREEN, OCTOBER 2005

This is a service of the SIGNIS Website, presenting reviews by Peter Malone of films that have been screening during the previous month.

BEAT MY HEART SKIPPED, The
BROTHERS GRIMM, The
CONSTANT GARDENER, The
CORPSE BRIDE, The
DOMINO
DREAMER
ELIZABETH TOWN
GOOD NIGHT, AND GOOD LUCK
GUY X
HEIGHTS
HONEYMOONERS, The
IN MY COUNTRY
INTO THE BLUE
LEFT BEHIND: WORLD AT WAR
LEGEND OF ZORRO, The
LORD OF WAR
MARCH OF THE PENGUINS
MURDERBALL
NANNY McPHEE
NINE LIVES
OUT ON A LIMB
SAW 2
SKY HIGH
THUMBSUCKER
WALK THE LINE
WALLACE AND GROMIT: CURSE OF THE WERE-RABBIT

THE BEAT MY HEART SKIPPED (France, 2005, d. Jacques Audiard)

An impressive drama. Jacques Audiard has made only a few films but they have been striking (A Self-Made Hero, Read My Lips). He has an intense visual style with lighting, close-ups and editing pace. This is to his advantage here as he draws a portrait of a complex young man.

Audiard sets the tone with a pre-credits discussion about father-son relationships, especially how antagonism can change to love, even dependence, when a strong father has to be cared for in every detail

by his son. This conversation becomes more relevant as we see Tom, the protagonist, and his relationship with his own father. Both are in 'real estate', Tom and his cronies doing deals by ousting tenants and, especially, African squatters, from derelict sites that they want to buy and sell. His father is virtually a loan shark who wants his son to act as a tough collector (which he brutally does).

Tom's dead mother, however, was a concert pianist and Tom has inherited some of her talent. Could he break through the thug side of his life to live for music and beauty? He tries, with the help of a recently arrived pianist from China. She speaks no French, but she manages to train him and develop his skills and his emotions. This cuts little ice with his colleagues. And, because, Tom is so self-absorbed, he elicits little sympathy from them. The climax-crunch for Tom is whether he is murderously vengeful for an attack on his father or whether he can be another kind of person.

Romain Duris (Exils, Arsene Lupin) gives a performance that brings to vivid life the complexities and contradictions of Tom's character. Niels Arestrup is his father.

Remake usually means an American version of a European or Asian film. This time, Audiard has re-made an American film that influenced him when he was young, James Toback's *Fingers* (1977) with Harvey Keitel as Tom and Michael V. Gazzo as his father. Toback's film immersed us in a violent, even sleazy New York world, with a stoned Tom having to make his decisions. Audiard has broadened the screenplay, eliminated several of the sleazy characters but has re-produced some of the scenes exactly, especially Tom's piano audition and his first and his final confrontation with the Russian mobster in a stairwell – but has altered the plot and character decision. With Toback we first see Tom playing the piano and are shocked when he turns out to be a thug. Here we see Tom's brutality first and then are surprised to find he has a soul with his music.

This is an intelligent and challenging drama.

THE BROTHERS GRIMM (UK, 2005, d. Terry Gilliam)

The world is indebted to Wilhelm and Jakob Grimm. Over many years, they collected more than two hundred stories that were part of the German oral tradition, publishing them as Grimm's Fairy Tales. In the early 19th century, they wanted to offer stories of the people and of the imagination as a counter to the dominance of the 18th century's Age of Reason.

A cheerfully exuberant film was made in the early 1960s, *The Wonderful World of the Brothers Grimm*. With Terry Gilliam at the helm, the new film about the brothers is not quite so cheerful, although in its way it is certainly exuberant. Gilliam calls his film a fairy tale about the Grimms. It didn't happen... It could have happened!

Gilliam imagines the brothers as two con-men travelling their native Germany which is now occupied by French invading forces. It is 1796 and the Napoleonic wars are about to break in Europe. The French are snobbish (but with 'Allo, 'Allo accents). The Germans are more sensible although they are highly superstitious. The brothers have a reputation for ridding communities of witches and ghosts, quite a spectacular show – but all of their own making. They get a shock when the French general (Jonathan Pryce, star of Gilliam's 1980s classic *Brazil*) arrests them but orders them to solve a mystery in a village where the children have been disappearing.

Thus begins a story where reality and fairy story mingle.

Matt Damon is the forceful and charming Wilhelm, master of the fraud. Heath Ledger is the mild-mannered and bespectacled Jacob who is forever writing down the folk stories he hears. With the help of a tough hunting guide, Angelika (Lena Headey), they enter the enchanted forest with its shifting trees, tentacle branches and continuing menace. In the forest is a Rapunzel-like tower where the Mirror Queen (Monica Bellucci) (of 'who is the fairest fame?') lies sleeping and haggard until she drinks the blood of twelve children at the moon's eclipse.

The brothers experience hazards in the forest and harassment from Cavaldi, the General's aide and creator of elaborate machines of torture. He is played by Peter Stormare in an even more over the top manic performance than his Satan in Constantine. If only Gilliam had reined him in more so that he would have been comic rather than demented! (There were delays in the production and interference from the Weinstein Brothers – if they were to cut anything, trimming Stormare would have been more acceptable!)

What the screenplay does is weave small scenes from well-known fairy tales and allusions to others throughout the whole script: Red Riding Hood, Hansel and Gretel, Cinderella, Snow White and, at the end with the threatened Angelika, Sleeping Beauty.

For what audience has the film been made? It has a 12A classification which means that children under 12 need to see it with an adult. It does have some frightening scenes (with wolves, with some mock torture, with the Mirror Queen's transformation), but they are the kinds of scares we expect from fairy tales rather than the mechanised brutality of so many children's television programs. Adults? Most of the critics dismissed the film. Many seemed to be expecting a treatise on the imagination and made no allowances for its appeal of popular and folktale storytelling.

This means that its main appeal is to audiences, young and old, who don't like to put limits on their imaginations. There are so many possibilities in imagining 'what if...?'. Gilliam (who has created such worlds before in Time Bandits, The Adventures of Baron Munchausen, Brazil and The Fisher King) lets rip with the adventures here, not waiting for audiences to admire the scenery of the costumes. He loves the action and its meanings. Gilliam was also one of the Monty Pythons, co-directing The Holy Grail and directing Jabberwocky. He has never minded presenting the absurd side of storytelling. He offers a brew of the comic, the sinister, fantasy and a dash of realism.

THE CONSTANT GARDENER (UK, 2005, d. Fernando Mireilles)

Speaking of Justin Quayle's character, one of the diplomats in the film notes speaks the words that are the title of this article, Justin was self-effacing, courteous and large of heart. The official synopsis of the film describes Justin as '...mild-mannered and unambitious colleague'. His garden is called a refuge, a private place, where his heart lay. The director, Fernando Mireilles (a Brazilian who directed the intense look at the gangs in the favelas in City of God) remarks, 'At first glance, Justin appears very passive. He's a civilised British gentleman, a polite diplomat who lives by a code.'

In an interview Ralph Fiennes calls Justin 'a wonderful part, because he goes from being a reticent nice guy to being someone who is forced to confront pretty tough truths about the world'. He then adds, 'I hope that the audience sees him as a kind of Everyman'.

One does not expect to find this kind of laid-back character prominent in a John Le Carre story. However, since the end of the Cold War and the fall of Communism, Le Carre has had to change the milieu of his novels. He has not changed the structures, the mystery, the conspiracy settings and the intrigue and double-dealings in shadowy worlds. It is just that he now concentrates on different shadowy worlds and on industrial misconduct and espionage. With The Constant Gardener it is the world of one of the most powerful and profitable industries in the world, that of pharmaceuticals. Not only does he dramatise the political and financial deals, he also takes his readers into the abusive world of illicit testing of drugs-in-development, especially on unsuspecting African townspeople and villagers.

This is a long way from the world of Justin, even though he is a diplomat of the British High Commission in Nairobi. He might never have been aware of this world had he not become infatuated with a bumptiously attractive campaigner, Tessa (a feisty Rachel Weisz), married her and brought her to Kenya where she is soon plunged into a cover-up conspiracy. She does not, however, let her shy husband know. It is only when she is murdered (at the beginning of the film) that he begins to open his eyes, move out into her world to solve her murder, gradually realising that he is falling more deeply in love with her after she is dead as he learns more about her.

Justin is a faceless bureaucrat who takes refuge in his passion for gardening, for cultivating and growing, for sense beauty. It is worth quoting Ralph Fiennes again on how he interprets his character. 'Justin is a passionate – gardener. There's an internal quietude about gardeners, this sensitivity to watching something live and grow, and caring about how something will flourish and bloom. To me, that was all key to Justin'.

Meanwhile, within, he lives his very subjective emotional life – the crisis will make him realise that he has not developed his rational side very well. In fact, he realises this when Tessa interrupts the speech he is giving on behalf of his absent head and he is at unexpectedly courteous pains to conciliate his adversarial interrogator. It does not take much seduction on her part for him to begin an affair which his proper English background quickly leads to marriage and a loving commitment.

The first challenges for him to begin this development are the suggestions made that his wife was having an affair with a fellow-doctor. He does and doesn't believe it. But, his need to understand leads him to the truth about his love for his wife, to the truth of what she was involved in and her campaign against a government and company conspiracy, to the truth of his own integrity as a compassionate man. Rachel Weisz makes the comment on how she saw the relationship and its consequences, 'Because of Justin's love for Tessa, he goes on a journey of discovery where he reaches a new level of self-knowledge but he also discovers a huge political scandal'.

Justin is moving towards his opposite out-going qualities but Le Carre realises that, dramatically, and in real life, this kind of person will not change the world through up-front leadership but, rather, on a more personal and individual level. He may be defeated by the powers that be, but not morally defeated. The tragedy is, in *The Constant Gardener*, that Justin is not as powerful as his enemies and he allows them literally to efface him, self-effacing to the last. Except that he has cunningly used his ingenuity to arrange for the exposure of those who needed to be exposed.

It is a tribute to Ralph Fiennes' skill as an actor that, without changing his appearance very much, he can quietly immerse himself in such different screen characters – think Amon Goetz in *Schindler's List*, his television personality in *Quiz Show*, his romantic English Patient and, more recently, his voicing of the pantomime villain, Victor Quartermain, in *Wallace and Gromit in The Case of the Were Rabbit*. He has made the reticent Justin Quayle a fully rounded character.

CORPSE BRIDE (US, 2005. d. Tim Burton)

While watching *Corpse Bride* and delighting in the puppets and their look, the sets and the design, the colour and movement, we are not surprised to know that Tim Burton is an artist as well as a director. This has been evident in the design of his fantasies like *Beetlejuice*, his *Batman* films, *Edward Scissorhands*, *Sleepy Hollow* – and with more touches of brightness in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. It was also evident in the animated film he produced, *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. Burton is an idiosyncratic but skilful and imaginative film-maker.

Corpse Bride is very entertaining, more of an adult fantasy than one for children. It is based on an Eastern European folktale. However, it is set in a rather grimy late Victorian England where the impoverished upper class are desperate to marry off their daughter into wealth and the nouveau (and vulgar) riche are ambitious to be seen in society, even if they are fishmongers. This is all the more forceful when the parents are voiced by Albert Finney and Joanna Lumley (snobs) and Tracy Ullman and Paul Whitehouse (would-be snobs).

Poor young Victor Van Dort is a forlorn, accident-prone young man who is being set up to marry, sight unseen, Victoria Everglot. If ever true love had its difficulties, it is here between Victor and Victoria. What is worse, when he tries to rehearse his marriage vows (after being intimidated by a fearsome clergyman voiced even more fearsomely by Christopher Lee), he is overheard by a ghost, Emily, the corpse bride who has been done to death long since by a dastardly villain (voiced by a dastardly Richard E. Grant). The scene then moves to the underworld, the haven of ghosts, which is much brighter and more colourful than life above ground.

So, a dilemma. Should Victor marry Emily who has an emotional as well as a skeletal hold on him, or should he tell her the truth and return to Emily. He is an honourable young man and tries to do the right thing – and, despite the darkness of the plot, there is a happy ending for Victor, Victoria and Emily.

Not only is this a delightful fable about honesty and true love, it is a very witty take on social mores of the nineteenth century. What consolidates the visuals is the quality of the character voices. Emily Watson is a nice and pliant Victoria. Helena Bonham Carter is a feisty Victoria. But, Johnny Depp (with yet another convincing British accent) brings the visual Victor truly alive as a decent young man caught in a parents' ambitions and a corpse bride's trap.

DOMINO (US, 2005, d. Tony Scott)

This is a very flashy film with more than a touch of what used to be called 'psychedelic style'. It was filmed on 35mm film with High Digital cameras. This has enabled director, Tony Scott, to draw on his long history of making commercials to employ an enormous range of colour effects, sweeps, palettes that characterise MTV-influenced movie-making. That means it will be visually exhilarating or distracting and exhausting depending on taste.

The screenplay is flashy as well. It's something of a moving mosaic, as complicated and sometimes as unfathomable as a jigsaw puzzle. It was written by Richard Kelly who achieved some notoriety with *Donnie Darko* which he both wrote and directed. That was a tantalising drama combining reality, fantasy, off-kilter imagination. *Domino* is definitely off-kilter.

Tony Scott is entitled to bring the story of Domino Harvey to the screen. He had known her since she was twenty and had been in discussions with her about a film on her life and her adventures. He sees himself as being a father-figure to her for a decade or more. He had also known her associates and been fascinated by them.

At the beginning and end of the film, Domino Harvey announces that she is a bounty hunter. With her comfortable and socialite family background, her educated accent and her being the daughter of actor Laurence Harvey (seen in this film in clips from *The Manchurian Candidate*), she is an unlikely bet for taking up the career of a bounty hunter. However, she was a rebel, ready to take risks, exhilarated by adrenalin pumping as she pursued and caught criminal, attracted to what might be called the 'low life'. In 2005, Domino Harvey took her own life.

The film-makers announce that this film is based on a true story and just as we are taking that in after seeing a swift paced, brutal attack on would-be thieves, they add, tongue-in-cheekily, 'sort of'. The film goes backwards and forwards with Domino's life, gets us lost in who are the villains and who are not (even resurrecting characters we have seen being executed), so that by the gun-battle climax at the top of the Stratosphere Hotel in Las Vegas, it is difficult to tell who is gunning whom down!

This is a 'post-modern' blend of the comic, the intensely individual, the brutal (reminding us that Tony Scott directed the Tarantino script, *True Romance*). Keira Knightly, still on a startlingly rapid rise to stardom, is Domino, Mickey Rourke does a variation on his usual as her boss. Venezuelan Edgar Ramirez is Choco, the third member of the team. *Domino* is a whirl of a film.

DREAMER (US, 2005, d. John Gatins)

Dreamer bears the subtitle, *Inspired by a true story*. Just as well, because it does seem a bit far-fetched. However, we have seen *Seabiscuit* and know that horses which have been injured and written off can rise to occasions and become champions. The press book gives information about the story on which *Dreamer* is based and the real horse seems to have been even more successful in races than *Sonyador* in the film.

Director John Gatins has made a career of writing sports films. They include *Coach Carter* (basketball) and two baseball films, *Hardball* and *Summer Catch*. He knows the successful formula for a heart-warming sports film.

However, this reviewer's heart turns a little cold when Dakota Fanning appears on screen. A journalist described her as 'the whey-faced girl with the frightening work ethic'. This work ethic is to the fore in *Dreamer*. We know she is a little girl who likes horses but she comes across less as a child than as a mini-adult in the way she bears herself, walks and talks. She has no scruples in emotionally blackmailing her father after he did the right thing in letting the horse go – and, not only does he buy the horse back, he makes her a major owner with power to make decisions, front acceptance boards and confront a tycoon owner. She also has to face up to a tycoon sheikh to get over \$100,000 dollars to enter her horse in the championship race. Of course, she does. She is never plagued by self-doubt.

So, if you don't mind Dakota Fanning and her precocious presence, the rest is standard 'family' fare with Kurt Russell agreeable as the father, Elisabeth Shue with less to do as the mother and Kris Kristofferson as the grumpy then kindly grandfather. There are some exciting race and training sequences which make it a pleasantly standard racing film.

ELIZABETHTOWN (US, 2005, d. Cameron Crowe)

This is a strange cinema experience. Just over two hours... of what?

The plotline had potential: bright young man's shoe invention fails and leads to huge company debts; in the meantime his father dies and he has to leave California to collect the body in Kentucky; his Kentucky kin are friendly but want the father buried there; he befriends a rather desperately extraverted flight attendant; his mother and sister come to the funeral... Actually, it doesn't end there, but that's another matter.

The shoe thing is made much of at first with Orlando Bloom (wilting more than a little as he ponders failure and fiasco) reassuring himself with repetitions of 'I'm fine' and then confronting the boss (Alec Baldwin, slightly manic as if he were still in court confronting Kim Basinger about child custody). Things are a bit manic at home, especially with Mum (Susan Sarandon) going gung-ho on cooking, stand-up comedy and tap-dancing to deal with her grief.

This is all more than just whimsical – and he has not yet met Kirsten Dunst as the incessantly talking flight attendant. He does not have to be with her for the chat and chatter – we have one of the longest mobile phone conversations in cinema history. (Let's hope it puts a stop to imitations and homages!)

There's a lot more but, as the film goes on and one listens to the dialogue, the confusion concerning what's it all about is not allayed. So much of the dialogue is articulately inconsequential. So, it stops and starts, pauses and digresses (especially with a show-stopping performance where the plot is put on hold for a tour-de-force speech, song and dance by Susan Sarandon at her husband's wake, and a suggestive story that makes all the previously antagonistic relatives and Kentuckians just love her). Cameron Crowe (as we know from his semi-autobiographical *Almost Famous*) was a music journalist so he accompanies the plot with continuous hits from the past.

And the ending...? The timeline of all of this makes little sense. Four days are mentioned at one stage but how so much could be done in four days defies belief – and a complainant on the IMDb points out that big jets do not fly from LA to Louisville, so there!). Kirsten has organised a car trip for Orlando back to California with stops programmed to the minute and music to accompany each emotional moment (all when she should have been working on flights to Hawaii).

Perhaps it is just that *Elizabethtown* is a modern American fairytale land that does not entice audiences to believe in it.

GOOD NIGHT, AND GOOD LUCK (US, 2005, d. George Clooney)

This is a film which invites its audience to think. It also invites its audience to think about the present in the light of the past, especially the mistakes of the past. When we do not learn the lessons of history, we are condemned to repeat them.

The anti-Communist activities of Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin, his hounding of anyone suspected of having Communist links strengthened the atmosphere of fear created soon after the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War. The United States turned its back on its wartime ally, the Soviet Union, when the Iron Curtain came down. House Committee hearings on UnAmerican activities were held in the late 1940s and early 1950s which led to the blacklisting of many alleged Communist party members or sympathisers in the public service, the armed forces and the entertainment industry. Playwright Lillian Hellman called this period in American politics 'Scoundrel Time'. Arthur Miller's play 'The Crucible' served as an allegory of these witch hunts.

There have been a number of films on this era including a portrait of McCarthy in *Tail Gunner Joe* with Peter Boyle, of McCarthy's adviser, Roy Cohn in *Citizen Cohn* with James Woods. Cohn appears in the 1990s critique of the US, *Angels in America*. The *Front* and *Guilty by Suspicion* were films about Hollywood and these times. Journalist and television personality, Edward R. Murrow, was played by Daniel J. Travanti in *Murrow*. Murrow is now the subject of *Goodnight, and Good Luck*, which was his signing off phrase for his broadcasts.

This film has been widely acclaimed, David Strathairn winning the Best Actor award in Venice and George Clooney and Grant Heslov winning for Best Screenplay. The film has been directed by Clooney who also appears as Murrow's producer, Fred Friendly.

Good Night and Good Luck has been shot in black and white, symbolic perhaps of the public stances of the times which did not allow for any greys. This enables Clooney to incorporate actual footage of McCarthy and the hearings instead of having an actor play the senator. This footage ends with the famous challenge to McCarthy by judge Joseph Welch, 'Have you no decency, sir?'.

This 90 minute film confines itself to the challenge made by CBS television to McCarthy by Edward R. Murrow. Murrow had built up a reputation for solid and fearless journalism with broadcasts from London during the war. We see his research and legal team at work, the stances of Bill Paley (Frank Langella), head of CBS in the face of political pressure and pressure from the sponsors, Alcoa. We see a television news anchor (Ray Wise) hounded by the conservative press. We see two people on the team (Patricia Clarkson and Robert Downey Jr) who conceal their marriage because CBS rules did not allow couples to work for the company. We see Murrow interviewing Liberace and the entertainer answering questions about his hopes for his marriage. We also see Murrow as a heavy smoker and his endorsement of Kent cigarettes. This reminds us that fifty years ago, honesty and concealment were major issues for celebrities in the public eye but smoking was not.

David Strathairn, a reliable actor who has supported many significant films, is most impressive as Murrow, a man of principle, fearless and articulate. His rendition of several of Murrow's broadcasts remind us of how relevant his stances are today, including his statement that dissent does not mean disloyalty.

Directed with passion but control by Clooney, this is a film both to watch and to listen to

GUY X (Canada/Iceland/UK, 2005. d. Saul Metzstein)

Decades after *M*A*S*H* and *Catch 22*, we think we are used to satire on the American military, but this one takes us somewhat by surprise. It looks as if it is serious. It opens with a young man being dropped in Greenland for a tour of duty. But there is something askew. He is dropped from the plane which takes off – and then we find he should be in Hawaii and authority will not accept he is who he is. And what is going on in this base – in Greenland? We are in *Catch 22* territory.

The original novel by John Griesemer is called *No One Thinks of Greenland*. That should give some clues and tone.

The base is filled with eccentrics and misfits – and holds a very dark secret which makes the latter part of the film and the destruction of the base all the more sinister in the light of American troops and the war in Iraq and the wounded and the veterans.

The cast is also unusual. Jason Biggs has grown out of American Pie films and has appeared with Woody Allen in Anything Else. Here he has to hold interest as the centre of the film, which he does well. Jeremy Northam sporting a broad American accent is the commandant. Natascha McElhone is his assistant who gets caught up with our hero. Michael Ironside the veteran of so many action films has a very different role as a maimed and wounded patient.

The trouble after Catch 22 and M*A*S*H is that what seems patently absurd up there on the screen is replicated at times in real life – and that isn't funny. Which is, probably, the point of the film.

HEIGHTS (US, 2004, d. Chris Terrio)

You may have to search hard to find a screening of Heights. It is one of those well-written and well-acted dramas that appeals to a limited audience. It is considered 'art-house' cinema. Maybe it is, but it is an interesting character study nonetheless. However, it limits itself in its ability to create really rounded portraits because the action takes place over twenty four hours and a lot happens to the characters, not so much in events as in emotions.

Not unlike a film like Nine Lives, Heights displays captions to highlight the characters the film-makers want us to pay attention to. Often there are two names and we have to watch the relationship. At one stage, two names appear but one of the characters is never seen, phones and is talked about and has a determining role in the outcome.

Again, the screenplay is based on a play by Amy Fox. While the film is opened out, it is not difficult to appreciate how it would have worked in the theatre.

For some there are heights, for others depths. This is a New York story, a story of apartments, of theatre – stars, directors and aspiring actors – of affluent celebrities and of young adults desperate to have successful careers. It is also one of those 'six degrees of separation' stories, plausible but still a bit difficult to accept the interconnections because they all have to be made in the one day.

The central character is a talented photographer who is about to marry. She is played by Elizabeth Banks. Her fiancé is James Marsden who is concerned about wedding rehearsals and confiding in his rabbi (George Segal). She is sacked during the day, gets a great opportunity to go on a photo-shoot overseas, is pursued by a past friend (Matt Davis), has to deal with her prima donna mother who dislikes her fiancé and, finally, has to deal with her decision about marrying. All the degrees of connection can be linked to her.

Her mother is Glenn Close, a Broadway star rehearsing Macbeth, directed by her husband, Eric Bogosian. She is a woman of definite opinions, temperamental who decides to take up a young man at an audition as a protégé (Jesse Bradford) and invites him to her soiree. The reason he does not ultimately go leads to a dramatic surprise and the reason for the resolution of the whole piece. There is also a significant plot device where a gay photographer is mounting an exhibition of photos, including men that he has had relationships with.

Audiences will not miss not seeing it, but will be interested if they do.

THE HONEYMOONERS (US, 2005, d. John Schultz)

Here is a raucous comedy that most people will not mind missing.

It is an adaptation of the classic TV series that starred Jackie Gleason and Art Carney which, with its black and white photography, fixed sets and some laboured comedy, fades now in its classic status somewhat. This is not a version to rehabilitate its reputation.

It has to be said immediately, that the setting is African American and is designed almost exclusively for this audience who will be familiar with the cast, the kind of humour and jokes and the desperate situations that Ralph Kramden gets himself into. Cedric the Entertainer does the Jackie Gleason thing, getting himself into deeper and deeper hot water with mad financial schemes (like buying a subway train without thinking about how to get it out of the underground) and with his wife who wants to buy a house. Michael Epps is the Art Carney equivalent.

While the film is good humoured and pleads for sympathy for this latter day Ralph Kramden, the comedy does not travel well outside the target audience.

IN MY COUNTRY (UK, 2005, d. John Boorman)

It is a pity that this film had troubled production and delays and has not had a wide release. It is not the best film about South Africa but it has something to say and gives audiences worldwide an opportunity to see and hear something about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings.

The screenplay is based on a book by the journalist, Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull*. She covered the hearings for the South African Broadcasting Corporation. Her story is also autobiographical fiction, a portrait of her Afrikaaner upbringing with its inherent dominance and prejudices, a picture of her marriage and an affair with a fellow journalist and the need for confession, honesty and reconciliation in her own life. She is played with her customary sensitivity and intensity by Juliette Binoche.

The American journalist is played by Samuel L. Jackson, a reporter for the Washington Post, who arrives in South Africa with a strong bias, even prejudice against whites and Afrikaaners, drawing on his own experience of American racist attitudes. He is outspoken and initially clashes with Anna and her African assistant. This gives the opportunity for the screenplay to dramatise the issues underlying apartheid and the Truth and Reconciliation hearings.

While the film gives a lot of its attention to the relationship between the two journalists, the back story in Washington has been cut (and can be seen in the deleted scenes on the DVD). This gives a priority to Anna's story, her response to her family, to the hearings (including emotional breakdown) and to acceptance of guilt and responsibility. The affair seems dramatically contrived, although it actually happened. But, it gives the opportunity for Anna's mother to reveal secrets from her own past and urge Anna to be truthful to her injured husband.

What makes the most impact, of course, is the work of the Commission itself. Several witnesses tell their harrowing stories of disappearances, of torture and of murders. Anna's broadcasts lead to several further witnesses coming forward and giving information which leads to the pathos of recovered corpses and the knowledge of further murders.

There is also a dramatic motif throughout the film as the Washington journalist conducts a series of interviews with one of the police officers (Brendan Gleeson) who is unrepentant about the role he played and the torture and killings he administered. Other officers come forward during the hearings to testify that they were politically motivated and following orders thus enabling them to receive amnesty.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was based on the principle that all South Africans were interconnected and that forgiveness and atonement were more important than vengeance.

In My Country was directed in South African locations by John Boorman (Point Blank, Deliverance, Emerald Forest, Excalibur, Hope and Glory).

INTO THE BLUE (US, 2005, d. John Stockwell)

In the 1950s, a popular genre of action films was that of the deep sea diving thriller, with titles like *Beneath the Twelve Mile Reef*. Here is a contemporary version of this genre with popular star, Paul Walker (The

Skulls, *The Fast and the Furious*) instead of Robert Wagner. Jessica Alba is the principled heroine and Scott Caan, the friend with selfish motives and slippery moral judgements about salvaged goods. The temptation for him is that the treasure is a huge cache of drugs. Director is former action actor, John Stockwell (*Blue Crush*).

There is lots of underwater photography as the young cast scour the waters for a Civil War ship and as they deal with the drugs. The sleazy villain is British actor, James Frain, but there is also an American villain (who outsmarts the British) played by James Brolin.

There is very little one can say about this kind of film. It aims at its younger niche market. It features personable and attractive (looking) stars. It does, however, take on a moral tone to show that greed and money are not everything and that we can be satisfied with self-respect and love. And who can quarrel with that – even if they do ultimately become millionaires because of their honesty!

THE LEGEND OF ZORRO (US, 2005, d. Martin Campbell)

Action, romance and comedy. Ingredients for a crowd-pleaser. Capitalising on the huge popularity of 1998's *The Mask of Zorro*, stars, director and many of the production team have come together again to bring us what may well be one of the most popular films of 2005.

It comes as something of a surprise to learn that Zorro was created for a 1919 novel, 'The Curse of Capistrano' by an American writer, Jackson McCully. Almost immediately, Zorro starred in a silent film in the form of the swashbuckling Douglas Fairbanks, who then appeared as Son of Zorro in 1925. Since then he has been continually on screen, including a 1930s serial of twelve episodes, a television series in the 1950s and many films. For those who enjoy some internet research, there are 69 entries under the name of Zorro in the Internet Movie Database!

This time around, Antonio Banderas and Catherine Zeta-Jones have settled down into a comfortable family life with their son, Joaquin. But, of course, that is all on the surface. Don Aleyandro is always available when the mission bell tolls and the people need Zorro. This happens as soon as the film starts. It is the day of voting for California to become the 50th state of the Union. Everyone is rejoicing to become American and free. However, the vote does not go smoothly. They seem to have had far more trouble and disturbance in old California than in modern Iraq. Robber barons try to steal the ballot papers. Zorro to the rescue. With athletic prowess and skilful stunts and special effects, the film is off and definitely running.

This is really old-fashioned film making on a contemporary big-budget and none the less entertaining for that. James Horner's score with orchestra crescendos, guitars and castanets keeps us in the mood. The 19th century costumes and décor evoke the past. The continuous cliff-hanging climaxes capitalise on our eagerness for excitement. And, by the end, with Zorro, his wife and son disarmed and at the mercy of the villain, you don't exactly fear for Zorro and the family but wonder how on earth they can all possibly get out of this fix. It does not spoil the ending to know that they do!

Antonio Banderas still cuts a dashing figure as Zorro. He is matched by Catherine Zeta-Jones as Elena. In *The Mask of Zorro*, she had to join in the sword-fights and she does again. It reminds us, even though there are punch-ups and knocking people on the head, sword fights look visually spectacular.

There is a literally ugly villain played by Nick Chidlund and a suave villain, a British actor, of course, Rufus Sewell. There is always a grandee with ambitious plans for self-aggrandisement. However, this time the writers have been absorbing Da Vinci Code conspiracies and present us with another variation: the Knights of Aragon whose sway in Europe is being menaced by the power of the United States and who, therefore, must resort to sabotage. They plan to produce a weapon of mass destruction in a plant hidden underground, nitro-glycerine, and, with the help of Southern Army generals, explode bombs in Washington DC.

The serial-like scenario is not without its parallels with contemporary American world leadership issues and terrorist attacks.

One of the reasons given for the continued popularity of Zorro is that he is a hero of the people, a defender of ordinary people's rights against ruthless and greedy oppressors. He is a mysterious masked man who, unlike the comic book heroes with special powers, relies on his own wit and stamina and sense of justice to do good.

LEFT BEHIND: WORLD AT WAR (US, 2005, d. Craig R. Baxley)

In October 2005, the premiere of Left Behind: World at War (complete with searchlights and stars) was held not in a theatre but in the Hollywood Presbyterian Church. The following weekend it was screened, not in cinemas, but in 3200 churches across the United States. Monday then saw the DVD release. This is the third film in the Left Behind series which is based on the best-sellers by Reverend Tim Lahaye and Jerry Jenkins.

A brief review/critique would acknowledge that the Left Behind films are well-crafted, although budgets are not large as blockbusters go and this is sometimes evident in the limited special effects. In World at War, it looks as though the global conflagration is confined to the Washington DC area with some explosions and two glimpses of a semi-demolished White House. More attention is given to the musical score and songs by popular Christian composers and performers.

The quality of acting is standard with the screenplay giving the cast some conventional lines about danger and war but also asking them to portray earnest people who are not afraid of expressing their faith in the Lord, in the words of the Bible and in the times of tribulation and the Antichrist. Kirk Cameron is not a vigorous performer and his acting, though genial, is not particularly forceful. Gordon Currie, on the other hand, knows that the devil usually gets the best lines and communicates a diabolical ruthlessness as Nicolae Carpathio. World at War does have the advantage of Louis Gossett Jr as the embattled president of the United States. At best, the movies can be described as generally competent and meeting the expectations of their audience.

But, in an era where The Da Vinci Code is taken as gospel by millions of 'secular' readers (which will increase when the movie version is released), what of the theology and spirituality behind the Left Behind series? What of the biblical scholarship?

The issues are not those of mainstream Christians around the world. Rather, they are of immediate interest to more evangelical groups, especially those with a more apocalyptic perspective on the world, that judgment is deserved and may well be coming soon. They see plenty of signs and portents and in 2005 with tsunami, famine, hurricanes and devastating earthquakes in Asia, Africa and the Americas, even more strikingly. For Christians who take their bible literally and for those anticipating 'the rapture', the films are even more compelling.

Interpretation of the bible is over-literal. Matthew 24 is explicitly quoted in several of the films. In World at War, Buck simply opens the Gospels at this text, reads a few lines to the bewildered American president and shows him that the signs that Jesus offers to the disciples who ask about the 'end of the age' are happening now. Matthew 24:40-41 are key rapture quotations: that of two men in a field, one taken, one left; two women grinding at a mill, one taken, one left. The image and the metaphor, in this interpretation, become the reality.

Nicolae Carpathio (with the help of the United Nations) has destroyed his enemies and controls the now globalised world. He is the Beast of the books of Daniel and Revelation. His power is challenged by the Tribulation Force in World at War. But, with the end of the third film, there is still much more to come.

This takes no account of the original biblical context nor of the literary forms, the poetry and symbolism, of the mentalities and imaginations of the authors. The interpretation is fundamentalist, a literal application of words about events in the past to the present. Clearly a biblical faith listens to God's word to discover its

meaning for our times but appreciates the literary forms, the mentality of the times in order to discover richer and deeper meaning.

While there are some allusions to a forgiving God, the image of God in the Left Behind films is one of a powerful creator but, more, of a powerful judge of human sinfulness. Those who are beloved might be taken up in rapture to heaven, but most people are left behind. By using the natural disasters as signs of God's judgment, the image of God as an angry, even vengeful, judge is reinforced. In World at War, the president is forced to see the errors of his reliance on the worldly power of Nicolae and the military when his life is threatened and his Vice President is blown up. Pestilence is infecting people, including Bruce and Chloe. The Tribulation Force, a remnant at best, are in the service of a mighty God but a God to whom it is difficult to relate to in any personal, experiential spirituality. Buck's conversion in the original Left Behind (which is based on rational arguments) comes about very quickly. His converting the president to his faith way of thinking is, once again, too rational and too rapid.

There is one striking episode in World at War when Bruce and Chloe are dying from the menacing pestilence. It seems from out of nowhere, but the ill Chloe produces some bread, some wine and a chalice. Dramatically, this is unexpected and difficult for credibility. However, her inviting the Tribulation Force to share in eating the bread and drinking the wine in Jesus' name does indicate some feeling for spirituality.

It would be interesting if future movies, developed themes of a more compassionate and forgiving God as well as exploring and dramatising a more personalised living of faith, some devotion and manifestation of spirituality like the Eucharistic episode in World at War.

LORD OF WAR (US, 2005, d. Andrew Niccol)

The illegal arms trade. Most audiences might not have the interest or the patience to watch a documentary chronicling the history of illegal arms dealing, especially since the fall of the Soviet Union with the sudden supply of Kalashnikovs and rockets and all kinds of hardware not wanted for Cold War threats or use. On the other hand, audiences might be just willing to learn and to learn to protest if they were shown a feature film with action, drama, comedy and some cynicism and starred Nicolas Cage. And, here it is, Lord of War.

Most reviewers quote the eminently quotable opening. Here it is again. As the camera tracks over thousands of expended bullet cases and focuses on Yuri (Nicolas Cage), he looks into the lens and tells us that in our world one out of every twelve people has a gun. He then poses what he says is the most important question as a consequence of this, 'how do we arm the other eleven?' With this dose of cynicism, we are off and running.

This is a cleverly written film, from New Zealander Andrew Niccol who directed Gattaca and has shown that he is a critic of technology run rampant with his script for The Truman Show and his writing and directing of the satire on the visual images where even a computerised image can become an Oscar-winning star and celebrity, Simone.

Cage and Jared Leto portray two Ukrainian migrants in the Coney Island area of Manhattan, the Little Odessa of the Russian Mafia. Yuri tries out a gun deal and it succeeds. Allegedly keeping within the letter of the law, he then travels the world for years (from the 1980s to the present), involved in every civil war and uprising, taking advantage of stocks of disposable weapons, finally arriving in Africa for the uprisings and massacres of the 1990s on. His last job is in Liberia.

Along the way, he keeps involving his brother. He also picks up a trophy bride, a model (Brigid Moynahan) who has no idea of his other life until the relentless agent (Ethan Hawke) turns up. And she has to face her husband's lies and make a moral decision.

The film ends, of course, with some alarming statistics. For gun lobbies, this may just seem sensationalising a necessary situation. For those who campaign for peace, Lord of War will be an entertainment that cuts two ways: an enjoyable action drama but a dismaying reminder of the reality of the

illegal arms trade and those who benefit by it financially as well as in using the weapons against fellow human beings (so often by 'liberation' forces).

MURDERBALL (US, 2005, d. Henry Alex Rubin, Dana Adam Shapiro)

Yet another documentary that has drawn audiences out of home and away from their TV sets.

Murderball doesn't sound immediately promising. However, it is a nickname for a wheelchair rugby that is an accepted sport for the para Olympics. The wheelchairs are described as Mad Max chairs but, although there are some spills, this is a sport that is more akin to wheelchair basketball.

The film-makers, one of whom wrote a magazine article on the subject, stayed with two teams, one American and one Canadian, for the best part of two and a half years, with an Olympic climax in Athens, 2004. We get to know the personalities involved, especially Joe, the intense coach who suffers a coronary during this period and, given his energy and drive and tension, should have suffered a few more. The players are a very mixed group, united in the fact that most of them are quadriplegic because of serious accidents.

So, not only is Murderball an opportunity to see the sport and follow the extreme competitiveness, it is more of a chance to spend time with the quadriplegics themselves and their families. We learn a lot about suffering, about dignity and the loss of dignity, of the awkwardness of able people confronting the quadriplegics. While these men have suffered, wheelchair rugby has given them a great new lease on life and on friendships. The film is also about gifts and achievements. There are a few sobering moments before the final credits. The players visit Washington and show the new war veterans, the maimed from the war in Iraq, how to play the game.

The sport and the people – and wondering who wins in Athens – are able to hold audience interest and attention.

NANNY McPHEE (UK, 2005, d. Kirk Jones)

The title 'Nanny' takes us back to an England of a hundred years ago or more – or back to Mary Poppins. Mary Poppins has imprinted herself on the world's imagination, not only through the Disney film but with the new and successful musical. And a nanny looks like Julie Andrews.

Enter Nanny McPhee.

The screenplay for this fantasy-comedy was written by its star, Emma Thompson. She had read some stories by Christianna Brand about a severe Nurse Matilda. Since Nurse didn't sound as severe as Nanny and since Roald Dahl had commandeered the name, Matilda, the title Nanny McPhee was chosen for bringing Christiana Brand's children-changing blend of witch and fairy godmother to the screen. Emma Thompson is very well served by commercials director, Kirk Jones, whose only other film has been the entertaining *Waking Ned*.

It is quite an enjoyable show. Perhaps it should be said that it seems designed to appeal to a more feminine sensibility, younger girls, their mothers, grandmothers and aunts. Actually, fathers who become desperate at misbehaving children might also enjoy it when they see Nanny's tactics for obedience and control. And, actually, I have been told that children get a lot of laughs at the various antics.

Nanny McPhee (no personal name at all) looks the opposite of Mary Poppins – well, at least the opposite of Julie Andrews. Swathed in black, she has a double nose, startling warts, wispy bunned hair and a tombstone buck tooth. She does not claim to be practically perfect but she exudes a certain presumption that she believes she is. And, by the end of the film, she has woven her magic and we have seven well-behaved boys and girls.

These seven are the children of newly-widowed Colin Firth, an undertaker who has withdrawn from his children, grieving the death of his wife. The children have become champions of malice in getting rid of seventeen nannies – they really are most obnoxious, not just naughty. However, the scullery maid, Evangeline (Kelly Macdonald) sees the goodness beneath the surface (and we are not surprised at her final Cinderella-Eliza Doolittle transformation).

While Nanny McPhee has the advantage of just banging her stick on the floor to bring about some magical change, she also relies on the children themselves to use their brains and their better instincts to remedy bad situations. Some of these still have the touch of the farcical, but the good intentions (and accepting of the consequences) are important. Indeed, Nanny McPhee's methods after the instilling of some discipline and good manners have the qualities of sensible counselling.

The film has some broad jokes and some witty dialogue. Emma Thompson makes the character of Nanny her own. She creates a very interesting character – and we can look forward to articles about her and her pedagogy and psychology.

The children are a motley lot – and not all that attractive even when they are finally good. But Thomas Sangster as the eldest son, Simon, should be on the way to a successful career.

Adults will enjoy Colin Firth as a kind of distracted Mr Darcy. There are some supporting cast to relish, especially Angela Lansbury as the snooty Aunt Adelaide and Celia Imrie as a common, gold-digging widow and fearfully prospective stepmother. Imelda Staunton is the harassed cook and Derek Jacobi and Patrick Barlow do a kind of pantomime duo dame impersonation as two funeral parlour assistants.

It is all comic make-believe but it does make its point about good behaviour and good parenting.

NINE LIVES (US, 2005, d. Rodrigo Garcia).

In 2001, Rodrigo Garcia's previous film, *Things You Can Tell Just by Looking at Her*, played the festival circuit. It was an anthology of five stories about women and relationships, with some connection between them. It had a particularly strong cast of women: Glenn Close, Cameron Diaz, Holly Hunter, Kathy Baker and Callista Flockhart. *Nine Lives* is much more ambitious – and Garcia was rewarded by winning the Golden Leopard for Best Film and his cast won the Best Actress award as an ensemble at the 2005 Locarno Film Festival.

The *Nine Lives* we see are much more interconnected than in his previous film, sometimes unexpectedly and pleasingly so. Each of the nine lives has a chapter heading focussing on one of the women and providing them with an opportunity for a tour-de-force performance. Each of the segments is around ten minutes. One of them is a one take piece in a supermarket.

The backgrounds of the women are quite different moving from a prison to an affluent apartment building. The final segment is set at a graveside. This gives Garcia the opportunity to range through so many facets of women's lives: imprisonment, marriage, adultery, parental abuse, adolescent changes, friendship, pregnancy and abortion, suicide, moral choices, cancer, nursing, death and grief.

The cinematic style varies from story to story and keeps audiences alert and interested. It should be added that there is a strong male cast as well as the award-winning women. It includes Aidan Quinn, Stephen Dillane, Joe Mantegna, Miguel Sandoval, William Fichtner, Jason Isaacs and Ian McShane.

The nine women are worth acknowledging: Elpidia Carrillo as the prisoner, Robin Penn Wright surprisingly strong in the supermarket scene, Lisa Gaye Hamilton in conflict with her stepfather, Holly Hunter as a socialite, Amy Brenneman as a divorcee, Amanda Seyfried as the teenager trying to bring her parents together, Sissy Spacek as her mother, Kathy Baker as a woman angry at the cancer she is suffering from and Glenn Close (with Dakota Fanning) in the cemetery sequence. They are all very good indeed, Kathy Baker excelling in her rage, Glenn Close excelling in her quiet grief.

Garcia has a literary bent, not surprising when his father is novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Garcia who has worked in Hollywood as a cinematographer and writer as well as directing for television, comments 'I'm always interested in characters who are trapped, in a rut, can't grow... That kind of story pushes me to write scripts with lots of little stories... So, I had the idea of spending ten, twelve, fourteen minutes in the life of a woman. I know this taxes the audience because I am asking them to invest in a character time and time again and then move on...I like to choose a moment in life that sums up a situation.'

SAW II (US, 2005, d. Darren Lynn Bousman)

The original Saw thriller was a clever horror or terror film, much better written and more frighteningly constructed than might have been expected. The sequel has appeared very rapidly, the makers probably having a healthy bank balance to go in to production almost immediately. The sequel continues the style of the original, even to repeating the basic plot (and linking it with the first film towards the end). Fans will know what to expect. Other audiences straying into Saw will find it all rather alarming and gruesome.

Once again, a group of seemingly random individuals wake to find themselves trapped in a locked room, discovering tapes which gives them clues as to how they might escape. They bicker, they try their wits, they fail. In the meantime, their tormentor watches on closed circuit television. Last time there was a twist as to where the killer actually was – and a variation on this trick is used here with a character from Saw. The other difference here is that John (a sinister Tobin Bell) has a central role this time as he taunts a detective as they watch the victims on the screens. The detective has tried to reconcile with his son who is one of those trapped. As the plot goes on, the detective is unmasked as having some deep secrets.

While trying to find a word that would do some justice to the skills in the film-making while highlighting the macabre, even sadistic touches, I came across a review which called it both clever and heartless. That seems to be right.

SKY HIGH (US, 2005, d. Mike Mitchell)

This is a really pleasant surprise and made me sorry that I had noticed that director Mike Mitchell had made the first Deuce Bigalow film and Surviving Christmas. This is a lot better, much better.

It's almost as if you had The Incredibles in live-action. Mum and Dad are heroes who can be called upon at any time to right the world's wrongs (they are The Commander and Jetstream). Meanwhile, they have a nice domestic life at home. The crisis comes when their son, Will Stronghold, has to go to high school (Sky High which is only for those with superhuman powers, the heroes, and those who are gifted but not in the same league.) He can't bring himself to tell his parents that he is gawky and has no powers, especially since Mr Stronghold is one of those square-jawed heroes who can't imagine that anybody would not be like him.

What a relief for him and us when he does get his powers – which get him into all kinds of high school trouble. Lynda Carter is the principal.

Needless to say, there is a crisis in the school at prom night when a vindictive opponent, humiliated long since by The Commander and Jetstream, tries to destroy the school. What follows is lots of stunts and effects while, enjoyably, Will saves the day and finds his true love.

This could have been really terrible and corny, but it isn't. The screenplay is witty and funny. It does not take itself too seriously even while The Commander takes himself very seriously. He is played by Kurt Russell who enters into the spirit of the thing with fine comic timing and earnest moralising and paternal pride. Kelly Preston is a nice counterbalance as Jetstream/Mum. Michael Angarano (Dear Wendy, Lords of Dogtown) is just right as the potential nerd who becomes actual hero.

A light-hearted adventure most of the family could enjoy.

THUMBSUCKER (US, 2005, d. Mike Mills)

In recent years, there have been many films about angst-ridden teenagers, like *The United States of Leland* and *Imaginary Heroes*, with their portraits of dysfunctional families. It is a surprise then to find that a film named after a symptom of angst and delayed adolescence is so agreeable and, finally, hopeful with a touch of exuberance.

That's not to say that the Cobb family is not dysfunctional. They have huge communication problems, especially Dad (who prefers to be called Mike so as not to seem old), a successful businessman who still pines about his high school injury that cost him his professional football career. Vincent D'Onofrio gives one of his best performances as the bewildered Mike. Tilda Swinton is very good as Audrey who, it turns out, is a completely loving and kind mother who helps her children and finds fulfilment in working at a celebrity addiction centre where she aids one of her favourite TV stars (Benjamin Bratt). This makes the thumbsucker, Justin, very suspicious. Surprise supporting roles are taken by Keanu Reeves as a New Age orthodontist and an excellent Vince Vaughn as the debating team teacher.

Justin is played by Lou Taylor Pucci who has to act reserved, sometimes 'weird', and infatuated with one of his classmates, Rebecca. When the school authorities decide he suffers from Attention Deficit Syndrome, his medication makes him almost change personalities. Pucci is just as convincing as the hyped Justin who excels in class but particularly in the debating team. The film has some critical observations on the too quick prescribing of medication to solve adolescent problems – and the danger of their being only a few steps away from addiction. Just when you think the plot is going to come crashing down in guilt and anxiety, it brightens up, has an amusing dream when Justin is on his way by plane to New York University, a kind of summing up of himself and all the people in his life. It concludes with an exhilarating run.

Thumbsucker is a very pleasant surprise. Lou Taylor Pucci won the best actor award at the 2005 Berlin Film Festival.

WALK THE LINE (US, 2005, d. James Mangold)

A biopic that has impressed American viewers and should travel well beyond the United States and to audiences who are not familiar with the music and story of Johnny Cash.

Walk the Line (from one of Cash's most memorable songs, *I Walk the Line*) uses the framework of 2004's successful celebrity biopic of Ray Charles, *Ray*. It takes a crucial moment in the singer's life and takes us back to childhood, the beginnings of a career, success and the inevitable dependency and crash. It ends with the comeback of the singer, taking a second chance in life and career – and, as with Ray, spending more than three decades as a successful and respected entertainer. The key year for Johnny Cash was 1968 when he made a record of his concert for inmates at California's Folsom Prison. After that, and his marriage to June Carter, he really never looked back. The film-makers have left this part of his life to his concerts, television appearances and his music.

Walk the Line has been written and directed by James Mangold. Mangold received acclaim in the mid-90s with his small-budget film, *Heavy*, then with his take on corrupt New Jersey police in *Cop Land*. He then guided Angelina Jolie to an Oscar in *Girl, Interrupted*. Which makes Mangold completely unpredictable in his choice of projects and skilful in a range of genres. He also made the romantic *Kate and Leopold* and the horror thriller, *Identity*. Mangold obviously likes Cash and offers us a warm portrait, despite his failings.

Joaquin Phoenix may not be the image of Johnny Cash but he brings him alive in a sympathetic performance, warts and all. Phoenix also sings all of Cash's songs and plays the guitar in the Cash manner, quite an accomplishment. We know that Reese Witherspoon can be sassy in her *Legally Blonde* comedies, but here she brings a strength of character and responsibility to her charm and buoyancy as June Carter. Witherspoon also sings all the songs herself.

The film has a long running time which tends to undermine something of the impact of the drama and the music. The basic plot is so familiar from so many biopics that it does quite sustain the length. However, in all other aspects, this is an exemplary celebrity biography.

WALLACE AND GROMIT IN THE CURSE OF THE WERE-RABBIT
(UK, 2005, d. Nick Park, Steve Box)

Wallace and Gromit have become British icons – and one of Britain’s best exports. Their creator, animator, Nick Park, brought them to the screen in 1989 in the Oscar-nominated *A Grand Day Out*. They won their Academy Award in 1993 with *The Wrong Trousers* and again in 1995 for *A Close Shave*. Wallace and Gromit were popular the world over.

Now they appear in their first feature-length film. And they have another success on their hands, topping the US Box Office on its opening weekend at the beginning of October. But the makers received bad news as well when the production studios in Bristol, the Aardman company, burnt to the ground the same weekend. While they lost decades of film history, many of the clay models were out on exhibition and were not destroyed.

The films themselves are indestructible. They have great appeal for both children’s audiences and for adults.

As the title indicates, the film is something of a spoof of horror movies. And that is a smart move. After all, so many horror stories have become classics of literature and cinema. Older audiences will have quite a lot of fun noticing the parallels with horror movies and the amusing send-ups. Of course, it starts with the play on werewolf. This time the monster is a gigantic rabbit who has an enormous appetite for vegetables. This is especially disastrous for the village because all the inhabitants are desperately tending extraordinarily sized pumpkins and gardens full of veg to win the competitions at the forthcoming fair. Gromit himself is growing a giant marrow. Wallace, of course, does not like vegetables at all. He loves cheese.

Wallace is an inventor (and we see quite a few of the inventions from the previous films as well as a machine for collecting rabbits out of lawns – a kind of giant vacuum cleaner – without injuring them). Not only does he now create a rabbit Frankenstein creature, trying to brainwash the rabbits to hate vegetables, he also becomes Dr Jekyll and creates his alter ego Mr Hyde.

When the going gets touch, the people turn on the rabbit just as they do in *Son of Frankenstein* – and there is the potential for a bride of the Were-Rabbit. But, when the rabbit is pursued, he seizes the lady of the manor and climbs a tower as did King Kong of old. Just when you thought, the writers might have run out of ideas, they set up Gromit like a British Snoopy and create an air battle modelled on World War I and the attack of the Red Baron. You see how inventive they have been.

The script is also funny and witty. In the middle of the chase, Gromit turns on the car radio and it is playing *Bright Eyes*, the theme from *Watership Down*! Some of the jokes have mild and amusing innuendo that will be lost on the smaller audiences.

Nick Park has done wonders with the clay characters, patiently working with stop-motion photography for years. It is extraordinary the expressions he can create – especially with Gromit who does not speak but whose facial gestures are worth a thousand words.

The voices are wonderful as well. Peter Sallis has been supplying the voice of Wallace for years and it would be hard to imagine Wallace without him. The villain of the piece, Victor Quartermain, a bounder who wants to marry Lady Tottington for her manor and money and hunt down rabbits with his rifle, is played by Ralph Fiennes sounding far more vigorous than in his films, a real moustachio-twirling performance. Lady Tottington is Helena Bonham Carter, more lively and funny than she has ever been as well.

Fans of Wallace and Gromit will also welcome the musical score with the familiar anthem from the previous films. The Curse will keep you smiling.

2 YOUNG
DOOM
EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED
FLIGHTPLAN
HARRY POTTER AND THE GOBLET OF FIRE
HATING ALISON ASHLEY
IN HER SHOES
KEEPING MUM
LIBERTINE, The
LOWER CITY, The
MAD HOT BALLROOM
MARCH OF THE PENGUINS (LA MARCHE DE L'EMPEREUR)
MRS HENDERSON PRESENTS
MURDERBALL
NARNIA
OUT ON A LIMB
SEPARATE LIES
STONED
TICKETS
TRANSPORTER 2
VA, VIS ET DEVIENS
YASMIN

2 YOUNG (JO SOK) (Hong Kong, 2005, d. Tung-Shing Yee (Derek Yee))

Billed as a Hong Kong modern Romeo and Juliet, there is definitely something in the allusion to Shakespeare and young and immature love. However, Romeo and Juliet die. Fu and Nam have to live.

What starts as an American-like high school teen show with the usual crushes, snubs and mocking authority turns into a poor boy romances rich girl story. She has lawyer parents who neglect her. He has a working-class mother and father (who drives a bus). They go camping together, she provoking him, he not wanting to appear inexperienced. Pregnancy. Parental shock and alarm. Running away to fend for themselves. Hard work and survival. Crises and...

For an audience outside Hong Kong, this seems a nice, even sentimental at times, story of hard luck and trying to make good. For an audience in Hong Kong, one assumes that this is a moral and morale-boosting film dealing with social concerns. It takes up issues of poor parenting, especially by the privileged classes. It takes up abortion issues and opts pro-life. It takes up themes of teenagers taking responsibility for their lives, working and supporting family. It questions the capacity for love and commitment in those who are too young while urging them to responsibility. It acknowledges that individualism and freedom militate against family unity and the extended family. So, this is clearly an emotional and didactic drama.

The cast are persuasive – of interest is the fact that Jackie Chan's son, Jaycee Fong (taller than but resembling his father) is the young man. Fans of Hong Kong films will recognise the familiar faces of the fathers, Anthony Wong and Eric Tsang.

DOOM (US, 2005, d. Andrej Bartkowiak)

Doom is a video game. The film follows the trend to make live action features out of popular video games. It does this sleekly with the full range of special effects. But, as one watches it, one is forced to ask who the film is for and what good it will do them.

One of the difficulties in watching the film is the constant, pounding action. It is certainly violent. It is also brutal and ugly, inviting the audience to revel in bone and gut crunching mayhem and deaths. The classifications board consumer advice (which makes no moral judgment, simply informs) is rightly, 'strong violence, gore and language'.

Doom is about soldiers, weaponry (really big guns which should get psychologists going), the ethos of trained killers – although at one stage it does make a point about disobeying ruthless orders. Otherwise, this is an appeal to an extreme macho sensibility (which, in fact, is under fire as more and more stories come out of Iraq or Guantanamo Bay about military torture and abuses).

For the movie buff who wants to abstract from the violence, it is a variation on Alien themes, then Resident Evil and other video game movies followed by The Night of the Living Dead. Former cinematographer Andrez Bartkowiak has become a specialist director of this kind of film with Romeo is Bleeding, Exit Wounds, Cradle to the Grave, violence vehicles for Jet Li, Steven Seagal and The Rock.

EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED (US, 2005, d. Liev Schreiber)

A young Jewish New Yorker is told that 'everything is illuminated by the past'.

We have come to realise ever more deeply that our quest for being as fully human as we can possibly be is to be grounded in our roots. We have a need to go back into our family tree, our ancestry. We feel the need to probe the secrets and mysteries we have inherited so that we can understand ourselves better. We need to achieve some kind of emotional balance. These themes are at the core of Everything is Illuminated.

Talented actor Liev Schreiber (The Manchurian Candidate) has adapted a novel by Jonathan Safran Foer and directed this film. It is a restrained and sometimes muted portrait of the New Yorker and the story of his visit to the Ukraine to find his grandfather's village.

The early sequences establish Jonathan Safran Foer's situation. He is an extremely buttoned-up young man, always formally dressed with thick-rimmed glasses. He is photographed to look uncannily like Cary Grant – though his behaviour is more of a constricted Clark Kent. He is an inveterate collector. He souvenirs everything, especially about his heritage and his past, and plastic bags them and pins them on his overcrowded notice board. When his dying grandmother gives him a photo and a brooch, he decides that he will go to seek his roots. Foer is played by an ultra-serious, scarcely smiling Elijah Wood.

Meanwhile in Odessa, where a strict father can scarcely tolerate his earring-wearing, American music-loving son, Alex, Foer's request for their Jewish heritage-seeing service is taken up by Alex's grandfather. The journey takes them into the Ukrainian countryside (where most people treat intruders from the city and overseas with indifference or hostility). After several dead ends and basic accommodation and food (especially for vegetarian Foer who baffles the meat-devouring locals), they find a woman who is able to shed light on the story and show them the site of the village and reveal the appalling massacre of over a thousand people by the Nazis.

As it turns out, it is a journey of revelation for the grandfather, a time for confronting his own past.

Eugene Hutz is persuasive as the awkward Alex, full of ambitions (and unfettered by memories of the Communist past) and is a foil to Elijah Wood's earnestly prim Foer. Schreiber has written an elegiac piece and it is photographed accordingly in muted colours. It invites its audience into an unfamiliar world but challenges them to appreciate Jewish suffering and the universal desire to discover roots.

FLIGHTPLAN (US, 2005, d. Robert Schwentke)

Terror on a plane is a good old standby for a popular suspense thriller. We have seen plenty of hijackers, mad bombers, merciless terrorists. What about a distraught widow whose daughter disappears? And what about her name being missing from the passenger list? And what if passengers and staff are certain that

they never saw the little girl? What would we do if we were the mother? (It helps if, as here, that the mother is an engineer and knows the designs of planes and where to look.)

A cautionary note of lack of realism needs to be made, especially for those who fly often. When the mother starts her cabin search for her daughter, all the toilets are vacant and there is no line for them. This certainly requires an enormous suspension of disbelief!

Despite that, the film works quite well in the suspense department. This is in large part due to Jodie Foster. A couple of years ago, she was menaced in her apartment (again with a daughter) by burglars while she hid in the Panic Room. This time she is a widow accompanying her husband's body from Berlin to New York. In her grief, she remembers and imagines her husband. She comforts her daughter. She feels that men are prying from a neighbouring building. All this is enough to make us unsure when the on board crisis occurs. Did it happen? Well, we saw it all? But how could there be such a conspiracy against her? And when she goes over the top demanding the plane be searched, upsetting the passengers, challenging the crew, well Jodie Foster is so convincing an actress that we realise she must have imagined it all. But did she? And what happens when the plane lands?

Obviously it is far-fetched (we hope) and to criticise it for lack of realism is to have missed the point about this kind of thriller. It's what if? rather than what really happens.

Sean Bean is the pilot who has to make the choices. Peter Sarsgaard is the air marshall required on flights after September 11th. Actually, the title gives away the intensity of the plot more than we might realise!

HARRY POTTER AND THE GOBLET OF FIRE (UK, 2005, d. Mike Newell)

Book and film the 4th. I like this one best. The first two saw Harry, Ron and Hermione as younger children and the films were geared to the younger audiences who identify with the characters and their adventures. The third was darker, with sinister happenings. Now they are fourteen, the stories not for the younger children but rather for their peers – and adult audiences will also enjoy this.

For a while, controversy surrounded Harry Potter and the issue of magic. This is not a world of witches and warlocks. Rather, it is a world of wizards. Computer language likes the name 'wizard' for some of the marvellous things computers can copy and fix. And, since 2001, wizards seem absolutely respectable because of Gandulf. No one imagines that Tolkein's world actually exists and nobody is bothered by the mythologies he weaves nor with the magic and spells. They belong to a fantasy world, a world so different from our own. Harry Potter lives in a similar kind of imaginary world. If anyone mistook this world for a real world, that would be a worry – and some anxious campaigners spoke about the Potter world as if it were real and condemned it.

By now, we can all sit back and enjoy the wonderful adventures.

The other point to be made is that with the children now as young teenagers (and Daniel Radcliffe, Rupert Grint and Emma Watson have themselves grown older as each new film has been made), they are at the age for what we call 'rites of passage'. Adulthood and adult responsibilities are just around the corner.

This means that, although the trio are a bit gawky and not too versed in the ways of the (real) world as they excel at lessons and magic, they have to become aware of attractions towards the opposite sex, mood swings and suspicions and tensions for friendships, and learning to be more mature. This aspect is one of the best features of the film, raising all the questions well but quietly and subtly – and, for us, amusingly. Asking partners to go to the Yule ball, learning to dance and knowing the protocols of the ball make strong demands on them.

The rites of passage are also seen in the 'quest' theme of the film. Harry dreams of threats by Lord Voldemort and, ultimately, has to confront him. It is a clash between evil and good. On the way to this finale, Harry has to go through tests, an equivalent of initiation in other cultures. The Goblet of Fire is the

instrument for naming the three entrants in the Triwizard competition. Age-wise, he is too young to enter but the Goblet reveals his name.

The three tests are symbolic (but made vividly actual with top special effects). The first is a confrontation with the wild side of nature, a battle with a dragon. The second is to plunge into the deep and rescue close friends despite the water perils and the attacking mermaids. The third is to find one's way through a dangerous maze to the light. [Psychologists are really going to like these symbols from J.K.Rowling's imagination.]

Not only does Harry come through (that does not, of course, spoil the ending), he shows himself courageous beyond his years, selfless in saving others even though he is momentarily tempted to self-promotion. He is a boy with a sense of responsibility and a generous spirit. It is a tribute to Daniel Radcliffe's staying with the role and credibly showing Harry's development as a boy.

The large British cast is excellent with the regulars like Michael Gambon, Alan Rickman, Maggie Smith and Robbie Coltrane. Ralph Fiennes makes a very sinister Valdemort. Brendan Gleeson steals much of the show as a wild, one-eyed teacher as does Miranda Richardson as an obnoxiously intrusive reporter.

The numerous special effects and action sequences are better than ever.

HATING ALISON ASHLEY (Australia, 2004, d. Geoff Bennett)

What if your name were Erica Yurken? What if you had ambitions to be a famous actress? What if you could not stand your family, your older sister who is always out on dates and a younger sister who for years has thought she was a horse? What if you couldn't stand your mum's truckie boyfriend and, though you loved your mum, she still acted as if she was in Kath and Kim? These are the yearnings and dilemmas of Erica Yurken whom nobody at school really likes. She is very well played by Saskia Burmeister.

Then, one day, a new girl comes into the class and sits next to her. It is singer Delta Goodrem as Alison Ashley whose mother manages restaurants, who dresses beautifully and could win a Keira Knightly look-alike contest. Friendship blossoms... but can jealousy be far behind? No.

Poor Erica lives a tormented life. She is good at her work but not appreciated. She volunteers to write the school play and be the star but she freezes and really can't act. Who will replace her? Alison Ashley, of course. Erica is mean, devious, destructive, then tries her best to imitate a teacher on the phone to make sure Alison's mother comes to the play. She is unmasked, rebuked – and is forbidden to attend the performance. But, of course, she has it all wrong.

Alison is a poor little rich girl, neglected by her mother and gets on well with Erica's family. She does make a booboo in neglecting Erica and going off with her fashionable friends. But, she is sorry. And she does her best with the play. Erica has to get over hating the very nice Alison Ashley.

She is supported unreservedly by Mum (Tracy Mann) and finds a really good and decent friend in the truckie (Richard Carter) who acts as an empathetic father-figure. Even the lout who plays the romantic lead reforms.

This is not a film designed for a male sensibility. It should reach its targeted female audience, especially those girls who feel like Erica inside.

HOWL'S MOVING CASTLE (Japan, 2004, d. Hayao Miyazaki)

Japanese animation artist and director, Hayao Miyazaki, won an Oscar for Best Animated Film for *Spirited Away*, an extraordinary tour-de-force of imaginative storytelling with continually mesmerising design and colour. Well, perhaps it was not a tour-de-force because he also made *Princess Mononoke* in 1997 and now seems to have outdone himself with the imaginative creativity of *Howl's Moving Castle*.

The plot comes from a British children's author, Diana Wynne Jones. It seems somewhat culturally odd (as it did in the equally impressive Japanese animation film, *Steam Boy*) that a Japanese artist would take an English story and bring it to life. Not that it looks particularly English. Howl's Castle (which one writer imaginatively described as part Terry Gilliam, part Hieronymus Bosch) floats over European landscapes and cities. We are in a fairyland, but one that is peopled not only by the nice but unprepossessing Sophie (who is transformed into an old woman) and Heen the dog, but by witches and Madame Suliman the sorceress and the demon, Calcifer, let alone the mysterious Howl himself.

On the one hand, you have the sensible town. On the other, you have the hovering castle with its bizarre staircases and fireplaces, sinister and happy rooms. Trying to put this altogether with the adventures of Sophie and Howl, requires constant attention. And then there is the war. The film makes a great deal of the destruction wrought by deadly aircraft and bombings. So, on the one hand again, you are in the 19th century and then, on the other, you are in the 20th. It's a great temptation to describe the film as a creative phantasmagoria – so, why not?

IN HER SHOES (US, 2005, d. Curtis Hanson)

This is one of those films where it is best to suspend final judgment until the very end credits. It is quite a long film and one is tempted during some of the dramatic lulls to think that up till then the parts were better than the whole. But, by the end, it is quite satisfying and its themes worth reflecting on.

The screenplay, based on a novel by Jennifer Weiner, was written by Susannah Grant who wrote *Erin Brockovich* and the forthcoming *Charlotte's Web*. It is very much a women's project. The focus is on three women and the emotional issues between them. It is surprising to find that the male director, Curtis Hanson, is better known for some tough thrillers like his best film, *LA Confidential*, as well as *Bad Influence*, *The River Wild* and *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*.

This time the shoes are not kinky boots but a wardrobe full of stylish shoes collected by the plain and dowdy sister, Rose (Toni Colette). They are borrowed without permission (and broken) by the attractive and wilful sister, Maggie (Cameron Diaz). The first part of the film is the compare and contrast of the two women and the exasperation of the responsible sister who is sick of mopping up after the thoughtlessness and spoilt-brat behaviour of the other. While Rose can sometimes be annoying as she tries to cope and make good with some unexpected relationships, Maggie is completely frustrating. It is to the credit of both actresses that they are quite persuasive.

When Maggie disappears to Florida to sponge on her newly discovered grandmother, Rose is quietly distraught at having thrown her out and being unable to find her. However, love enters her life and it is wonderful. Maggie, on the other hand, does a deal with her grandmother and is transformed (rather quickly) by working in a home for the elderly, full of genial refugees from the colder northern states, especially the wise and wisecracking Mrs Lefkowitz (Francine Beers).

The reason the Florida sequences work so well is the presence of Shirley MacLaine. She gives a finely controlled performance as a strong woman with sensible convictions who wants to rectify the mistakes she has made in her past. Watching her, we realise that she could have a powerful influence on changing the fickle Maggie.

The film ends happily (which has brought down the wrath of some critics who deplore hope as sentimentality).

KEEPING MUM (UK, 2005, d. Niall Johnson)

It is probably true that some British housekeepers are battleaxes. But most of them don't wield an axe, especially on unsuspecting neighbours. But, Maggie Smith, as the sweetly-smiling Grace Hawkins, has some secrets like this, and she needs to keep mum.

If you have ever seen that old classic, *Arsenic and Old Lace*, the one where two nice old ladies send lonely old men off to their eternal reward (or, at least, bury them in the cellar), then you will know what to expect. This is genteel black comedy.

We know from the opening of *Keeping Mum* that, under the sensible hat, inside the old-fashioned clothes, Maggie Smith's Grace is a psychopathic killer. When challenged by the family she keeps house for that people just don't go round killing people they don't approve of, she cheerfully remembers that was the one thing she and her doctors disagreed on.

The family consists of the local vicar of Little Wallop (down Truro way), his dissatisfied wife, his emerging nymphomaniac 17 year old daughter and a son who is continually bullied at school. It is to the credit of Rowan Atkinson's quite laid back performance as the vicar, that he brings a little pathos to the film. However, he does get the chance to perform some 'Beanery' comedy, especially a disastrous spell at goalkeeping during the local football match.

And Kristin Scott Thomas brings more than a spot of good acting to the frustrated wife. We know that she is a clerical desperate housewife when she becomes infatuated with her bronzed American golf coach, Patrick Swayze sending up his image. Or, at least, creating the impression that he is murderable when Grace unmasks him as a lying rotter.

It's not as witty as all that. The comedy is often obvious. But, on the other hand, an impressive cast make it a smilingly light night out.

THE LIBERTINE (UK, 2005, d. Laurence Dunmore)

Some audiences who have not done their homework to find out what this film is about will be attracted by the promises of a salacious-sounding title. If they buy a ticket, they will probably find the film tough going. While it is very frank in its language and theme, it will disappoint the prurient. It is much more serious than that. And, with its love of the English language and theatre, it might come across as very high-brow. John Wilmot, the dissipated Duke of Rochester, the subject of the film would approve both of the frankness and the intelligence, probably praising the latter while calling for more of the former.

This is a very good film for those who have been warned. The Restoration period was a huge reaction against the Puritan decades of Oliver Cromwell, the Protectorate and the Commonwealth. And the rakish Charles II led the way. We have seen many Restoration stories and remember Nell Gwynn. Some of us have studied Restoration comedy and wonder why the Hays Code was not introduced in the 1660s instead of the 1930s! As the opening information to the film reminds us, these were excessively permissive times.

And then centre-screen is Rochester himself in bold, dark grey close-up, warning us that we will not like him. And he does his best to ensure this, not only for the audience but for his extraordinarily patient wife Elizabeth (Rosamund Pike) and even Charles II (a nuanced performance by John Malkovich, often acting with his eyes rather than his voice) and the court entourage. Rochester embodied the spirit of the times, writing plays and poems (described as 'philosophy in verse'), womanising as if there were no tomorrow (and, in fact, there was little tomorrow for him as he died at 33, disfigured by syphilis), a boorish drunk, masquerading as a doctor when Charles II banished him, yet taking theatre very seriously and directing Elizabeth Barry (Samantha Morton at her best) to become the greatest actress on the London stage. Yet, he was a critic of the politics of the times, upsetting the king with his denunciations but making a final almost-death speech to the Lords in support of the succession of Catholic James II.

Why does the film work so well, especially when it is often difficult to peer at? The photography is not quite black and white, not quite colour. It does not have the Restoration splash and brightness we have come to expect. This is a literally muddy England. The colours are not only muted, they almost disappear. However, this is balanced by a musical score which echoes the instruments and styles of the times.

There are two reasons for *The Libertine*'s success. The first is the writing as Stephen Jeffrey adapts his very literate play for the screen. The film values English language. The second reason is the performance

by Johnny Depp. In 2004-5, he appeared in Finding Neverland, Charley and the Chocolate Factory, Corpse Bride and The Libertine. He is certainly one of the best American actors of the times (though all these productions are British and he uses an impeccable British accent). This is a performance of deserved award-winning calibre.

In a way, this is a pity because The Libertine and its portrayal of the period will be too much for many audiences in both theme and in language.

LOWER CITY (Brazil, 2005, d. Sergio Machado)

At the end of Lower City, we see signposts which signal the way to the Upper City of Salvador, Brazil. That is where the wealthy and the privileged live. We and the characters of the film never get there. Instead, we are firmly placed in the lower city and its rough and tumble, a kind of Brazilian mean streets.

This is sometimes grim, sometimes glum. People are trapped by their situations, their personalities, their lack of opportunity, their limited horizons of what is possible in life, their pragmatic and survival codes and morals.

This is a hand-held camera view of Brazilian life. In many ways, with all the close-ups of the three central characters, we are too close to them, witness to their feelings and the more intimate sides of their lives, including their ignorance of what might constitute a better life.

Deco (who is black) and Naldinho (who is white) have been friends since school days. They carry all kinds of goods up and down the river. They manage. When they meet a young girl who wants a lift to Salvador, they bring her on board and do a sex deal for her passage. She is a prostitute and, later, a pole dancer in one of the lower city clubs they frequent. She loves them both but that does not prevent bouts of envy, jealousy, anger and violence between the two.

This is a slice of low life. But, even that sounds patronising, especially coming from those who have more opportunities. This is a slice of life at the day-by-day, tough, sometimes squalid, sometimes happy margins of the big cities of today.

MAD HOT BALLROOM (US, 2005, d. Marilyn Agrelo)

Strictly Ballroom, Strictly Come Dancing... No problems in finding an audience for a film about dance. This is a very entertaining documentary from New York City where a program of teaching ballroom dancing to young children in schools and entering their teams in competition has been growing since the mid 1990s. As with the very lively documentary about spelling bees and children's competitions, Spellbound, Mad Hot Ballroom follows the training and preparations of several schools in vastly differing neighbourhoods of Manhattan, Queens and Brooklyn.

You know how it is going to be. We visit the schools, meet the teachers and children, see them in action. We are given explanations of the social difficulties, of the problem children. We listen in to the kids discussing all kinds of topics (especially eagerness or awkwardness with the opposite sex). We do get glimpses of some of the parents but this is an area that could have been more strongly developed. Without the same kind of input from the parents, we do not understand the children as much as we would like. The children themselves, from multi-racial backgrounds, do reveal a lot of how they think and feel.

What of contests? Looking at the disappointed faces of the losers, we wonder at the value of such competitiveness and its effect. The compensating factor is that the children have learned a skill, learned to relate and work as a team and take responsibility.

For those who love the dancing there is plenty, much of it skilled (and some of it not!). Since I lived for a year just down the street in upper Manhattan, Washington Heights, from one of the schools, I knew whom I was supporting: the Indigo team. And they were very good.

MARCH OF THE PENGUINS (LA MARCHE DE L'EMPEREUR) (France, 2005, d. Luc Jacquet)

These penguins made a surprisingly successful march during the 2005 summer through the American box-office with more tickets sold than for many holiday films. Documentaries have to be very well made to excite the word of mouth that persuades people to come out to see a film. It seems that the penguins did not disappoint. There are millions of people out there who enjoy nature documentaries, who are devotees of National Geographic programs and the Discovery Channel who appreciate an opportunity to look, close-up, at a year in the life of the Emperor Penguins of Antarctica.

How they live in Antarctica and why they stay remains something of a mystery even after we watch the film. After all, the penguins in the summer comedy *Madagascar*, were escaping from New York zoo to migrate to Antarctica. It seems they think they were misinformed and so gave up the ice and snow and turned up in tropical Madagascar.

Antarctica is snow and ice and frigid water under the icecaps. The summer lights are long but still cold. The winter darkness, despite the Aurora, is long and long. To see the penguins marching single file over the icy wastes, standing day after day, week after week, huddling together to find some warmth while their bellies are empty and enduring a long wait until they are filled again with the mother penguins returning from a hundred kilometre trek to the water to fill up on fish (and try to avoid death from sea predators), almost defies belief.

Director, Luc Jacquet, and his team spent a year in the Antarctic, filming a great deal of footage but not knowing how well their material had turned out because lab facilities were so far away. One can only admire the courage, patience and human endurance in remaining to film the story of the penguins. Much of the film is quite spectacular, enabling the audience to live quite easily and vicariously this experience of life and death, of birth and nurture.

The cycle of reproduction, of the laying of the eggs, of the fathers' protection and incubating of the eggs, of the mothers' foraging the food, the companionship of the surviving families, the growth of the chicks and their independence and the fact that the cycle begins again and the family never more see each other is quite movingly portrayed.

The English version has a voiceover by Morgan Freeman which brings great 'gravitas' to the events. Humans are prone to anthropomorphise animals and their stories, to make the parallels with human life, trying to see how animals are just like us. (Christian groups in the United States were reported as recommending the films to their congregations because of the emphasis on family values). The original French version actually has a voice cast of prominent actors (Charles Berling, Romane Bohringer) playing the dialogue between some of the penguins as does the Japanese version. How this works, or how cute it is, English-language audiences will never know. They have to be satisfied (and are, with good reason) with Morgan Freeman's commentary.

This may be a good moment to mention the French tradition of nature documentaries, especially for audiences who may not have caught up with *Microcosmos* and *Winged Migration*.

MRS HENDERSON PRESENTS (UK, 2005, d. Stephen Frears)

Stephen Frears has been making films for television, small budget features and big-budget Hollywood features since the early 1970s (like *Bloody Kids*, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Dangerous Liaisons*, *Liam*, *Dirty Pretty Things*). You cannot predict his next project, although most of them tend to be serious with social comment. You could not predict his choice of *Mrs Henderson Presents*.

While *Mrs Henderson Presents* is interested in surfaces (especially bare human surfaces) and the film can give the impression of being a cheerful bit of nostalgic fluff, it does in fact go below the surfaces.

Best to say straight out that its subject is the Windmill Theatre in Soho which introduced naked women on stage just before World War II – with great success. Laura Henderson, widow of a businessman who had made a fortune in India, bought an old theatre, refurbished it, hired Vivian Van Damm to manage it and produce the shows.

A fair amount of the dialogue concerns the human body and our attitudes when an issue like the Windmill nudes comes up. Nowadays, very few people are going to be upset by the subject. Does that mean we have become too permissive, that anything goes on stage, screen and TV set? There may be something in that. But that would be to miss the point of Mrs Henderson Presents. The film is more interested in acknowledging that, whether we approve of it or not, we are bodily people. God made us this way. While privacy is important, prudery is an excess of it and can be dangerously repressive with some dire consequences when people break out of it. Prudery seems to get bodyliness and privacy out of proportion.

The Lord Chamberlain, until the 1960s, had to make decisions about what was permitted on the London stage and what forbidden. The compromise in the 1930s was that the models had to remain perfectly still – and so the analogy was with the classics of pictorial or statue art (forgetting that across the channel in Paris, they had long since worked out these problems at the Moulin Rouge and other clubs). The film's screenplay has several speeches along these

While there are moments of total nudity (where the producer and the stagehands strip, for instance, to make the models feel more at ease), if you blink you will miss them. The tableaux on stage are designed to resemble art works. It should be noted that the British censor gave the film a 12 A certificate.

Mrs Henderson is played by Judi Dench, bombastic, complacently upper-class yet invigorated by her theatre and challenged by the issues of nudity. Bob Hoskins plays Van Damm. The Lord Chamberlain is played for genteel caricature by Christopher Guest (writer director of such hilarious spoofs as Best In Show and A Mighty Wind). Should someone suggest he is miscast, others will let them know that he is fact a member of the House of Lords, Lord Haden Guest!

But there is a lot more below the surfaces. This is a portrait of London and British society in the 1930s, the generation that had to face the war while many were still grieving over World War I losses. In the latter part of the film, this is quite strong as it turns into a story of London, the Blitz and the Windmill never closing as it boosted morale. There is quite some pathos towards the end.

However, it is a film of nostalgia for a period that is long gone. Walking around Picadilly Circus and Great Windmill Street where the film is set, you now see a mixture of ethnic groups that are not to be found in the film. This film is a tribute to the undaunted spirit of the British past.

MURDERBALL (US, 2005, d. Henry Alex Rubin, Dana Adam Shapiro)

Yet another documentary that has drawn audiences out of home and away from their TV sets.

Murderball doesn't sound immediately promising. However, it is a nickname for a wheelchair rugby that is an accepted sport for the para Olympics. The wheelchairs are described as Mad Max chairs but, although there are some spills, this is a sport that is more akin to wheelchair basketball.

The film-makers, one of whom wrote a magazine article on the subject, stayed with two teams, one American and one Canadian, for the best part of two and a half years, with an Olympic climax in Athens, 2004. We get to know the personalities involved, especially Joe, the intense coach who suffers a coronary during this period and, given his energy and drive and tension, should have suffered a few more. The players are a very mixed group, united in the fact that most of them are quadriplegic because of serious accidents.

So, not only is Murderball an opportunity to see the sport and follow the extreme competitiveness, it is more of a chance to spend time with the quadriplegics themselves and their families. We learn a lot about suffering, about dignity and the loss of dignity, of the awkwardness of able people confronting the quadriplegics. While these men have suffered, wheelchair rugby has given them a great new lease on life

and on friendships. The film is also about gifts and achievements. There are a few sobering moments before the final credits. The players visit Washington and show the new war veterans, the maimed from the war in Iraq, how to play the game.

The sport and the people – and wondering who wins in Athens – are able to hold audience interest and attention.

NARNIA

THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA, THE LION, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE

(US, 2004. d. Andrew Adamson)

Narnia is an impressive achievement.

Clearly, it will appeal to audiences who liked The Lord of the Rings trilogy. It is a story of imagination and of values. However, it does not have the scope or depth of Tolkein's work. Rather, C.S. Lewis wrote a children's story that he hoped would appeal to children of all ages and the child within the adult readers.

This is a review by someone who read Lewis's theological writings, including his fantasy of good and evil, The Screwtape Letters as well as his biography, Surprised by Joy, and appreciates Shadowlands, but never read the Narnia books. The first impression is one of surprise at how 'childlike' the film is – in the sense that the characters are young and that all the action and the issues are pictured from their point of view rather than an adult perspective. This is quite a difference from Tolkein's adult storytelling. Adults who read the books as children will have no difficulty relishing what it was that delighted them when they were young.

Another surprise is how firmly the Narnia experience is rooted in British war history, the evacuation of the children from London to the countryside, to fostering in homes and estates. Lewis was wanting his readers (after the War) to remember that, no matter what the difficulty, there was always hope – and imagination.

Lucy and Susan, Peter and Edmond Pevensie are called the sons of Adam and the daughters of Eve – they are Everychild figures. The youngest, Lucy, is the innocent who discovers Narnia. Edmond, the mischievous, is the betrayer. Susan is the voice of reason (which in Narnia is not enough). Peter, the eldest is the responsible one who becomes the knight leader. Together (including the repentant and reconciled Edmond) they overcome the powers of evil and eternal winter embodied by the white Witch and her cohorts.

However, they cannot conquer by themselves. On the one hand, Mr and Mrs Beaver, are their playful guides. On the other, the majestic lion, Aslan, is the king who is willing to lay down his life for Edmond but whose inner strength and power enables him to rise again.

Tilda Swinton is Jadis, the witch. Aslan is voiced by Liam Neeson with great dignity. Mr Beaver is Ray Winstone displaying a delightful sense of humour, with Dawn French as Mrs Beaver.

Douglas Gresham, Lewis's stepson and head of the author's estate, is a producer of Narnia which means that it is a respectful adaptation of the novel (remembering that it is a 'version' and a visual interpretation, not the novel itself). New Zealander, Andrew Adamson (director of the two Shrek films) has co-written the screenplay and directed (joining fellow-kiwi Peter Jackson in adapting beloved British classics for the screen). The effects and the computer graphics are state of the art, creating a wonderful world of snowscapes, creatures and battles.

There has been a lot of publicity given to the fact that Church groups in the United States have been promoting Narnia extensively. This is a little surprising given many of this constituency's alarm about witchcraft and Harry Potter. On the other hand, many critics are saying either that there is no religious content or that Lewis was evangelising.

Lewis was not only a committed Christian, he tried to find literary ways of communicating the meaning of the Gospel. With this frame of mind, he was able to imbue his tales with Christian references. Some may not recognise these but will appreciate the values the story embodies. Christians will be able to recognise the references (especially with the character of the noble lion, Aslan, and his sacrificial death and rising) and connect them with their beliefs.

OUT ON A LIMB (UK/South Africa, 2004, d. Robert Heath)

A very laboured comedy which won't offer much entertainment except for the most undemanding audience. A pity because the central idea isn't bad and Henry Goodman tries his best as an obnoxious TV cook who finds himself sacked and has to cope with a dinner planned to celebrate the end of his season. His wife feels estranged. He has an assistant with whom he is having an affair. A magazine editor is there with a best-selling psychology author. His long-suffering producer is there. When two-would-be thieves invade the house (the wrong address!), there is a siege, something of the Stockholm syndrome (where the victims identify with their captors) and some reverse Stockholm where the captors identify with their victims. There is a lot of gabble, some silly situations, some most improbable situations. This will have to do if you are not going to see it, but whether this description will entice someone to go...?

SEPARATE LIES (UK, 2004, d. Julian Fellowes)

Separate Lies is an elegant and intelligent adult drama.

Julian Fellowes, writer and actor, won a screenplay Oscar for Gosford Park. He is obviously comfortable in exploring themes and characters in an upper middle-class world where the men work in the City of London but have weekend cottages in the Buckinghamshire countryside and the women support the men (or leave to find lives of their own).

Based on a novel by Nigel Balchin, Separate Lies is a complex story, one where all the characters are differing shades of grey in their moral stances. No easy black and white solutions.

Tom Wilkinson, in a finely controlled performance (which sometimes breaks out irrationally), is a successful lawyer. Emily Watson is also successful in subtly suggesting the moods of his loving but sometimes dithering wife who is discovering how unhappy she is. When the husband of the woman who does their house is killed in a hit-run accident, the lying begins. Characters are prepared to cover up. Others believe in truth and justice until it touches themselves and do about-faces. The repercussions of the events on the marriage are devastating.

Rupert Everett is able to portray cads without effort and does so here. Linda Bassett, very moving as the widow, becomes the focus of attention at the end and lays before the audience the moral issues and how truth and justice can be handled.

In many ways, this is traditional British drama, drama associated with the BBC. It takes place in a privileged world but its themes are universal.

STONED (UK, 2005, d. Stephen Wooley)

By 2005, only aficionados of Rock and Roll history of the 1960s will know who Brian Jones is. After this film, many audiences will feel that they have seen enough about him and, repelled, will not want to know more. For the record, he was the founder of the Rolling Stones, a composer and musician who succumbed to the 60s sex, drugs and rock'n'roll big time, showed very few attractive qualities and was dead, drowned, by the age of 27. At the time, pundits thought that without him that would be the end of the Rolling Stones. Forty years on, those pundits could not be more wrong.

Why a film about such an uninteresting character? A homage? A tribute? A desire to re-create the times? An attempt at analysis of the 1960s? Really, none of the above except, perhaps, a desire on the part of those fascinated by the ethos of the era to go back there.

The screenplay is fragmented in terms of time jigsaw pieces. The visual style aspires to remind audiences of the psychedelic consciousness of those years. We see bits and pieces and, if we care to, we might try to put them together into some coherent whole. But all that would produce would be a portrait of a dissolute young man, seeing him in sex, drugs and, occasionally, music action. Jones is played by Leo Gregory.

The characters who surround him do not ingratiate themselves with the audience either. (We actually see very little of Mick Jagger or Keith Richards.) There is his dominating manager, Tom Keylock who served as an adviser for the film, played by David Morrissey as if he were aping Michael Caine. There is the builder, Frank Thorogood (Paddy Considine) who is placed in the household to remodel his mansion but to keep an eye on him. There are the discontented builders and several available girls, including actress Anita Pallenberg. (Much of the film resembles Donald Cammell's 1970s film with Mick Jagger, *Performance*.) And, maybe, that is more than most potential audiences need to know, except that the screenplay announces that Thorogood on his deathbed in 1993 confessed that he had murdered Jones in the swimming pool.

TICKETS (Italy/UK, 2005, d. Ermanno Olmi, Abbas Kiarostami, Ken Loach)

The three directors had never met before they began this project. Ermanno Olmi, celebrated Italian director since the 1960s (*Tree of Wooden Clogs*, *Legend of the Holy Drinker*), told a producer that the directors he admired were the Iranian Abbas Kiarostami (*Through the Olive Grove*, *The Taste of Cherry*) and England's Ken Loach (*Raining Stones*, *Ladybird Ladybird*, *Ae Fond Kiss*). What if they were to make a film together? The result is *Tickets*. The action all takes place during a train journey from Austria to Rome.

The first part concerns an academic who has to go home by train because of an air strike. He remembers with fondness the kind PR woman who befriends him, buys him his ticket and stays talking with him while the departure is delayed. This is a miniature portrait as the professor sits in the dining car, reflecting. He also becomes aware of bullying military personnel and a migrant family they are pushing around. The family will reappear in the third part. This story is principally that from Olmi.

The second part is the most dramatically powerful. It is also striking in the way it is filmed despite the action being confined to carriages and corridors. This is principally the contribution of Kiarostami (making a rare production outside Iran). The plot concerns an obnoxious (exceedingly), large, middle-aged widow of a general travelling to his memorial service accompanied by an increasingly put upon young man doing his national service. She wants a seat at any cost and makes a scene when the businessmen whose seats she has taken (in first class despite her second class ticket) want to claim them. She is haughty, surly, tries emotional blackmail and immovable stubbornness. When she does get a compartment to herself, she constantly and intrusively demands the attention of the young man who chats in the corridor to a young girl from his town. Eventually it is too much for him. Though she is monstrous in her behaviour, the final image of her, sitting bewildered on her cases alone on a platform, shows how pitiable she really is. Silvana de Santis is completely convincing as the woman.

The third story is unmistakably Ken Loach. It was written by his now long-time collaborator, Paul Laverty. Two of the boys from Loach-Laverty's Glasgow-set *Sweet Sixteen* appear as supermarket Celtic supporters on their way to a match in Rome. Their encounter is with the migrant family and their upset when one of their tickets is stolen. They squabble harshly amongst themselves but the pleading of the young woman with a baby makes them pause (they would have done the same themselves in similar situations they realise) but they are not sure what the truth is. The ending is happy, even triumphant, though cheeky and anti-authority.

Audiences can identify with the characters and the situations, observing fellow passengers, seats wrongly occupied, lost tickets... This is a microcosm portrait by three distinguished film artists.

TRANSPORTER 2 (France, 2005, d. Louis Leterrier)

This is one of those slambang action films – like *The Transporter* in fact! – which reviewers all bemoan. Not another explosion! Which action fans love. Good, another explosion! Which makes one feel guilty for enjoying this one (that is, for those who do, as I did).

Jason Statham (former Olympic diver) has found a niche in action films, especially those of Guy Ritchie (*Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, *Snatch* and, in a more serious role, *Revolver*) as well as films like *The Transporter* and *Cellular*. He is fairly solid and stolid and with limited expressions. However, this can suit an audience as they read into him what his character might be thinking. And, in this one, he wears a coat and tie all the time, though when one coat is dragged off him in a fight, he finds a replacement. In this, he belongs to the James Bond school of action hero. And, of course, he can drive faster, more skilfully and weavily than anyone else.

Plot does not really matter although it concerns the abduction of the son of the too-busy director of the DEA, his rescue and a sub-plot about a virus that can kill in a conference room full of VIPs within hours.

Written by Luc Besson (who really should be writing classier material but obviously enjoys this), directed by Louis Letterier (who directed the ugly *Unleashed*), it need not be on anybody's must see list. But it was brashly entertaining while it was on screen.

VAS, VIS ET DEVIENS (LIVE AND BECOME) (France, 2005, d.Radu Mihaileanu)

Radu Mihaileanu was a political refugee to France from Romania in 1980. His background is Jewish. This has been an important theme for his films, especially the award-winning *Train of Life*. Now he has filmed in Israel, a film of broad scope which focuses on the experience of Falasha refugees from Ethiopia to Israel in the 1980s.

Usually, a review suggests that a film could be shorter. This film, although it runs for 140 minutes, really could be longer, especially in the third and final section. Compared with the satisfying pace of the first part (which comprises half the film), the final part is extremely hurried, suggesting significant events briefly and telegramming developments rather than dramatising them fully.

Live and Become is a very worthy film and crosses all kinds of boundaries, a plea for tolerance and understanding.

The opening of the film gives some basic information about the Falashas, the people of Ethiopia who claim descent from Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. In the 1980s and 1990s, they suffered persecution from the Ethiopian government and thousands fled the country. Many died on the way to camps in the Sudan. In the mid-80s, the United States, eventually with the help of Israel's Mossad, airlifted many of them to Israel.

A 9 year old Christian boy is told by his mother to go with another woman and pretend that he is Jewish, Solomon, 'Schlomo'. The film is very moving, thanks to the performance of Mosche Agazai as the young boy who experiences bewilderment at his mother's action, confusion in a strange country with different habits for eating, sleeping and clothes, alienation although he learns Hebrew. He is adopted by a couple with two children and begins his road to becoming an Israeli.

There are some tense and funny moments as he is invited to say grace by his adopted parents who are not religious and when he cannot answer questions in rabbinical classes and gives a speech about Jesus.

The second part of the film shows Schlomo as an adolescent. He has become part of his family. A neighbouring girl is in love with him despite her bigoted father. In the third part, Schlomo is a young adult and the important events of his life including telling the truth about himself with the support of the Falasha leader who has been his source of strength for years, going to Paris to study, marrying and returning to Ethiopia to work and to find his mother are sketched very quickly.

The ending is one of those which causes problems where anti-sentimentalist audiences begrudge the happy ending all of us would wish for in real life.

Yael Abecassis, who plays the adoptive mother, was born in Morocco and lives in Israel. Roschdy Zem, on the other hand, is of Arab background living in Paris. The three actors who portray Schlomo are all Ethiopian Jews. Live and Become is truly a work of compassion and an appeal for understanding. Winner of an Ecumenical Award at the Berlin Film Festival, 2005.

YASMIN (UK, 2004, d. Kenny Glenaan)

Winner of the Ecumenical Award in Locarno, 2004, and then winner of the Templeton award for best European film, Yasmin is a timely picture of inter-racial life in Yorkshire.

Yasmin herself, played with vivacious charm by Archie Panjabi, lives in two worlds. She works at a social services organisation and blends with the accepted British ways. She then changes back into her Muslim dress as she goes back home to her Pakistani background. Her father is a devout man but an embodiment of patriarchal traditions. Her brother is a local drug-dealer just waiting to be recruited by militant organisations. Her husband, part of an arranged marriage, is inept.

The film shows this double life taking its toll on Yasmin. Ordinary relationships, celebrating and going out, less constrained dress and make-up are part of the world she goes out to. At home, she is covered, dutiful, modest – and angry. The film makes its point about double standards for men compared with the restrictions on women.

Then comes September 11th, 2001, with devastating consequences in terms of suspicions and bigotry against any ethnic group that might be thought of as potential terrorists. When her family is victim of a brutish police raid and she spends time in a cell, though there is no reason for it, it leads to a re-thinking of where she stands as a woman, as being of Pakistani origin, as a Muslim.

In the light of the London bombings of July 2005 and along with films like Love + Hate and Red Mercury which deal with all these issues, Yasmin should be seen and talked about, especially in Britain.

CALVAIRE
CHEAPER BY THE DOZEN
FAMILY STONE, The
JUST LIKE HEAVEN
KING KONG
LASSIE
MERRY CHRISTMAS (JOYEUX NOEL)
PRODUCERS, The
RUNNING SCARED
13, TAZEMI
U CARMEN e-KHAYELITSHA
WORLD'S FASTEST INDIAN, The

CALVAIRE (Belgium, 2004, d.

This is definitely a film that can't be judged by its first twenty minutes. A singer performs for a group of elderly ladies at an old people's home. They think he is wonderful and some of them are blatantly attracted to him.

But, that is only to introduce us to the singer (Laurent Lucas). When his van breaks down, things take a turn for the worse (and worsen). You expect bizarre goings on when vehicles break down in isolated areas in American films. There is always the equivalent of the Texas chainsaw massacre. Well, here is the Belgian woods version of the same story. Just as gory, quite as bizarre and an insane motivation to rival the Americans.

Poor Laurent. He has to go through so much humiliation and pain. And the isolated backwoods types are inbred, prone to mistake strangers for their wives or lovers, hang around the local for drinks and stomp a zombie-like dance when roused.

There are some allusions to the passion of Jesus which might seem a reasonable metaphor for the suffering but a touch blasphemous given the story and treatment. This is one of those dramas, because unexpected and gruesome, where you feel a strong desire for fresh and clean air by the end.

CHEAPER BY THE DOZEN 2 (US, 2005, d. Adam Shankman)

Family films don't come bigger than this – well, actually, there is a remake of the 1968 comedy, Yours, Mine and Ours where husband and wife bring 8 plus 9 children from previous marriages! This time it is just a Baker's dozen (that's the actual name of the large family).

The original film, from 1950, had a quiet charm. Of all actors, Clifton Webb was the acerbic father and Myrna Loy the soothe-all mother. Their sequel focussed on the daughters of the family. It was called Belles on their Toes.

No such charm, no such reticence in the 21st century remakes, Cheaper by the Dozen and, prosaically, Cheaper by the Dozen 2. And there is absolutely no quiet. A quick review of this sequel would be that it is infinitely better than the first film. But, that is not saying very much. The first was raucous with a frantic Steve Martin and a gaggle of obnoxious children who spent a lot of the film squabbling and/or being mischievous.

This one is far more genial, even some niceness in the behaviour of the children who are actually growing up better behaved than you might have imagined. There are also some touches of romance in the air. As Dad, Martin does a whole lot of mugging with some overly intrusive parental control. He is also in consuming competitiveness with a successful businessman who was a rival back in schooldays - played with his customary double-take humour by Eugene Levy.

Bonnie Hunt manages to survive the proceedings by bringing sweetness and light and infinite tolerance as the unflappably wise mother of the dozen.

THE FAMILY STONE (US, 2005, d. Thomas Bezucha)

What is it about American families? Are they different from families in other cultures? In so many films, we see family reunions at Thanksgiving or Christmas. After the greetings come the recriminations and everyone seems to fall out with everyone else. If we are lucky (and if they are lucky and good-willed), we might see some reconciliation.

And so it is with the family Stone. It's Christmas and the oldest 'perfect' son (Dermot Mulroney) is bringing his fiancée to meet them all. Only his younger sister (Rachel McAdams) has met her, but they all already loathe her, mock her and are determined to prevent the engagement. And, when she does arrive, they behave abominably towards her – and this includes retired professor father (Craig T. Nelson) and freethinking mother (Diane Keaton). The trouble is that the fiancée (Sarah Jessica Parker) is rather hard to like and take. She is ultra-buttoned up, a controller, with a nervous cough and a propensity to talk incessantly. The family, of course, realises that they are justified in disliking her and mocking her.

One of the sons is less starchy than the rest (Luke Wilson). Of course, he now lives in Los Angeles and is a documentary editor, so what would you expect? He actually befriends the put-upon woman and is kind to her. In the meantime, she has asked her sister (Claire Danes) to come to her aid. The sister is so nice and the family like her so much, the fiancée seems even worse. It all comes to a head when there is a discussion at the table about gay stances. The other son in the family, deaf, is living in a gay partnership. Explosions.

You have a hunch that all will end happily (more or less), so it is a matter of watching the developments to see how this could possibly happen. Performances are quite strong. In fact, Sarah Jessica Parker received a Golden Globe nomination which one would be inclined to give her for having put up with so much from the family.

These are the woes of a reasonably affluent and comfortable family, so it is a little hard to be compassionate. But, perhaps there are some people in our families who are a bit like the Stones.

JOYEUX NOEL (MERRY CHRISTMAS) (France, 2005, d. Christian Carion)

What could be more appropriate for a film review on the first day of 2006, in the spirit of Christmas and the celebration of the motherhood of Mary, than Merry Christmas. It is a film about Christmas with a message that is still important for today.

Merry Christmas is an international collaboration between France, the UK and Germany, with scenes filmed in Romania. Its setting is World War I, especially Christmas eve and Christmas day, 1914. The bulk of the film is spoken in French (with English sub-titles). The Scottish characters speak English and the Germans, German.

Stories have long been told of how the troops in the trenches, often only four or five metres apart, sometimes fraternised during lulls between bombardments. This story focuses on a French troop, a Scottish troop and a German troop. We are given something of their background, the harking back to the styles and codes of 19th century warfare by the French officers who had little understanding of what fighting in the trenches was like. It was the same with the German officers who enjoyed lavish meals and listened to opera singers while their men were in the bitter cold of the trenches. The Scottish story is somewhat different. Two brothers eagerly join up while their parish priest becomes a chaplain. One of the brothers is killed and the other becomes bitter. The chaplain is a fine man and a compassionate minister.

When husband and wife opera singers visit the German trenches, they hear the Scots playing their bagpipes. The tenor sings Silent Night and the bagpipes then accompany him. The result is that all the troops come out of their dugouts, join in the singing, listen to the soprano sing Ave Maria, exchange food and drink and attend, all together, a midnight service led by the chaplain. The screenplay is very strong in highlighting that this is truly the Christmas message of peace on earth to all people of good will. The German officer is Jewish and explains that this is not part of his religion but that he was very glad to be able to share in it.

The officers call a truce on Christmas Day and the men once again show their common humanity. Some play football, others cards. Addresses are exchanged for meetings after the cessation of hostilities.

Had the film ended with this joyeux noel, this merry Christmas, it might have seemed rather sentimental, even though there are records of this kind of fraternisation happening. (The director has pointed out that photos appeared on the front pages of British newspapers of the time but that the French concealed these happenings.)

To our dismay, the final part of the film presents the official reaction to what the authorities call treason and conduct unbecoming soldiers in war – even ludicrously condemning the cat who moves from trench to trench. The Germans are humiliated by commanding officers and sent to the Russian front. The French would like to execute the men for treason but 200 is too many, so they are transferred to Verdun. The Scots chaplain is visited by his bishop who lectures him on the text that Jesus came not to bring peace but the sword and gives a sermon to the troops on the war being a crusade, on the inhumanity of the Germans and, in the name of superior culture and civilisation, urges the men to kill Germans, all of them.

Director, Christian Carion, has said that he would like his film to be screened in every country which is involved in war. His humane film, classical in its cinema style, is a wonderful appeal to promoting a culture of peace rather than putting a priority on a crusade of destruction. It appeals to the deepest message of peace from the Judeo-Christian tradition and the Gospel teaching of Jesus.

JUST LIKE HEAVEN (US, 2005, d. Mark Waters)

For those who are looking for a nice film, adults who want something more amiable and gentle than the big-budget fantasies, need search no further than Just Like Heaven. It is also a nice fantasy and, indeed, unashamedly romantic.

It is all the more romantic because one of the partners is, presumably, a ghost!

Elizabeth Masterson is a doctor who is absolutely devoted to her patients. She is shrewd, efficient, with the personal touch. But, her workaholicism means that she has neglected her own life and relationships. Just as she might be open to broadening her perspective, she is involved in a massive lorry accident.

Meantime, widower, David Abbott, has been grieving for the death of his wife for two years. He is searching for an apartment when he is compelled to visit the apartment of – well, of Elizabeth, of course. And, then she appears. What is going on? Elizabeth is just as puzzled as David. Together they try to find out what has happened. Without spoiling the ending, they get to know each other, understand each other, become friends and fall in love. It's as nice as that.

The screenplay, from a French novel by Marc Levy, *If Only It Were True*, is not just mushy (though the American treatment of affection and love is more extraverted than the treatment by more reserved cultures). It is often quite humorous. It has a great advantage in having Reese Witherspoon as Elizabeth. Though still young, she has shown how versatile an actress she is with comedy (*Legally Blonde*), ironic satire (*Election*) and drama (*The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Vanity Fair*). She has great opportunities for acting and singing in the biography of Johnny and June Carter Cash, *Walk the Line*.

The romantic lead is Mark Ruffalo who is not a frequent smiler in his films. Rather, he has a kind of hangdog look that suits his performance as David very well. Jon Heder (who stood out as the eccentric adolescent in *Napoleon Dynamite*) has the role of an assistant at an occult bookstore who has a gift for recognising the presence of ghosts – after all, this is California, San Francisco.

Which means that the film has quite interesting features for Christian audiences. Even though the title has 'heaven' in it, this is a completely secular story about death and life after death. There is no God or religious language at all.

Yet, the film resonates with Christian beliefs. It is strongly on the side of life – should life-supports be turned off or not? Elizabeth is not in heaven and she is certainly not in hell. One might have thought about a kind of limbo, but that is a theological speculation that, we read, has lost its status. The Catholic alternative is purgatory. Doctrine says that purgatory is not a place but a state, a state where the dead person has to come to terms with the meaning of their life. This is what Elizabeth has to do. She has to revisit her life. She also has to experience some love so that she can find the meaning of her life.

Religious and theological discussion is difficult to initiate. But, on an ordinary workaday level, watching a film like *Just Like Heaven*, can lead to a sharing of ideas about death and the afterlife, where the aspirations of those who have little or no faith can meet the beliefs of Christians. Their beliefs can be seen to be more credible. They correspond to deep hopes of what we call Heaven.

KING KONG

(New Zealand/US, 2005, d. Peter Jackson)

Peter Jackson has done it again. Of course, it is not *Lord of the Rings* with its extraordinary sweep and vision, but *King Kong* is a reverent re-make of the 1933 classic – if 188 minutes, colour, continuous excitement, cliffhanger after cliffhanger, spectacular stunts, extraordinary sets, a wonderful use of cinema technology (all done in New Zealand) could be simply called 'reverent'. It is really a very entertaining homage.

Jackson has said that while the film is fantasy he wanted to anchor it in a sense of realism. While this could not happen, it might have happened!

The story is familiar to most moviegoers (and Jackson saw it on TV when he was twelve, was so passionately moved that he decided to become a film-maker and got his mother to give him props to make his own version). This version has a wonderful New York opening giving us powerful glimpses of the Depression and its effect, giving a context to the adventure which is to follow.

The main characters are all desperate in their own ways. Naomi Watts is the new Ann Darrow (and gets a chance to scream even more than her famous predecessor, Fay Wray), a down-and-own vaudeville entertainer who is offered the chance to star in an adventure film by quick-thinking conman movie director, Carl Denham, played by Jack Black. Trapped on board the ship which will take them to the uncharted Skull Island is playwright, Jack Driscoll (Adrien Brody). (In the original Driscoll was a crew member rather than a writer.)

The three principal performers are very good. Naomi Watts is just right as the charming but feisty heroine who is able to stand her ground with Kong, charm him and become his champion. Jack Black utilises his cheeky screen persona to fine effect but has to give it more depth than usual. Adrien Brody moves from meek writer to courageous hero.

And he has a lot to be courageous about. Skull Island turns out to be peopled by a fearsome tribe. They are right out of those Tarzan type of tale so popular in the past, only more so. The island also turns out to be another Jurassic Park with more dinosaurs, pterodactyls, giant bats, fearful scorpions and gorging leeches than any other film. And more breathtaking battles (and that's just the audience being breathless let alone the on-screen struggles) than ever before. They are spectacular, edge-of-the-seat feats that also make you wonder how ever they did it, so credible it all looks. There are so many cliffhangers (literally) that keep us in constant amazement.

Andy Serkis, who made Gollum so memorable, gave his expressions to Kong and was always present so that Naomi Watts could act with him. The scene where she performs her stage routines for Kong and he responds by playing with her makes the bonds between Ann and Kong quite poignant.

There are explicit references to *Beauty and the Beast*, as well as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

We remember it all culminates with Kong on display in New York City and a pursuit which culminates on top of the newly built Empire State Building. And this climax is breathtaking too. And dizzy-making as our heroine climbs to the top to be with Kong. In fact, so much of the action could make you experience vertigo in your comfortable seat.

Maybe at 188 minutes it is a bit long. But, never mind. If you enjoy this kind of film, you will be glad that Peter Jackson is probably giving us his full director's cut on the big screen rather than keeping it for the DVD.

LASSIE (UK, 2005, d. Charles Sturridge)

The press notes tell us that there have been eleven Lassie films or television series. And none of them filmed in Britain where Eric Knight wrote and set his story, *Lassie Come Home*.

Actually, it is over 60 years since Roddy McDowell and Elizabeth Taylor shed their tears over Lassie. They were war refugees from Britain, working in Hollywood, and their film was a wartime morale booster.

The war is still the time frame of the story but veteran director Charles Sturridge (*Brideshead Revisited*, *A Handful of Dust*), who also wrote the screenplay, takes his team to Ireland, Scotland and northern England to recreate the Yorkshire and Scotland of the story.

It's a very nice and enjoyable film, especially with its Christmas setting. In fact, it is somewhat miraculous. The film critics enjoyed it!

The dogs portraying Lassie are marvellous-looking Collies. The little boy (Jonathan Mason) who plays Joe is very little but very believable, Hester Odgers plays Cilla, the Duke's granddaughter. Joe's parents, a miner and his hard-working housewife, are played with strength by Samantha Morton and John Lynch. Peter O'Toole is as eccentric as ever as the Duke. Steve Pemberton (from the League of Extraordinary Gentlemen) is one of the most convincing 'hiss the villain' types for some time.

The bulk of the story is Lassie's hard journey from Scotland back to Yorkshire, managing, surviving. There is a very pleasing interlude where she meets a tinker (Peter Dinklage from The Station Agent) but not everybody is kind to Lassie.

It's hard to go wrong with Lassie. In fact, it's hard to go wrong with a boy and his dog story. This version of Lassie succeeds on all counts (well, Peter O'Toole is very mannered – but he means well).

THE PRODUCERS (US, 2005, d. Susan Stroman)

In 1968 Mel Brooks won a surprising Oscar for his screenplay, *The Producers*, a potentially controversial comedy which ran the risk of bad taste (and won) and of upsetting Jewish and other sensibilities about Hitler and World War II. But, Brooks, taking a cue from Chaplin's mockery of his look-alike, Hitler, in *The Great Dictator*, has always thought that an effective way of attacking is by satire and mockery – making a fool of Hitler. So, not only did *The Producers* pay off, it moved Brooks from a TV writer and performer to a screen director and actor for almost three decades.

Well, when *The Producers* was turned into a Broadway show, a musical comedy, it lacked the surprise element of the earlier film. On the other hand, it now had a bigger, brighter and more lavish opportunity to flaunt its satire and mockery – and was an award-winning success. There was a version of the jaw-dropping *Springtime for Hitler* song and dance routine in 1968. But, now, along with some other spoofing songs, it is a show-stopper.

But, not quite. That, of course, is the intention of impresario, Max Bialystock and his mousy accountant, Leopold Bloom. By raising huge money for a huge show and its closing after opening night, their literal understanding of show-stopper, the loss means that they don't have to pay back investors. When people start to walk out of *Springtime*, disgusted, someone suggests it is a send-up. The audience returns to their seats and they applaud it. Success – and disaster for the producers.

Mel Brooks has made some very funny films (*Blazing Saddles* – even with its Warner Brothers lot musical extravaganza finale – *Young Frankenstein*, *High Anxiety*, *History of the World Part I*). But, he loves to make jokes in bad taste. The usual word is 'outrageous'. And there is no let up here in the vulgar, the innuendo and the just plain corny. He is no Noel Coward but he has 'a talent to amuse'.

The film version of the Broadway show is quite theatrical in style (from the theatre's director, Susan Stroman). In many ways (too many ways?), it is a widescreen close-up of the musical. Much of the acting and enunciation could seem over-acting. Rather, it is hyper-acting. Nathan Lane and Matthew Broderick are re-creating their stage performances. Uma Thurman, surprising with her singing and dancing, is just right as Ula. The camp aspects are played to the hilt (or wherever), mocking the gay theatrical culture flamboyantly. Gary Beach is in-your-face memorable as the director/actor. Will Ferrell does a funny turn as dumb Nazi loyalist.

Which brings us back to the Hitler theme. Those who have suffered under tyrants need to draw desperately on a sense of humour when their tormentor is the stuff of comedy (like Iraqis who experienced Saddam Hussein while watching the *South Park* send-ups). But the Jewish Brooks proves that the sincerest form of attack is mockery.

RUNNING SCARED (US, 2005, d. Wayne Kramer)

This is the kind of violent film that poses a lot of problems, not in the sense that it is mindless violence but, rather, that it is mindful violence and so much of it. And the same with the language. How to assess it well as a film and its ethical implications?

First of all, like Robert Rodriguez's technical tour-de-force, *Sin City*, it is a very striking visual experience. Writer-director, Wayne Kramer, who made quite an impact with his first feature, *The Cooler*, set in the casinos of Las Vegas, is a storyboard artist. But, unlike *Sin City*, it relies on a more complex moral code. Sometimes press notes are not a reliable source of information, indulging, as they do, in hyperbole and praise, but the notes for *Running Scared* are useful in providing a description of what Kramer was trying to do with the look and sound of his film,

Before quoting him, it is useful to say that this is a crime thriller, set in New Jersey (although interiors were filmed in Prague!), a gangster underworld of Italian families and incoming Russian mafia, corrupt police and no holds barred brutality. The everyday language of these characters tends to gravitate towards variations than 'dear, oh, dear'. (Though, like that swearing comedy, *The Big Lebowski*, characters keep referring to the excessive language and objecting to it, making our response even more ambiguous.)

Kramer asked his director of photography to create 'a very cool, underworld, after-hours kind of look'. He wanted its palette (and that is a relevant word because his steadicam camera swirls and swishes, zooms and retreats to make the screen look like a palette) to be gritty but very modern, desaturated. Jim Whitaker, the director of photography says it is a 'bruised palette, a reflection of the bruised and battered state of many of the characters'.

And, so, the moral issues? This is a police investigation story where they have to go into a world that is ugly, brutal and unforgiving. This is the Lethal Weapon theory! As we criticise and bemoan the violence, we have to remember that these worlds exist, that men and women enter these worlds, sometimes at great personal and psychological risk as undercover agents, and that we can be safe and not have to go there. This should be a sobering thought for those of us whose lives tend to be more comfortable and cushioned rather than not.

The film begins and ends with full-on massacres. Most of the characters are people we would hope never to have to meet. But, there is an underlying integrity in the narrative and in some of the characters – and some who have to learn integrity before they are lost. At one point there is a reference to a character as a Charles Bronson type – and one of the difficulties is that there are some vigilante shootings which are psychologically comprehensible but legally and morally wrong.

Part of the complexity is that two of the principal characters are ten year old boys, one of them being pursued by the hero and the villains. His odyssey is seen through his eyes and includes a respectable looking couple who are, in fact, abusers. Not only is it a gangster world but one of pimps and prostitutes. This is a very discomfiting world. (Kramer has dedicated his film to Sam Peckinpah, Brian de Palma and Walter Hill.)

Paul Walker has specialised in tough ambiguous-hero roles. Cameron Bright is the Russian ten year old on the run. Vera Farmiga is Walker's wife who is drawn into the search for the boy.

There used to be a classification, Adults with Reservations. This is one of those films.

SCREAMING MASTERPIECE

Well, Eduard Munch of Norway, got in first with his painting, *The Scream*, to provide a screaming masterpiece. Move further west from Scandinavia and we arrive in Reykjavik, Iceland, for this documentary which attempts to prove that modern Icelandic rock and roll is of masterpiece stature.

This is one of those 'everything you wanted to know...' movies. The only trouble is that we did not know what questions we should have asked. At least forty groups and bands, from a few months old group from

a town of just over 400 a forty minutes drive from the capital to Bjork are given the chance to scream their stuff.

Clearly, this is one of those documentaries that preaches to the converted, those who want to keep up-to-date with the contemporary music scene. Those who want to learn will find a lot of information, some reflections on why it is that there are so many orchestras (400) and numerous bands in a country whose population is only 300,000 and how the people see themselves as continuing the legends and storytelling of the Viking past.

Its not an 'in-depth' treatment and will try the endurance of those who are not as young and with-it as they used to be. The style is obviously MTV, performances intercut by interviews, which means it achieves what it set out to do.

13, TZAMETI (France, 2005, d. Gela Babluani)

A surprising film. The director is from the old Soviet republic of Georgia. His father is a noted director and sent his son to France to be educated. In this first feature, we can discern a sympathy for the experience of Georgians trying to survive in France and a French perspective on society and morals.

The film was shot in black and white, reminiscent of visual styles and compositions of past times, even the silent era. When the themes finally emerge, one is relieved that the film is in black and white.

How much to say about the plot? Having seen the film without knowing anything of the plot, I shared the experience of the 22 year old builder who steals a train ticket that he feels will lead him to extra money for his family. It does, but not in the way he or we could have anticipated. After the quiet opening, watching him at work and helping a housekeeper revive the middle-aged addict she looks after, we set out on the young man's journey.

Maybe, it is best just to say that violence is the theme of the film, especially in the context of French macho attitudes and its gun culture. It is alarming.

This is a powerful and sombre film that reminds us that film-making can go well-beyond movies as a pastime.

U-CARMEN e-KHAYELITSHA (South Africa, 2005, d. Mark Dornford-May)

Those who are not aware that this is a South African interpretation of Bizet's popular opera may be curious to ask what lies behind the title. Who is this Carmen? What is Khayelitsha?

British theatre director, Mark Dornford-May has collaborated with singers, Pauline Malefane and Andiswa Kedama, to write a screenplay that draws on the original opera and re-locates it in the township of Khayelitsha, about thirty kilometres outside Cape Town. The local language used is Xhosa.

Adapting the plot of Carmen (originally, a novel by French author Prosper Merimee which has been filmed several times from the silent era on) to different cultures is not new. One of the best known versions is Otto Preminger's 1954 Carmen Jones, with Dorothy Dandridge and Harry Belafonte, where the setting was contemporary and in the American South. The lyrics were also adapted... 'beat out that rhythm with a drum' and the Toreador's Song became, 'Stand up and fight until you hear the bell...'

Judging by the sub-titles for U-Carmen, this kind of adaptation has been used here, much of it blunt and colloquial – although a cigarette factory is still the setting and the local police feature prominently. The Toreador is a local famous singer who performs the Toreador's song on television. For those familiar with the plot, part of the enjoyment will be recognising and assessing the success of the parallels. For those not familiar with the plot, they will need to be attentive. Scenes and transitions which work well on stage can

seem too abrupt on screen without time to adjust to the next and sometimes quite different episode in the film.

The music is as stirring and emotional as ever. The singing by the black cast is fine. Pauline Malefine makes a powerfully large impact both physically and emotionally.

What is particularly arresting is the visual style of the film as well as its insights into contemporary black South Africa. The film has been photographed in a realistic manner, one could call it 'naturalism', which contrasts with the stylisation of the plot and music. But, this counterpoint works very well. We are immersed in the daily life of Khayelitsha, the poverty, the dust, the nearby freeways and trainlines, the homes, the pubs, the shops – all presented with an eye to practical detail. Had there been no music, the visuals would be strong enough to communicate life in the township, the hardships, the emotional entanglements, the role of the police, the drug smugglers. As it is, this realism is enhanced by the singing.

Some of this counterpoint will work well with some audiences, some will not – depending on whether priority is on the music or on the social comment.

The film has found large audiences at home. Internationally, it won the Golden Bear at the 2005 Berlin Film Festival.

THE WORLD'S FASTEST INDIAN (New Zealand/US, 2005, d. Roger Donaldson)

Roger Donaldson left Australia at the time of conscription for the Vietnam War. He moved to New Zealand and made documentaries and the feature films, *Sleeping Dogs* and *Smash Palace*. With *The Bounty*, he began an international career that has lasted over twenty years. During his documentary days, he met Burt Munro, a veteran of motorcycle racing and breaking speed records.

Now he has returned to New Zealand and his love for his adoptive country to make a feature film on Burt Munro. It needs to be said at once that the Indian of the title refers to Burt's bike (or motorcicle as he pronounces it), made in Massachusetts in the 1930s and is not a reference to actual native American Indians. Donaldson has not just directed. He wrote the screenplay as well and consulted Burt Munro's three children.

The Burt who emerges from the film is a cheerful, older bloke from the Southern hemisphere who is not used to American ways and who bemuses and amuses the Yanks. He never misses an opportunity to tell them that he is from the other side of the world, proud of New Zealand.

We find him in Invercargill, revving up his cicle, disturbing the neighbour's peace but someone whom their young son, Tom (a natural performance by Aaron Murphy) likes spending time with. Burt's aim is to get to Bonneville, the dry lake speed course in Utah. Between several jigs and quite some reels, he actually gets the money and sets off – with everyone's good wishes though not with everyone's expectations that he could break a record.

The New Zealand 1960s sequences have the homely touch.

The rest of the film is Burt's arrival in LA (not a world he is used to), his road journey to Utah and his endeavours at Bonneville – which sometimes leaves the spectators aghast.

This is a genial film, a *Rocky* for the older generation (or, as 79 year old Stan Freberg remarked, 'the chronologically gifted'). Burt meets all kinds of people along the way and wins them over (except the disgruntled LA taxi driver). The people include the screen's most genial and kindly transvestite, a nice used car salesman, an actual Indian and his family and a very eager and lonely widow.

There is a credit for Anthony Hopkins' dialogue coach, but his accent (while definitely from the Southern hemisphere, seems a sometimes bizarre mixture). But Hopkins gives his character a warmth and sincere

naiveté that is engaging. Just as Burt wins over all the people he meets, so he wins over the audience (except anyone who resembles the grumbling taxi driver).

STEALTH (US, 2005, d. Rob Cohen)

The high-tech action adventure is not the first place that audiences go to for a moral perspective on society and controversial political issues. The 'war against terrorism' has meant that we look at films about these questions much more carefully since they touch us personally. Since the London underground bombings and attempted bombings, British audiences have a great deal more to think about, especially about counter-terrorism.

While Stealth is an action show for the holidays, it has enough current themes to make it more than just entertainment. Whatever the feelings about terror, aggression and pre-emptive strikes, we cannot avoid the issue of the exercise of power by authority and the abuse of power by politicians and the armed services. The screenplay of Stealth focuses on military ambitions, issuing and following of orders.

The film is allegedly set in the near future, a period when unpiloted stealth planes will use digital means to wage war. Sophisticated cameras and programming will be able to determine exactly where a target is, even people. With the arrest of one of the would-be bombers in Rome at the end of July, tracked by his use of his mobile phone and pinpointed in exactly the right apartment where he was hiding and then arrested, maybe this is not so fanciful.

While the film displays its firepower in state of the art special effect explosions, it soon raises the issues of collateral damage and its relation to the destruction of the target is to be so accurate as to make a building implode without destroying adjacent (buildings (which brings back memories of recent wars and wrong targets being hit with subsequent deaths and injuries). But Stealth wants to take its audiences further. The commanding officer (Sam Shepard) has so committed himself to his project's success, that he is prepared to risk lives and destruction and involve himself in giving authorities false information. At first, he seems a genial American hero and leader, but allows himself to be corrupted by his obsession.

As with the Dr Frankenstein myths, the deadly creation takes on a life of its own and becomes a monster. The point is made that while humans can work on artificial intelligence, they underestimate (as in The Matrix trilogy) how intelligence can develop itself beyond human control. The stealth plane here is given a nickname, EDI (from Extreme Deep Invader) and referred to as him rather than it. He has a central red light, reminiscent of the rogue computer HAL in 2001: a Space Odyssey, as well as a smoothly sinister

voice. Of course, it is up to the decent humans to take moral control of the situation and assess the ethical implications of orders and whether they should be obeyed or not.

Coming from the United States, the film dramatises both hawkish action (the enemies at the moment are Myanmar, Turkmenistan and North Korea) and dovish reason (with a criticism of indiscriminate US jingoism). But, in the last 20 minutes or so, it becomes a ra-ra actioner where heroic individuals accomplish almost impossible feats of daring and save the day.

The heroes are played by Josh Lucas, Jessica Biel and Jamie Foxx. The former live up to their status but Foxx is not particularly good or convincing - if he had used this performance as an audition for his Oscar-winning performance as Ray and his fine nominated performance in *Collateral*, he would never have got the parts. The Thai scenes were filmed in Thailand but the rest of the film was made in Sydney with the New Zealand ranges standing in for Alaska. We can enjoy the whizz-bang effects on the screen - but *Stealth* is offering us a caution about the dangers of digital warfare in reality.

THE EXORCISM OF EMILY ROSE (US, 2005, d. Scott Derickson)

For film audiences since 1973, *The Exorcist* has been something of a model for what most people imagine as the rite of exorcism in the Catholic Church. The film was successful in its time, both critically and at the box-office, produced two sequels and many imitations, was successfully re-released on its twenty fifth anniversary and continues its life on television, on video and DVD. A prequel, *The Exorcist: A New Beginning*, was released in 2004. *The Exorcist* is probably a case where a film shapes consciousness rather than reflecting it.

In the era of *The Da Vinci Code*, there is a greater interest in Christian themes, especially connected with the Catholic Church. All kinds of hypothesis and inventions are turning up, many of which are being accepted as 'gospel' by a usually sceptical public. This is compounded by the impact of the abuse cases against clergy which have turned public attention towards the priesthood leading, in many countries, to disappointment on the one hand and to contempt on the other.

It is in this context that *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* has been released. Considered as a low-key box-office prospect, the film surprised the industry by taking \$30,000,000 in its September opening weekend in the United States. This means that its prospects of being screened more widely improved considerably.

The Exorcism of Emily Rose is worth seeing.

The subject will not appeal to everyone. Demonic possession is a frightening topic. It is mystifying. Why would devils possess a human being, and what does this mean? How can people cope? What is the response of the Church? Who are exorcists and what authority do they have? What are the rituals - and are they successful? What impact does possession and exorcism have on non-believers and on a sceptical world? (It is interesting to note that a two month course on Exorcisms and Satanism was held in early 2005 at the Athenaeum Pontificium Regina Apostolorum in Rome.

This film takes all these issues into consideration. Admittedly, this is 'only a movie'. It is not a theological or sociological or medical document. However, in the space of two hours storytelling, it draws its audiences into the reality of possession, moves them emotionally, but also challenges them to think about the issues.

Director and co-writer, Scott Derickson, is not a Catholic. He has a Presbyterian background. He has done his research and Catholics will be comfortable with his perception of the Church. As with so many stories, he has added some of his own speculations which are passed off as the real thing. This is the case especially with his device of having clocks stop at 3.00am and claiming it to be the devil's hour for entering the world because three refers to the Trinity and to the time that Jesus died. (It would be a pity if that were the only thing that audiences remembered.) He also has a parish catechetical program where Emily Rose could study some Biblical Greek and Hebrew and even a smattering of Aramaic. (That is wishful thinking!)

In comparison with *The Exorcist*, *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* is a model of how to make more with less. It should not be considered as a horror film. Rather, it is a religious and psychological drama that has traditional elements of horror or, as *The Hollywood Reporter* describes it, a 'supernatural thriller'. In the possession scenes, there is no swearing, no bile, no vomit, no head swivelling as in 1973. (It has a US rating of PG 13.) There are strange voices and utterances (as were also reported in the Gospel stories of demonic possession), catatonic episodes and limb contortions. The eeriness is felt through loud and piercing cries and the atmospheric sounds and sound engineering.

What are the themes and treatment that make the film of interest to Catholic audiences?

- The film is basically respectful towards the Church, even when criticisms are voiced. It is sympathetic to this Catholic story at a time when many are hostile towards the Church or feel they have been offended by it.
- The film shows a sincere priest, even though many may disagree with the stances he takes towards the possessed girl, the treatment by doctors and the medication she was prescribed. He is accused of negligent homicide because of his agreement with her that she should come off medication and that religious ritual was the way to deal with her condition. As portrayed by Tom Wilkinson, Fr Richard Moore is a decent and spiritual man caught up with something previously beyond his experience and trying to do his best for the family from his parish and getting the authority of the diocese to go ahead with an exorcism (including using technical resources like taping the ritual so that it can be authenticated). The screenplay shows the important role of the parish priest as confidant who can be trusted and the nature of confidentiality.
- The film suggests a respect for simple faith, the trusting unsophisticated faith of ordinary people that more educated critics look down on as superstitious or simplistic. This is the case with Emily Rose's parents and their beliefs and trust in the priest. It is glib to disregard anything that is not understood as 'medieval superstition'.
- During the latter part of the 20th century, many have struggled with the questions of evil in the world and how this relates to traditional teachings and beliefs about the devil and evil spirits. The film highlights the reality of evil in our world, the power of evil as well as of the divine.
- The answer to some of these questions that the screenplay offers harks back to previous centuries, especially to those women who experienced apparitions whether it be Anne Catherine Emmerich, Bernadette, the children of Fatima or more recent visionaries. Emily Rose is presented as one of these. She sees Mary and receives a message. In 2004, a number of Catholics found the spirituality in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* too focused on Jesus' sufferings and the implication of cruelty on the part of the Father and not enough on resurrection hope. A similar critique might be made here. Emily Rose is given the option of being freed from possession by exorcism or continuing to be possessed until her death in order to witness to the world that there is a supernatural world, that evil exists and invades the world but that the presence of God is stronger. This spirituality of victimhood has a strong tradition. In more recent centuries, saints like Therese of Lisieux offered her 'little way' of community contemplative life for the labours of overseas missionaries. Saints like Gemma Galgani or St John Vianney had experiences similar to those of Emily Rose in combating the devil. The efficacy and relevance of this kind of spirituality will be continually argued. The film does not follow the path of some recent visionaries (and of some whose messages have been discredited) in being pessimistic about the world and uttering apocalyptic condemnations. The message here is that redemption is possible and that good will overcome evil.
- The core of the film is the court case where Fr Moore is being tried for negligent homicide. The prosecution develops the argument that Emily Rose was schizophrenic or paranoid or experiencing some kind of psychotic episode. Expert opinion is heard. The nature of the medication prescribed and its hoped-for effects are discussed. This is the approach that most people take (including

Church officials who would take the part of what has become known as the Devil's Advocate). The prosecutor, played by a steely Campbell Scott, has been chosen because he is a Methodist and a churchgoer. However, he stresses that, in the courts, facts are what is important and he relies on scientific, medical fact.

The defence lawyer, Laura Linney at her best, tries to counter these arguments. She calls a witness, an expert in the experience of evil in more sophisticated and less sophisticated religions around the world and their belief in possession. Then she decides that the better defence is to accept that the religious treatment, the exorcism, is a valid way of dealing with Emily Rose's condition and that Fr Moore made the correct decision to go through with the ritual. She is a declared agnostic. Fr Moore warns her that she will be subject to demonic attacks. Strange things happen to her – or that is how she perceives them. What happens to her in terms of the defence is that she realises that facts are not absolutes, that facts are always interpreted.

The screenplay is well-written all the way through. It is in the two summing up speeches that the differences between fact and interpretation are made very clear. Scientific evidence, plain and well-founded as it may be, is still working in the realm of hypothesis. Therefore, it must concede that there can be other possibilities.

One reviewer commenting after the screening was offended by the film because he alleged that it advocated bringing religious hypotheses into American jurisprudence. This highlights the limitations of the confrontative nature of court proceedings, especially the confining of witness testimony to issues of 'yes' and 'no' with no allowance for modifications or 'buts'. The Exorcism of Emily Rose indicates that facts must be presented but the facts are open to several possibilities of interpretation.

- The film raises the question as to the nature of holiness and who are saints. In the secularised Western world, people tend to be very sceptical about the possibility of saints. It is an unspoken assumption that saints should be 'normal'. When the saint is less than perfect, especially if influenced by a psychological condition, their holiness is dismissed – except in literature where Dostoevski's *The Idiot* and characters who resemble him can be extolled. Fr Moore claims that Emily Rose is a saint. He tells her story in court, challenging the audience to consider whether they think she is a saint and that this is an example of sanctity. This is clearly a challenge to the theological stances of the audience and the nature of their own spirituality and piety.

There is no claim that *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* is a cinema masterpiece. Rather, it is a well-written and well-crafted film that deals with religious and Church questions in a secular world which, at the moment, has become intrigued by spirituality and ecclesiastical institutions.