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SIGNIS FILM REVIEWS 2010

Avatar is reviewed here as is The Lovely Bones. Both The Last Station (about Tolstoy's last year) and Sherlock Holmes (like a graphic novel of Conan Doyle's stories) are worth attention.

Fr Richard Leonard, director of the Australian Catholic Film Office, has issued a press release on the office's award winners for 2009. The prize goes to Samson & Delilah, the aboriginal film, which won the Camera D'Or in Cannes, the main awards at the Australian Film Institute and is Australia's entry for Best Foreign Language Oscar consideration (reviewed in May last year). Commendations went to Mao's Last Dancer (reviewed here) and The Boys are Back (reviewed last month).

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AVATAR

-(US. 2009, d. James Cameron)

Despite the early reviews and positive word of mouth for Avatar, it took me a long while to be drawn into the film and its story and feelings (which doesn't matter so much since it goes for 162 minutes). But then, I succumbed to it. One of the reasons for the delay, I would think, was that I was expecting it to be a fantasy epic but at first it was science, science fiction and mineral exploitation on the planet Pandora, with a hero who was singularly unsympathetic, even uninteresting, with a lot of dialogue of the 'How's it goin'?' lack of variety, rather mundane, even banal.

But, it does move into epic fantasy mode (though the dialogue does not improve all that much) and the paraplegic, ex-marine hero gradually moves into epic saviour hero mode, not least because he is transformed into avatar life (with the use of his legs and some mighty strength).

Avatar is the technical name given to creatures who are mixes of the DNA of a human subject with the DNA of the Pandoran inhabitants which transforms the character into a rather giant figure, blue, science fantasy features, including a tale.

That being said, it is the imagination and cinematic flair bringing that imagination on to the screen with special effects that keep us watching (at least mentally gawping, if not physically, in amazement) at the space, the beauty, the movement, the colours, the wonderful swooping beauty of riding creatures through the sky well beyond Quidditch and, a favourite, the floating mountains.

When we move away from the science and engineering (not entirely, of course, because the 'sky people', humans who have ravaged the earth and are on a futuristic conquistadoring expedition to Pandora with gigantic bulldozers and robots to exploit the resources, have to shape up for a final explosions and flame-throwing Apocalypse Now attack and a warrior confrontation), we enter the nature world of the Pandoran natives (a kind of beautiful pantheistic, divine energy world with a giant sacred tree and a vegetal network of energy), we are reminded of Eden and innocence. It weaves its spell on our hero, Jake Sully, who enters into the world of natives and avatars, spying at first and reporting to military authorities, but then finding a new, simpler, harmonious nature world and, needless to say, falling in love.

The military leader (a very strong Stephen Lang in a familiar but effective performance), refers to the natives as 'hostiles' and, visually, they do remind us of cowboys and Indian films – perhaps the film is like a cowboys and Indians saga in a futuristic Jurassic Park, full of marvellous special effect creatures.

Australian Sam Worthington is Jake Sully (Worthington earlier in the year proving himself a more impressive presence than Christian Bale in Terminator Salvation). The princess of the tribe is Zoe Saldana. The scientist (who also transforms into an avatar) is Sigourney Weaver whose name is the feminine Grace (compared with her blunt name of Ripley in the Aliens series, the second of which, Aliens, was directed by James Cameron). Giovanni Ribisi (looking too young) has all the villainous dialogue about exploitation, scepticism at any suggestion of mysticism or spirituality and vicious, without conscience, during the final battle.

While the film has a clear 'green' message, it also is strong in its reminder of the destructive realities of colonial and imperialist attitudes. In fact, the film seems highly critical of US foreign and business policy (echoes of Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan) and its huge insensitivity to people who are different, to their cultures and their way of life which is judged as vastly inferior.

So, the epic quality is there. The fantasy builds on the traditions of the Post Star Wars era – and, technically, and in 3D – so much of the images, movement and effects are cinema wonders to behold.

BEYOND A REASONABLE DOUBT

(US, 2009, d. Peter Hyams)

This legal thriller is adapted from a 1956 drama directed by Fritz Lang where a newspaper man sets up a situation to incriminate himself to expose an exploitative lawyer. It starred Dana Andrews. More than 50 years later, genre film director, Peter Hyams, has remade it with DNA evidence as the key issue for a would-be governor winning murder trials.

This time the journalist is a documentary maker with his eye on a Pulitzer Prize. He is played with supreme self-confidence, even when his expose plan starts to go wrong, by Jesse Spencer. Michael Douglas is the public figure prosecutor with ambitions. Amber Tamblyn is his assistant – who becomes emotionally and professionally involved with the young man who puts himself in legal harm's way to make a name for himself.

If you accept that this is a rather far-fetched story, you will accept the rather melodramatic events, car chases, murders, incriminating photos and evidence planted – and be glad of the comeuppance to the crooked lawyer. The film suddenly becomes a story in a hurry towards the end, but provides us with a twist that most audiences would certainly not be anticipating.

THE BROTHERS BLOOM

(US, 2009, d. Rian Johnson)

The Brothers Bloom may be a comedy which appeals to an offbeat sensibility and requires an acquired taste. It seems akin to a Wes Anderson comedy and his work is also an acquired taste, exercises in eccentric comedy with bizarre characters in oddball situations (Bottle Rocket, Rushmore, The Life Aquatic, Darjeeling Limited). Comments about The Brothers Bloom refer to it as off-kilter! (Johnson's other film was the intriguing Brick, a story of a teenager taking

on criminals to find his girlfriend who has disappeared.)

The Brothers Bloom is both serious and comic. They are two orphans, Stephen and Bloom, who move from foster home to foster home as children. Stephen is shrewd and invents scams (with elaborately detailed plans), even conning the children at school. When they grow up (Mark Ruffalo is Stephen and Adrien Brody is Bloom), Stephen is still creating scenarios that they play out, always featuring Bloom, dangerous cons which could get them killed – and they tangle with a mysterious French importer (Robbie Coltrane) and a sinister Russian dealer (Maximilian Schell). They also have a blonde Japanese assistant who rarely speaks.

One of the intriguing aspects of the film is watching the scam develop and pay off, not without risk.

They decide to target a wealthy New Jersey recluse, Penelope (Rachel Weisz) and they embark on a final con with her which takes them to different countries. Stephen is still in control. Bloom has fallen for Penelope. Will they get away with the scam, especially when pursued by Russian gunmen?

No predictions as to who might like this off-kilter story – you might. Or, feeling the need for some more balance, you might not!

CHARLIE AND BOOTS

(Australia, 2009, d. Dean Murphy)

Here is an easy-going comedy, serious in its themes, but lightly funny because of the characters and situations. And it features two Australian actors who have become icons, one from the 70s and 80s, the other recently.

The first is Paul Hogan, who entertained us with television skits and sketches after working on painting Sydney Harbour Bridge (which provides the final quip of this film). Then, he became Crocodile Dundee, advertised putting shrimps on the barbie and tried a few more films like Almost an Angel and Flipper, and was successful only in Crocodile Dundee sequels. He made an amusing comedy some years ago, Strange Bedfellows, and now Charlie and Boots. He hasn't really changed his style all that much but here he is a grieving widower who has given up on much of life. He is Charlie.

The second icon is Shane Jacobson, perhaps better known as Kenny. He is Boots (and you will enjoy finding out why he doesn't use the name which his mother, keen on popular singers, actually gave him).

Hogan and Jacobson make an entertaining odd couple.

This is a very Australian comedy, not just because of the stars and the characters they create, nor the jokes and Aussie humour style, but because it takes father and son and the audience on a trip through Victoria and New South Wales, up through Queensland with the destination, Cape York, the northern tip of the continent. This is a trip that son thinks father needs to come to terms with his grief. It is also a trip that enables father and son to come to terms with each other, father fulfilling a promise to take his son fishing at Cape York. The trip elicits memories for Charlie. Charlie wants it to offer opportunities for Boots to start dating again. They meet a range of Aussie outback types: a 16 year old who wants to sing at Tamworth, various waitresses, a lady truckie, a north Queensland pilot, speeding tow truck drivers with our heroes car connected (and a Queensland policeman who wants to book the towed truck for speeding).

Plenty of scenery and plenty of outback Australian life, plenty of sentiment and plenty of humour.

DIAMANT 13

(France, 2009, d. Gilles Behat)

A tough police and crime thriller filmed in Antwerp.

It's not as if we haven't seen similar stories but this one is quite effective with its tale of an ageing, somewhat disillusioned inspector who is let in on a drugs and cash scam by an old friend on the force.

The film does not have too much time to explain all this before it all gets out of hand with murders, dealers and drugs, corrupt politicians, police loyalties and betrayals, a cache of money and an incriminating diary.

What makes the film more effective than usual is the atmospheric locations and photography and the cast. It is Gerard Depardieu again (at almost 60) as the policeman, Olivier Marchal as his friend and Asia Argento as a young police chief.

The audience has to pay attention to who is good and who is bad and follow some unexpected (and some predictable) plot developments. But it is an effective crime drama.

DID YOU HEAR ABOUT THE MORGANS?

(US, 2009, d. Marc Lawrence)

In a way, you could say, 'seen any of Hugh Grant's American romantic comedies, you've seen them all'. Not quite accurate – some are more entertaining than others – but this one is more or less the usual. When his voice comes over the opening credits, he really does sound more British than British (and is later referred to as 'the tea drinker'). When he comes on screen (and it is two years since his last film, *Music & Lyrics*), it is a shock to be reminded of how mannered he is, the charming bumbler who has gaffed his way through many a film. His character is not quite so charming here – an infidelity in his marriage – and, as a New York City lawyer, he can't be all that bumbling...

Except, if the plot landed him in the middle of rural Wyoming where he is most definitely not at home. Oh, how did he get there from NYC? The Witness Protection program.

After a usual kind of opening as he meets his ex-wife, Sara Jessica Parker, a hot shot real estate agent, for dinner, they witness a murder and off they are hurried to the small town of Ray (one cafe, one store, a rodeo...).

The plot is a kind of *Crocodile Dundee* in reverse. The city slickers who can't get to sleep because Wyoming lacks the accustomed noises of New York have to adjust (they do a bit), have to face their marriage (they do), escape the killer who has tracked them down (yes, she did make a phone call to her office which the killer had bugged), kiss and make up, find a child to adopt and become pregnant. If you like the stars, no problem.

But Sam Elliot (who has done this kind of laconic cowboy role so many times in westerns and non-westerns but does it effectively) and Mary Steenburgen (who is appearing these years in welcome character roles) are the husband and wife deputies who are responsible for the protection of the witnesses.

That's it, neither more nor less.

THE LAST STATION

(UK/ Germany/ Russia, 2009, d. Michael Hoffman)

One hopes that many people would be able to answer the question of who wrote *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. Leo Tolstoy. Here is an opportunity to learn a little more about the man and his ideas. It is also an opportunity to get to know his wife, Sofya.

The action of this beautifully made drama takes place in 1910, the last year of Tolstoy's life. *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* are long behind him. In his later years, he developed more socialist and utopian ideas, delved into the different religions and promoted a humanist and egalitarian perspective on life before the 1917 revolution. He had devout disciples who put him on a pedestal, promoted his writings and teaching as if he were a prophet. Many went to live and work in the communes. This is the background to the personal story of his last months.

Christopher Plummer, turning 80, is still a strong screen presence and gives Tolstoy an energy, a compulsiveness to think, to work, to publish and to support his disciples. His principal disciple is Vladimir Chertkov, played by Paul Giamatti. He is an enthusiast but a man (under suspicion from and confined to his house by the Moscow authorities) who lives in his head despite his enthusiastic feelings. He is an ideologue who has put Tolstoy, who is his close friend, on a pedestal, even wanting to orchestrate the way Tolstoy would die so that it would make impact on his followers and on the whole world (with crowds of journalists camping outside the station in southern Russia where Tolstoy was dying).

That being said, it should be emphasised that this is also a film about Tolstoy's wife, Sofya, the Countess who valued her status and way of life, disagreed with many of the principles of the husband she loved, detested Chertkov and his friends. She was hypersensitive, prone to tantrums and hysteria, jealous of her husband's friendships and fanatical about his will and the preserving of property for her children. She is played by Helen Mirren in a marvellous tour-de-force.

One of the children is Sasha (Anne-Marie Duff) who works for her father and takes stands against her mother.

But the film is also about Tolstoy's young secretary, Valentin Bulgakov, also a young idealist hired by Chertkov and who is welcomed into the household by both Tolstoy and Sofya. A prim young man, he is mocked by Masha who lives

in the commune, but is also seduced and falls in love with her. McAvoy also gives a fine nuanced performance.

The film does not have the dramatic drive of Tolstoy's novels. Rather, it offers an opportunity for the audience to enter into an unfamiliar world, meet arresting (and sometimes irritating) characters and learn about a different era and different ideas. Director Michael Hoffman also made the very interesting period drama about the era of Charles II in England, Restoration.

THE LOVELY BONES

(New Zealand/US, 2009, d. Peter Jackson)

After *The Lord of the Rings* and *King Kong*, a Peter Jackson film sets up an expectation for most audiences for an epic adventure with special effects and action. It is unfair to him – audiences should remember *Heavenly Creatures* – and he has tried to break through the expectation with this American story of 1973 in a small Pennsylvania town where a serial killer murders a 14 year old girl. Teenagers and murder may remind some of *Heavenly Creatures* and that is probably a good thing because that film blended realism with fantasy and imagination. Which is what *The Lovely Bones* does as well.

It is based on a novel by Alice Sebold, who is thanked in the final credits (though devotees of the novel have not hesitated in blogging how much they dislike the film and Jackson's interpretation of the novel).

What distinguishes the film from other murder stories is that it is narrated by the dead Susie Salmon, who guides the audience through what happened to her (with some restraint in what is actually shown on screen). The other distinguishing feature is that she is shown, not in Heaven, but in a temporary afterlife called the In Between, where the landscapes, touches of lollipops and rainbows, is part of the dead girl's imagination (something similar to the visions of heaven in Vincent Ward's *What Dreams May Come*), that of a young female teenager (rather than the In Between that some adult critics thought should be modelled on their imagination, which might mean something of a dour place rather than the sentimentality they said they experienced). It is interesting to look back at *Heavenly Creatures* and see how Peter Jackson also created the imaginary world of his teenage murderers.

Susie's family are distraught, the father (Mark Wahlberg, good but sometimes too restrained though he does have a number of angry outbursts) becomes obsessed and makes demands on the friendly detective on the case (Michael Imperioli). The mother (Rachel Weisz, who is a strong screen presence) cannot cope with what has happened and with her husband's persistence in searching, so has to go away from her family. Susan Sarandon appears as the hard-drinking, smoking grandmother who seems too much of a caricature for the tone of this storytelling. The victim's sister (Rose McIver) uses her grief with more initiative and precipitates the resolution of the case.

But it is Saoirse Ronan (*Atonement*, *City of Ember*, *Death Defying Acts*) who commands attention as Susie – in her ordinary life before her death, in the encounter with the killer, in her delight and her distress in the In Between and her desire that the killer give an account of his crime. And Stanley Tucci as the quiet neighbour who is the smooth-tongued serial murderer gives a performance that takes us into the devious mind and emotions of a sexual predator.

Because the story told by the victim is not usual, audiences may find it hard to respond to its changing moods and locations. This reviewer found the character of the grandmother unbalancing the impact and could have done without her. Audiences may be saying similar things about other aspects that they found difficult or off-putting. So, not an entirely satisfying experience, though Peter Jackson has tried to be creative in telling his tale in an offbeat style.

MAO'S LAST DANCER

(Australia, 2009, d. Bruce Beresford)

A fine, entertaining film, exhilarating at times.

Bruce Beresford has been making films for almost forty years. He made some of the Australian classics of the 1970s and 1980s, including *Don's Party* and *Breaker Morant*. His first Hollywood film won Robert Duvall an Oscar for *Tender Mercies*. *Driving Miss Daisy* won the Best Film Oscar (with Oscar-winning actress, Jessica Tandy, remarking on his not being nominated as Best Director that the academy must have thought the film directed itself). He also made the humane/social films *The Fringe Dwellers*, *Black Robe* and *Paradise Road*. He is always a strong craftsman.

The screenplay by Jan Sardi (Shine), based on the autobiography of Chinese dancer Li Cunxin, must have enthused him because this is one of his most energetic and creative films.

Li's Chinese background is shown (filmed in China), the small and remote village of the 1970s, post Cultural Revolution but steeped in Mao's ideology and cult. At school, inspectors visit to choose talented children for further training. The eager Li is supported by a teacher and he finds himself, still very young, taken away to board at an academy and, despite his fragile build, to train and exercise to be a dancer. Life in this commune is also portrayed in some detail as well as the sometimes superhuman efforts Li makes to achieve strength and balance for ballet. One teacher scorns him, another, devoted to classical ballet and made to suffer for it, instructs and inspires him.

When he is chosen to go for three months to Houston, he is coached in caution about American ways. And, at first he is bewildered by the freedoms, the open political talk, the styles of dance at clubs. He is under the wing of Ben Stevenson of the Houston Ballet (Bruce Greenwood is a different role as the career director with a slightly camp style). Li is a success when he has to step in for a performance of Don Quixote and enraptures the audience.

There are quite a number of ballet sequences throughout the film which will excite fans and will be of interest (and some amazement at dance poise and agility) for those who do not know ballet well. They range from Swan Lake to a final performance of Stravinsky's The Rite of Spring.

The two actors who play the part of teenage and adult Li Cunxin excel as dancers. As they act and dance, the audience takes it for granted that they are Li Cunxin and has to remind itself that he was a great dancer but so are Chi Cao (adult) and Chengwu Guo (teenage) in their own right. The choreography is by Graeme Murphy.

While there are exteriors of Houston, most of the American scenes were shot in Sydney. A number of Australians appear in the cast including Penne Hackforth-Jones as Stevenson's associate, Steven Heathcote (a former celebrated dancer) as the leading dancer and Jack Thompson repeating his southern drawl (from Original Sin, Last Dance, Broken Arrow) as a US Judge.

Information at the end indicates that Li Cunxin and his wife, a former partner in ballet in Houston and world tours, live in Melbourne where he is an accountant and stockbroker.

OLD DOGS

(US, 2009, d. Walt Becker)

A checklist of dispositions needed for enjoying Old Dogs:

A very high tolerance level in general,

A very high level for corny comedy,

A fan's attitude to Robin Williams, no matter what he is in (actually, here he has to be both zany and sympathetic),

A fan's attitude to John Travolta who has to be both comic and insensitive, then sensitive,

A liking for heart-on-sleeve tales of children of single mothers who need a father-figure,

Films that show how big business is soul-destroying and undermines family, love and quality time,

Laughing at slapstick and pratfalls, where humans have to be silly or silly for the sake of the children,

Laughing at Seth Green having to sing to survive while being cuddled by a gorilla (spoiler: it's an animatronic gorilla),

Laughing at golf balls and accidents with golf and balls, especially with Seth Green,

Seeing Matt Dillon as a taskmaster scoutmaster,

Attending a funeral for a pet dog,

Enjoying Walt Becker's other films, Van Wilder, Buying the Cow, Wild Hogs. (The sequel plans have been scrapped).

Hoping for compensation with the couple of sequences featuring Ann-Margret.

THE OTHER MAN

(UK, 2008, d. Richard Eyre)

Some years ago, Orange phones began a series of very amusing advertisements for cinemas warning people to turn off their mobile phones. There was an Orange Committee for listening to pitches for films by well-known stars – and the head, Mr Dresden, always ruined them with a suggestion to insert a mobile phone into the script. The first was with Carrie Fisher who had proposed a romance where the couple communicated by letters. Mr Dresden suggested phone communication. Mr Dresden must have been around for this screenplay where a secret cache of communications is not found, as in the good old days, letters hidden away and tied with ribbon, but by ransacking a hard drive for emails and photos and trying to work out the computer password. Not as romantic as in the past!

The Other Man is a film with a fine pedigree: from a short story by Bernhard Schlink (The Reader), written by Charles Wood (How I Won the War, Iris), with the director, Richard Eyre (Iris, Notes on a Scandal), with a top cast. However, the film was little seen and, if you see it (not without interest), you understand why.

What can work well on a page, given the time we take to read it and absorb it, may move far too quickly on screen where the film keeps moving on without time for a pause. At times, this film is far too literary in the sense just explained, and, given the realistic setting and treatment of the plot, it seems far too contrived and stylised. Some scenes may have worked much better on stage (which is where Richard Eyre is from).

The other difficulty is the structure of the film. The audience is left deliberately confused until the end about what has happened, especially in terms of chronology - and an important (key) element is not revealed until very late. This makes some logical sense of what has transpired but is a bit of a twist shock that makes for irritation that we did not know this information before.

The plot is rather simple in itself, after the event. A wife asks whether a couple can stay married forever. She disappears. The husband discovers she had a lover and tracks him down and finally confronts him. The wife is played by Laura Linney, the husband by Liam Neeson. (they worked together in *Love, Actually* and *Kinsey*.) Romola Garai is their daughter. The 'other man' of the title is Antonio Banderas - and it is he who has most of the difficult lines (speeches) to deliver. He does his best, but the situation is contrived by the husband and the declarations are rather stagily elaborate.

Of course, this may work well for some audiences but most may resist the urge to be drawn into it.

POST GRAD

(US, 2009, d. Vicky Jenson)

Vicky Jenson was a co-director of *Shrek* and has worked extensively in animated films. Which may or may not be a strong qualification for directing live-action. In hindsight, this film has many cartoonish qualities. It is amusing while there but is the lightest of the light in terms of characters and situations.

Advertising might suggest that this is one of those ever-recurring teen comedies that are often tiresome and, very often, crass. It is not. Rather, it echoes the employment situations of recent years where college graduates find it very difficult to find a job for their qualifications. That being said, this is not a serious analysis of the times by any means.

Alexis Bledel starred in numerous episodes of TV's *The Gilmore Girls* and has some strong film credits as well. Here she is in the Elle Wood tradition (though not blonde) of ingeniously charming blends of airhead and shrewdness (airhead often taking over). She graduates and spends most of this short (85 minutes) film looking for a job and mixing it with pratfall comedy, insensitive to the neighbour who loves her (Zach Gilford), falling for the TV commercials director next door (Roderigo Santoro looking the exact opposite of his elaborate appearance as Xerxes in *300*).

However, one reason for looking at the film is the cast for the family. Michael Keaton is back in his old form of zany comedy (though with the touch of middle age) as the oddly inventive father. Jane Lynch does her fine deadpan as the mother. And who should turn up for some sardonic remarks, reminding us of her good old days on television sketches, but Carol Burnett?

Pleasantly harmless froth.

PRIME MOVER

(Australia, 2009, d. David Caesar)

No, this is not a film on the argument for the existence of God as the Prime Mover. Rather, a prime mover is a rig that long-haul distance drivers ride the roads with, the truckies.

There used to be a popular phrase to describe Australian novels about ordinary people as literature about 'the battlers'. In fact, author Kylie Tennant wrote a famous book, *The Battlers*. This is the kind of phrase that occurs in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. As Tom Joad said, representing the Okies, the farmers driven off their land, migrating to California, 'we are the people'.

Prime Mover is an Australian Battlers' tale.

The setting is Dubbo in the north west of New South Wales. Thomas (Michael Dorman) works as a mechanic with his father, is skilled in paint and design on the side of trucks but has ambitions to have a rig of his own. He is attracted to Melissa (Emily Barclay) who works at one of those convenience shops at a service station. The story is familiar. After his father is killed in an accident and Melissa becomes pregnant, they marry and he takes out a loan from shady

characters with strict repayment conditions and buys a rig. He clashes with Phil (William McInnes), the kindly driver who helps him out and gets jobs, and goes out on his own - and moves with Melissa and the baby out to the back of Bourke. You can almost guess most of the rest.

Australian audiences may be put in mind of the old 19th century stories of The Drover's Wife (especially the short story by Henry Lawson). The truckie seems to be the 21st century version of the drover, out on the road and away from home. The lonely wife, left in something of a dump and upset by her crying baby, is the new long-suffering drover's wife.

The challenge for the driver/drover is whether he can live his dream with his rig, stay the long hours (with the help of drugs) on the road, really want his wife and child – and do what he does best, the design and painting. Since this is a battler's story with a hopeful outlook, the driver does win some of his battles.

There is a down to earth tone in this film, written and directed by David Caesar (Greenkeeping, Idiot Box). It's a small film with character actors, including a villainous Ben Mendelsohn, with Lynette Curran. An Aussie story.

SEX & DRUGS & ROCK & ROLL

(UK, 2009, d. Matt Whitecross)

Sex, drugs and rock and roll is a phrase that has become part of the English language. Present writer included, many of us are not aware who popularised the phrase and may have coined it, the English musician, Ian Dury (1942-2000). This film is a portrait of Dury rather than a biography.

Dury was an eccentric character and we are introduced immediately into his eccentricity, his performance, a mixture of song and performance art. He was one of the initiators of punk rock – and looked and acted the part. He also studied at art school and the opening credits as well as some of the action throughout the film have been designed by his art teacher, Peter Blake, and serve as a mood creator for this portrait.

The other main feature of Dury's life that should be mentioned at once is that, as a child, he had polio and that from then on he had the handicap of an artificial limb and a severe limp, something which he absorbed as part of his personality and, later in life, as part of his mission to help the disabled.

The film is quite powerful in its plunging the audience into Dury's world. We see his early years with a band and his clashes with them and ditching them and moving on. Later he brought together new musicians and formed The Blockheads – The Blockheads came together to play their songs for the film in a special recording session with the film's star, Andy Serkis. And, they are portrayed as characters through the film.

Andy Serkis is one of the principal reasons for the film's strong impact. He embodies Dury. He is both frightening and interesting. Serkis has proven himself as a strong screen presence in The Lord of the Rings and King Kong. His Dury is something like Gollum on speed and fast-forward (and sometimes both). He has not gone for mere impersonation but for portrait and character study, even to the singing and performance of Dury's songs.

As a person, Dury was a 20th century phenomenon, someone born in the first half of the century and dying in 2000 of cancer, but a man born during World War II, experiencing the privation of the post-war period, exiled to an institution with his polio and suffering physical abuse, marrying but unable to sustain a monogamous relationship, fickle to the two women he loved, a loving father to his son, Baxter (who was a consultant on the film), expressing the freedoms and the 20th century consequences of his phrase, sex, drugs and rock and roll.

Olivia Williams is Dury's long-suffering wife, Naomie Harris is long-suffering girlfriend. Bill Milner, the child actor who made such an impression in Son of Rambow and Is Anybody There? Gives a nuanced performance as his son who begins with hostility towards his father but learns to like him and love him, and give his father some meaning in life. There are flashbacks to Dury's childhood, being taken to the institution by his father (Ray Winstone) and his treatment by a sadistic supervisor (Toby Jones).

For Dury and Blockhead fans this film is a must in its less conventional way of celebrating a celebrity. For those who do not know Dury, it is an excursion into a world of British popular music as well as a study of a difficult man who had a difficult life.

SHERLOCK HOLMES

(UK, 2009, d. Guy Ritchie)

“Sherlock Holmes, the Graphic Novel” on screen.

This is a 21st century interpretation of Sherlock Holmes, not the almost aristocratic manner and diction of previous Holmes like Basil Rathbone, Peter Cushing or Ian Richardson, rather, it presents Robert Downey Jr as a scruffy, knockabout Holmes (who still has his good diction which he uses to sound purpose in explaining his logic and thought processes). It is also a rip-roaring (lots of rips and plenty of roaring) action adventure in the manner of the recent screen superheroes, like Iron Man (who, of course, was Robert Downey Jr). It is interesting how commentators say that purist Conan Doyle fans may not like Holmes as a bareknuckle fighter and dressed in a fashion (rather, no fashion) that makes the rather dapper Dr Watson (Jude Law) embarrassed. Yet, Doyle has described Holmes as using jujitsu and a master of disguise, both refined and down-and-out.

The plot indulges Doyle's interest in the supernatural, the afterlife and seances (borrowing something key from Rosemary's Baby). It is a story of empire, ambition, vanity and political power. Holmes' nemesis is the sinister Lord Blackwood (the ever-versatile Mark Strong) who is hanged early in the film but rises from the dead to lead a masonic-like group of political leaders to Blofeld-like world domination. (And, in the background, is Professor Moriarty, working with Irene Adler (Rachel McAdams) just in case there is to be a sequel which, if immediate box-office is any indication, should be appearing sooner rather than later.)

he re-creation of a dark Victorian London (Dickensian is the cliché description that easily comes to mind, or the London of Jack the Ripper) is vivid and detailed with Londoners and visitors pleased to see glimpses of life on the Thames, Piccadilly Circus, Westminster Bridge and the Houses of Parliament. Hans Zimmer's score is pounding and melodramatic. But, this provides a background for Holmes and his cases, his upset that Dr Watson (with his limp from his military service that does not impede his fighting and brawling skills) is engaged to Mary Morsten (without any memories of The Sign of Four), some entanglements with Irene Adler, his visits to the masonic leaders, imprisonment, several beatings and a race against the clock (just as James Bond usually had to do) to disarm a destructive weapon.

Robert Downey Jr is usually very good in any film. He did the English accent for his fine portrayal of Chaplin. He is currently Tony Stark in the Iron Man films. While he looks dishevelled, his brain is always at work (and there is a device used several times to instruct us how he would do something, shown with explanation in slow motion, and then it happens in real time) and he follows the example of his screen predecessors in giving a logical account of how he arrives at his conclusions (showing, for instance, that taking him blindfold to a rendezvous is completely ineffectual as he listens, and smells, the clues for his journey). Jude Law's Watson is much less eccentric, a straight man to Holmes' comedy, with much more sense and nous.

Guy Ritchie is to be congratulated on having moved away from his gangster films (though incorporating much of the action, style and editing of those films) and successfully engaging with the world's most famous detective.

Sherlock Holmes shows that one didn't have to be 'Victorian' to live in Victorian England.

WHATEVER WORKS

(US, 2009, d. Woody Allen)

An entertaining return to the 'old' Woody Allen, the Allen of the 1970s and 1980s (when he first wrote this screenplay for Zero Mostel). More recently, Woody Allen has been working in England and Spain, making films which have drawn mixed reactions and reviews – though Penelope Cruz won an Oscar for her spitfire role in Vicky Cristina Barcelona. Allen is reported to have been held up by the writers' strike in Hollywood and so got out this screenplay and prepared it and pepped it up for the 21st century. I'm glad he did.

Enter Larry David (Curb Your Enthusiasm) as Boris. He sounds as if he is channelling the Woody Allen of the past, though he does it in his own distinctive way. He rants to his friends about everything, reminiscing how he almost won a Nobel Prize, his love for science, his scepticism about religion, his failed marriage and his botched suicide attempt. He also rants direct to camera, talking about the reaction of the audience.

Enter Evan Rachel Wood as Melodie, a runaway from the south to New York City, rather ingenuous but ingenuously shrewd. She listens to his orations. He gradually gets used to her. She is ready to be moulded and, before you can say Woody Allen, they are married. A shock for his friends. But, it all seems to work well enough. She starts to spout Boris's prejudices. He relaxes and relents, a little.

Enter Patricia Clarkson as Melodie's mother, a conservative lady who has left her husband. And, then, does New York change her! From amateur photographer to photo galleries. From proper and churchgoer to bohemian and permissive.

Enter Ed Begley Jr as Melodie's father, even more ingenuous than Melodie, who has broken up his marriage with an affair and has now come to New York to find wife and daughter. And, then, does New York change him! From uptight and homophobic to bohemian and gay.

Enter a would-be British actor who falls for Melodie who resists him, lectures him a la Boris, but... Is this the end for Boris and his belief in luck and the meaning of the universe?

The cast performs well. Woody Allen's dialogue is what we liked before, a blend of wit, of philosophy, of pessimism, of pontificating, of provocative remarks and an invitation to think and reflect as we react to Boris and his pontificating. The film also takes us back to films like *Interiors* and *Hannah* as he presents the odd couple blend of highbrow arty phonies and the common-sensed ordinary people, platitudes and pretensions versus down-to-earthiness.

Whatever Works is the response that Boris offers to all the questions and challenges of life though, sometimes, Allen and his characters are satisfied with whatever half-works.

Some of the Oscar nominees are amongst this month's reviews (especially Best Actor films: *Invictus*, *Single Man*, *Up in the Air*). *Nine* is an arresting attempt to make music of Fellini's 8 ½. I would commend the Norwegian film, *Troubled Waters*, a strong drama that incorporates, without embarrassment, some of the life of the Lutheran church in Oslo.

There is also a review of the aboriginal musical, *Bran Nue Dae*.

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BREATHLESS
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SHRINK
ST TRINIAN'S: THE LEGEND OF FRITTON'S GOLD
TALENTIME
TROUBLED WATERS
TONY
UP IN THE AIR
YOUTH IN REVOLT

44 INCH CHEST

(UK, 2009, d. Malcolm Venville)

Despite the prevalence of swearing and coarse language, it is still not usual to begin a review of film by mentioning the language first. However, *44 Inch Chest* is a film about language, good and bad. The bad language is enough to drive many of the average audience from the cinema so coarse is it and so wearing and wearying as it grates on the ear and the sensibilities. Repetitious is an understatement. And, as spoken by some of Britain's top character actors, it sometimes seems incongruous and seems more of a performance rather than language that comes naturally. So, the warning comes first.

What can be said about the film, which was written by Louis Mellis and David Cinto, responsible for *Sexy Beast*, is that seems more like a play, even a radio play, with the strong emphasis on language (and the strong language). Most of the action, such as it is, takes place in one dingy room and in the stairwell and hallway outside the room.

This means that the emphasis is on characters and characterisation.

At the opening, Colin Diamond (Ray Winstone) seems to be lying dead while Harry Nilsson is singing in the background. But he is not dead, just devastated by his wife's announcement that she is leaving him for another man. His friends rally to support him and abduct the man, a French waiter, and lock him in a wardrobe. For most of the film, they talk, they argue, they try to persuade Colin to come out of it. They deliver themselves of opinions on all kinds of topics, very male and very macho and are waiting for Colin to kill the waiter.

The friends seem to be thugs of one kind or another. Tom Wilkinson is the ordinary bloke who lives with his old mother

and seems to be a good mate. On the other hand, Ian McShane plays a more suave character (and excels in his delivery and sense of menace) who is gay and self-centred. Stephen Dillane is the follower. And John Hurt is the old man who belongs to the days of the Krays and their codes for old-fashioned gangster behaviour. Joanne Whalley is the wife and Melvil Poupard (who has no dialogue but is able to convey his depression at being taken and held) is the waiter.

Do they have thug versions of Waiting for Godot? 44 inch chest seems to be making a claim for a position to the left of centre in the Godot field.

ALL ABOUT STEVE

(US, 2009, d. Phil Traill)

Sandra Bullock may not approve of this pun, but her character in All About Steve, Mary Horowitz, probably would: one is tempted to use very cross words about this sometimes bizarre comedy about crosswords.

Mary composes crosswords for the Sacramento paper. She is a middle-aged nerd of the highest order, talking incessantly like Wikipedia only more so, with a high IQ that bears no relation to her social ineptness. At one stage, a little hearing impaired child signs to her that she talks too much.

Sandra Bullock can do dopey well, and nicely – look at Miss Congeniality. Here she is just just plain (no, complexly plain) ditzy. At which stage, Mary Horowitz would burst into a definition of ditzy with a superabundance of synonyms and the origins and usages of the word. But, you know what I mean. Maybe on paper, this character seemed funny and sweet, despite her irritation-potential, but she really doesn't make much sense as her character develops (a euphemism for what she does during the film). And Sandra Bullock was a producer of All About Steve so she could have done something about it.

There are too many inconsistencies about Mary Horowitz to make much sense, gawkily introverted one moment, almost a sexual predator the next. The victim of this unexpected outburst is television cameraman, Steve (Bradley Cooper) who gets out of her literal clutches as fast as he can. Silly man, he has remarked that it would be nice if she were on the road with him. She takes it literally and stalks him all over Texas, Oklahoma and Colorado, egged on by the vain front man played by Thomas Haden Church.

There is quite some satire on television news, the pressures of the ratings-chasing boss, Emmy rivalries, the phony emotional commentaries, the on-screen faux pas, the media circuses. Finally, there is parody of disaster reporting as a group of hearing impaired children fall into a disused mine shaft. For entirely different reasons, so does Mary – who has time to reconsider her attitudes and behaviour, becomes a media heroine and lets Steve (who confesses his unthinking macho behaviour to her) off the hook. So, she doesn't have to be normal, just herself and we will all love her, listen to her encyclopedic chatter and do her crosswords. (Mystery: how could Sandra Bullock be so annoying?)

ARMORED

(US, 2009, d. Nimrod Antal)

If you are going to make a B-style thriller about an armoured truck robbery that has a bit more intelligence in it than just action and shoot-outs, then this is one good way to do it. It may not satisfy the blood and guts audience, but it should be of interest to those who want a thriller to have some sense in it.

And, it has a very good cast of characters actors, led by Matt Dillon as the mastermind and, ultimately, the villain. Others in the crew include Laurence Fishburne as the impetuous one, Amaury Nolasco (from TV's Prison Break) as the born-again one, Jean Reno (called Quinn despite his French accent), Skeet Ulrich as the reluctant one. Columbus Short (reminding us in look and performance of a young Don Cheadle) is the honourable one, an Iraq veteran who is taking care of his brother and is being hard pressed by the banks to repossess his house.

The plot is basically straightforward, a plan to rob the armoured truck by the security guards. As expected, something will go wrong. However, the things that go wrong are unpredictable and the film builds up quite some suspense as to how the thieves could get away with it. Each of the members is given some character development which makes the drama more interesting and the interactions more tense.

Direction is by Nimrod Antal, who spent some time in Hungary where his family came from to LA, and made the award-winning Kontroll. Back in the US, he made the terror film, Vacancy.

ASTRO BOY

(US, 2009, d. David Bowers)

Astro Boy comes from the 1960s, an early Manga comic book character which inspired the Anime films from Japan and the versions of the Manga books. Now Astro Boy stars in an American film.

In the future, a mountain (looking like Mt Fuji) has risen into space from the devastated earth and a new civilisation is flourishing. There is much scientific research going on, especially with Dr Elefun and Dr Temna. However, as so often, a jingoistic president is more interested in developments in negative energy rather than positive (repeating that he is running for election). When an experiment goes destructively wrong, Dr Temna's young son is trapped and killed. However, the father constructs a robot just like his son – who becomes known as Astro Boy.

Astro Boy's adventures, after he discovers he is only a robot, take him back to earth where he finds a group of vagrant children in a circus – where he is made to fight all kinds of powerful robots to entertain the crowds. Meantime, the president is hell-bent on controlling the so-called Peacemaker, a giant robot whose red destructive power core overwhelms the blue positive core. Can Astro Boy remedy this?

The raging President finds himself inside The Peacemaker, which makes him more powerful. Which all leads up to a final confrontation and Astro Boy saves the world. What else!

Entertaining, differently drawn, with nods to the Japanese origins of the characters, the film has some excellent and pleasing voice talent. Freddie Highmore is Astro Boy. Donald Sutherland is a standout, both comically and seriously as the president. Nicholas Cage is the father. Bill Nighy is Dr Elefun (a rotund, small man which makes the thin Bill Nighy's voice seem a bit incongruous for those who are aware of him) and Nathan Lane is the circus master.

It should keep adults and children nicely amused.

THE BOOK OF ELI

(US, 2009, The Hughes Brothers)

Welcome, once again, to the end of civilisation as we know it and introducing the wasteland of post-apocalyptic America. Recently, this has been done with tongue in cheek humour in Zombieland and with earnest seriousness in the fine adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's novel, *The Road*, by John Hillcoat.

Eli has been wandering the devastated United States for thirty years. He is a survivor who is quick, very quick, with arrows, guns and a blade that would make some Samurai envious. Speaking of Samurai, he is the latest in the tradition of Mad Max heroes, a sign of contradiction, violent weapons master but straightforward sage who can be courteous and wise. Since he is played by Denzel Washington the latter almost goes without saying, so it is a surprise to see Denzel wielding the weapons.

The itinerary is familiar enough though the look of it, all desaturated colour and painter-like framing of scenes and of iconic buildings and roads, is quite distinctive and arresting. As is the soundtrack.

Eli shoots a wildcat for meat, is ambushed by a flesh-eating bikie gang which is literally dismembered, and rapidly. A gang rapes a wandering woman and Eli refuses to be involved. He chances on a town, ruled over by power-hungry Carnegie (Gary Oldman reminiscent of his Dracula in look and manner) who has search parties out looking for a book which will enhance his power and offer him a way to control people and their minds. We soon realise that it is the Bible – copies of which seem to have been destroyed because of the role of religion in the destructive wars.

Carnegie runs a bar and has a hold over a blind woman, Claudia (Jennifer Beals) and her daughter (Mila Kunis). The daughter is meant to seduce Eli but, instead, helps him. This brings on more disasters, especially for an elderly couple, with US-symbolism names of George and Martha (Michael Gambon and Frances de la Tour), who offer shelter and tea in china crockery.

The final goal, according to Eli, is 'West'. Actually, it is a destroyed San Francisco though, ironically, Alcatraz is intact and is the centre, under the leadership of Malcolm McDowell, where culture could begin again - with the help of the book of Eli and Christian teaching which takes its library place beside the Quran and other sacred texts.

The film is intriguing rather than involving, something like a futuristic western. The character of Eli is especially intriguing for religious audiences. He is a man who has become the bible incarnate even though he cannot always put it into practice.

After making some strong African-American gang films (*Menace II Society*, *Dead Presidents*), the Hughes twins, Alan

and Albert, made the intriguing Jack the Ripper film, with Johnny Depp, From Hell.

(Post-script: Some secularists have been mightily offended by this promotion of sacred texts and the role of religion which they see as fostering war and devastation and, because Eli begins with the book of Genesis, some commentators have seen this as part of a Creationist plot – now there's a different conspiracy theory, especially since one of the books that has survived, even out in the wasteland is The Da Vinci Code!)

BRAN NUE DAE

(Australia, 2009, d. Rachel Perkins)

Not a movie for a sobersides view of 1960s aboriginal history – it is better to check in one's serious race concerns at the door. Or, to take the concerns in but be prepared for a sunnily cheerful treatment, the kind that happens only in a musical, because this is what Bran Nue Dae is, a light look at life in Broome, in a school in Perth and on the road from Perth to Broome, with song and dance.

It is also a very broad comedy with some eccentric performances.

Bran Nue Dae began life in the 1990s as a theatrical performances, written by Jimmy Chi. The stage version was filmed and seen on screens and on television at the time. Now it has the cinema treatment, directed by Rachel Perkins (Radiance and the series, The First Australians).

It's a boy meets girl story. Boy goes to boarding school (his mother wanting him to be a priest, with a deeper reason that is revealed at the end) but owns up to a misdemeanour that he was not responsible for. Boy wants to go home and encounters a lovable rogue vagrant, some parody whites, a vampish Kimberly woman and sundry other adventures before getting home and finding true love and some surprising home truths.

When one remembers (if one was around at the time) aboriginal-white relationships in those days, just after the referendum for aboriginal rights to vote, it was not all sweetness and light. Actually, the screenplay does include a lot of the down side of prejudice, drink and hardships but they are incorporated into a treatment that is cheerful and forgiving and culminates in a rollicking song, sung by all, asking what could be better than being an aborigine.

However, there are some powerfully sombre moments in a dream sequence, Willie encountering phantoms and imagining himself strung up and hanging.

There are original songs as well as some borrowed ones (like Stand By Your Man). There are some dance routines, even a high school musical moment with a song and dance in the school chapel. Jessica Mauboy as Rose is able to belt out the songs with exuberant confidence and is a promising screen presence while Rocky McKenzie is sometimes shy and reticent as the hero, Willie, a genial lad for whom priesthood is not a realistic goal.

But the star of the show is Ernie Dingo as Uncle Tadpole a well rounded performance of comedy, song and dance and an embodiment of many of the serious issues of the day.

What to say about Geoffrey Rush as Fr Benedictus, the German priest who runs the school, pursues Willie up the Western Australian coast and who gets some unexpected comeuppance in Broome? The thing to say is that he is sometimes over the top, way over, a Captain Barbarossa in clerical soutane, with a 'vot is wrong vis you' accent. Magda Szubanski, as the gun-toting Roadside Betty is over the top as well but that is what Magda Szubanski does so well and what we expect from her. Singer Missy Pilgrim is OK as a would-be hippy but xx is way under the top as Slippery, a German tourist.

At a time when Samson & Delilah has made a strong impact on Australian audiences and around the world with awards, showing a much more serious side to life in the centre of Australia, Bran Nue Dae takes an opposite and optimistic view, that, despite the past and some of its disastrous consequences, we can enjoy a send-up of some of the bad old days, whites can take a parody of themselves and, why not, a bran nue dae.

BREATHLESS

(Korea, 2008, d. Yang Ik-june)

Watching Breathless is an overwhelming experience that, probably, most audiences would not want to submit themselves to. It is an almost unrelenting barrage of visual violence, mainly bashings, and a verbal assault of violently rough language. It is a Korean film, by director, Yang Ik-June, who is making his mark as a chronicler of petty gangsters and their standover-brutal tactics as they collect protection money. He also has a great deal to show about

Korean family violence.

It may come as a surprise to find that *Breathless* won the SIGNIS award in Buenos Aires in 2009. Over the years, SIGNIS has found that there are many grim De Profundis films ('Out of the depths, I cry to you O Lord') and this must be the most De Profundis of all the awards.

As the film progresses and we have become weary of the brutish behaviour and wonder where it could lead, we begin to see faint possibilities for some kind of change, some redemption for the central character, Sang-hoon – who is played most convincingly by the director himself. The film opens with him bashing a violent man in the street as well as the prostitute the man is attacking. His work for his boss gives him the opportunity of an outlet for his rage. But, gradually, we see him with his nephew and his half-sister and his befriending a school girl who has stood up to his spitting at her and confronted him.

The girl also has a dreadful home life, keeping house for a mentally ill father who fought in Vietnam and is still cursing his dead wife, subjected to violence and humiliation by her perpetually angry brother.

It is only later that we are shown the events which have turned Sang-hoon into a raging bully. His friendship with the young girl starts to effect some changes in him, especially towards the father he has loathed after the deaths of his mother and sister and his serving a long jail sentence. There is a crucial scene where he meets the girl for a drink in the middle of the night and sobs.

There are no easy answers for the violent men but some hope for their victims.

We always acknowledge that there are huge family problems in most societies. This Korean expose is alarming, more alarming than most because it immerses us in the anger, in the raging loss of control that is, at times, literally, deadly.

BROTHERS

(US, 2009, d. Jim Sheridan)

When the Danish film *Brothers* was released in 2003, it was topical because of the invasion of Afghanistan and the work of peacekeeping forces like those from Denmark. There was a certain remoteness for the Danish audience. Afghanistan was a long way away and the Danes were not at war. This made the telling of a story about the hardships of a soldier, the crisis of conscience and the pain in returning home after being released from capture, all the more powerful. The film was directed by Suzanne Bier.

It has now been adapted for the United States and directed by Jim Sheridan (*My Left Foot*, *In the Name of the Father*, *In America*). And this makes a great deal of difference, especially for an American audience. America is involved in the Afghan conflict. The war makes headlines every other day, especially with news of casualties. Even President Obama finds himself in a situation where he feels constrained to send more troops.

What will the American public make of a film which portrays heroes but portrays them in a questioning light? While the drama was more palpable in the Danish version, it seems more 'real' in the American version.

The action is transposed to Minnesota. Tobey Maguire (who often has a kind of monotonous voice delivery and a somewhat impassive face which he uses for the most part here) does have some opportunities to be more compellingly dramatic than usual, in the key scene of torture in Afghanistan and in the emotional trauma he experiences on his return home. Jake Gyllenhaal has the easier role as the younger brother who is a disappointment to his ex-Vietnam marine (a strong performance from Sam Shepard) and has served time. He becomes more engaging as the action progresses and takes on opportunities to redeem himself. Natalie Portman is the wife and mother.

Most of the action is in Minnesota, with scenes of action in Afghanistan, especially the imprisonment of two marines and the physical and, ultimately, mental torture which tests the metal and integrity of the hero. The film emphasises the toll that military service takes on families with absences, dangers and the homecoming which needs so much tolerance and understanding and time for healing (where and if possible).

After all this, the film ends somewhat abruptly, both emotionally and thematically. Some more explicit indications of the future would have been helpful. (And marketers have burdened the film with one of the most trite and misleadingly trivialising taglines: 'She is caught between the man she loves and the man who loves her', as if it were a melodramatic soap-opera.)

DAYBREAKERS

(Australia/US, 2009, d. Michael and Peter Spierig)

2009 seemed to offer a glut of vampire films and television series, notably the Twilight films and True Blood. While Daybreakers is a vampire film, it is also, for the most part, not a vampire film. Meaning? It is really a film about human nature, human behaviour and the deterioration of human society using the mythical aspects of the vampire legends to offer an allegory. (There is comparatively little blood in the early part of the film; later there are some living dead gory, blood-drenched moments.)

Filmed in Australia (with some gun-tree countryside locations) standing in for the US, Daybreakers offers a more intelligent use of vampires than usual.

The premiss is quite simple – it is how the premiss is developed that makes for the unusual allegory. And the premiss is this: what if by 2009, vampirism has affected most of the human race so that society, which looks 'normal' on the surface, is in fact solely vampires who have to operate at night or in the dark while the humans are the minority on the edges of society, being hunted for the blood for the survival of the vampires?

One of the arresting aspects of the film is seeing the vampires conducting themselves reasonably, going to work, drinking blood coffee at bars, watching a familiar television news service, working in corporations and experimenting in laboratories. However, there is a more sinister effect of the almost complete transformation of humans worldwide. Humans are scarce. Human blood is even scarcer. Rationing is prevalent. Headlines are alarming. The lack of blood has a physically and mentally deteriorating effect which is growing more rapid and turning law-abiding vampires into marauding vagrants.

In the meantime, a corporation, presided over by Sam Neill who was suffering from cancer but 'turned' for life and immortality, is experimenting for blood substitutes. Sam Neill is usually suave in manner on screen and here this smoothness becomes more sinister (especially in his yellow eyes) as he manipulates his staff for greed and profit. His chief haematologist, Ed Dalton, is played by Ethan Hawke. He has been turned by his younger military brother (Michael Dorman) but is sympathetic to the humans and refrains from human blood. His sympathy is soon tested as he encounters a group of rebels led by Audrey (Claudia Karvan) and Elvis, who has been transformed back into being human (Willem Dafoe).

While the film builds up to something of an apocalyptic climax with the gory self-destruction of many vampires, it is overall a drama of dominating society in need of sustenance for survival (environmental echoes?), a rebel fringe group (as in The Matrix and Demolition Man) and the struggle for human hope and dignity.

EDGE OF DARKNESS

(US, 2010, d. Martin Campbell)

In 1985 the BBC screened a six part television series, Edge of Darkness, which went on to win awards and be considered as one of the best programs in BBC history. It was directed by Martin Campbell who went on to commercial success with the first James Bond film with Pierce Brosnan, Goldeneye, and the Zorro films with Antonio Banderas. He has now returned to Edge of Darkness, adapted for the screen, as was the 2009 adaptation of the series, State of Play.

The plot (and there is a powerful conspiracy plot in the plot) has been re-located to Massachusetts and a Boston setting. It has also been adapted from the nuclear fears of the 1980s just prior to the arrival of Gorbachev on the world scene to the nuclear fears of the 21st century – with American companies covertly making nuclear weapons as the US accuses Iran of doing. So, Edge of Darkness remains topical.

The film also serves as an effective police thriller and investigation. When detective Tom Craven's daughter is shot on the doorstep of his home, it is presumed that he was the actual target. However, clues have been indicated already that his daughter was the real target. Craven grieves but continues at work and then follows the leads that bring him to a giant corporation which (as is frequently said by conspiring characters) brings finance to the state's economy. Northmoor is built on a site leased from the government where subterranean tunnels abound, enabling secret research and building to take place. It is presided over by Danny Huston who brings oily charm (and personal cowardice) to his character.

The film is significant with a return to the screen by Mel Gibson. Over 50 now, he is fit but his face looks lived in. He brings his sometimes steely look and stern visage to his role but also portrays some intensity and grief. Ray Winstone has an interesting role as a political fixer.

This is the kind of thriller that adult audiences find both interesting and thought-provoking. It has its grim and violent

moments as Tom Craven struggles with the pain of the loss of his daughter and the feelings of vengeance countering his principled beliefs as an officer of the law.

EXAM

(UK, 2009, d. Stuart Hazeldine)

An intriguing and clever film. It is not one that the general public would rush to see. It is a specialist film, very well crafted and asking for a thoughtful response.

The drama takes place in the exam room. Each of the characters is introduced as they prepare to come to the exam – make-up, combing hair, small personal things.

There are four men and four women. They come from different ethnic backgrounds. They are given precisely phrased instructions from the Invigilator (Colin Salmon) and given 80 minutes to complete their exam. An armed security guard is present to eject anyone who does not adhere strictly to the instructions.

The only trouble is that the exam papers are blank.

The purpose of the exam is explained right at the end so it is not just an exercise in futility but we spend the time watching these applicants for a job at a biopharmacy company (and trying to work out what we might do in such circumstances) interact to work out what is the question. At one stage, a candidate asks whether this is an exercise in group dynamics. It is.

The interactions reveal the characters, sometimes quite powerfully, even violently. Some are ejected. Some are prepared to use any means to stay.

The interest of the film is in the characters, in their response to a difficult situation, in their ethical or unethical stances and behaviour and in the puzzle as to find what really is the question.

The cast comprises character actors from stage and television. Jimi Mistry and Luke Mably are comparatively well-known. (And the thought occurs that the film could be described as neo-Kafkezesque!)

EXTRACT

(US, 2009, d. Mike Judge)

Even when we discover that the extract of the title refers to extracts of, say, vanilla, for flavouring products, it still doesn't really tell us much about the plot at all. Or, whether it is a comedy or a serious film. Let's say a broad comedy which raises some moral issues which are more serious. Let's also say that it deals with ordinary enough people that many audiences could identify with, if not in behaviour, at least, in temptations and personal crises and decisions – and the need to repair and make amends for some of them.

Actually, that might make it sound a bit more grandiose than it is, although grandiose it really is not.

Put it this way: Joel is a middle aged small factory owner, lenient on his staff (many of whom are stupid, gossipy and accident-prone) who receives an offer for his factory, who finds his wife, Suzie, rather cool at home and who takes refuge in a bar where his old friend, Dean, is the bartender and is full of really bad advice (and drugs as well). There is also a young con woman, Cindy, who is an unscrupulous thief who teams up with an employee, Step, who is the victim of a severe accident and is good-natured about it (until he meets Cindy). What is Joel to do – and, what is worse, what does he do, egged on by Dean?

Jason Bateman is Joel. He has been in many recent films and has proven himself quite a character actor. Dean is played with nonchalance by an almost unrecognisable Ben Affleck. Mila Kunis is the recidivist Cindy. Kristen Wiig is Suzie.

Add to that there are quite a few supporting characters who are well played, which probably make Extract better than it might have been. David Koechner is the wearing good neighbour whose demise comes as something of a shock to him and to us all. J.K. Simmons, always worth seeing, is the factory assistant. Gene Simmons (yes, of Kiss) is a ranting lawyer. Dustin Milligan makes a convincing really, really slow-witted would-be gigolo and Clifton Collins Jr offers a good turn as Step.

Writer-director, Mike Judge, made the animated film *Beavis and Butthead do America*, so he is not against some satiric touches in portraying some average (at times, very average in their decisions) middle Americans.

HOLY WATER

(Ireland, 2009, d. Tom Reeve)

For a while there, I was hoping that this would be a tongue-in-cheek Irish yarn (from the north) that would be undemandingly amusing. Chatting afterwards, somebody remarked that it was like a low-brow Ealing studios comedy from the 1950s. Someone else said that it was 'Viagra Galore'.

Yes, despite the several disclaimers that the Pfizer company had nothing to do with the film (well, except for producing it, distributing it and marketing it), this is the viagra comedy.

Four backblock types (where the local musician throws himself over a cliff – others just want to get away to England) join in a plan, fool-proof, of course, to hijack a truck full of viagra and sell it in Amsterdam and Patrick's your uncle.

And, of course, these fools are by no means fool-proof.

The robbery is lightly amusing. Then, when the yanks arrive with all their equipment to track the track, they hide the bins of pills in the local well. And the film goes right down even as it goes up, so to speak. What might have been light amusing comedy about the effects of viagra on all and sundry, it lapses into carry on viagra farce which isn't all that funny when you come to think about it.

The village is meant to be Catholic but they did not film in a Catholic church and did not consult on vestments or how confession goes.

Better luck next time.

INVICTUS

(US, 2009, d. Clint Eastwood)

Invictus means 'unconquered'. However, the film's title comes from a poem of 1775 by William Ernest Henley, a poem Nelson Mandela relied on during his 27 years internment on Robben Island, especially its final lines, 'master of my fate, captain of my soul'. Mandela was certainly invictus in his surviving prison and invictus in his election as president of South Africa.

This is a Clint Eastwood film. Eastwood will be 80 in May. During his 70s he has made a string of fine films, *Mystic River*, *Million Dollar Baby*, *Flags of Our Fathers*, *Letters from Iwo Jima*, *Changeling* and *Gran Torino*, an extraordinary effort and one marked by themes of forgiveness, a seemingly far cry from his *Dirty Harry* days. Eastwood is a master storyteller and, in his older age, has not shied away from significant themes.

As *Invictus* opens, Mandela is being released from prison in 1990. Eastwood uses television-reporting style of filming not only to indicate the historic moment being recorded but to enable the audience to accept Morgan Freeman as Nelson Mandela for the rest of the film. While he looks like Morgan Freeman and he sounds like Morgan Freeman and has Morgan Freeman's gravitas, we readily accept that it is Nelson Mandela, the historical person, that we are watching.

In retrospect, as journalist John Carlin does in his book, *Playing the Enemy*, on which the film is based, it seems a master stroke of politics and humanity (as Mandela notes several times) to bring black and white people together supporting the national rugby union team when South Africa is hosting the rugby world cup in 1995. The sequences where the meeting of football supporters vote to eliminate the colours and the name of the Springboks and Mandela himself comes to tell them not to because it is depriving the Afrikaners of something they value (which they had done to the blacks) but to use that for uniting people indicates his shrewdness and vision. The sequence where he persuades his black security officer to accept former white police, from Special Branch, into the bodyguard squad is similarly powerful.

The portrait of Mandela is glowing though the rift with his wife and family, his indefatigably driven work ethic, are indicated.

Matt Damon plays Francois Pinaar, the captain of the Springboks, who, with example in leadership and the encouragement of the president, urges his team on to a surprising victory. Again, the suggestion of Mandela that the

team go to the townships and coach the black youth despite the wariness and ignorance of the conditions on the part of some of the team, works wonders and, on television, is a coup for public relations.

The final match against New Zealand's All Blacks is presented in all its rough and tumble ('soccer is a gentlemen's game played by hooligans and Rugby is a hooligans game played by gentlemen') though whether it would convert any American audience to the code is probably a 'no'.

With Mandela and with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1990s South Africa, despite economic and social difficulties, despite the high crime rate, showed the world that hatred and revenge were understandable but futile – that is the spirit of *Invictus*. The poem reveals the experience of Mandela on Robben Island.

Invictus

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstances
I have not winced or cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

IT'S COMPLICATED

(US, 2009, d. Nancy Meyers)

It certainly is. Complicated to review as well. It's the tangled relationships that cause the problems in the film and it's the tangled relationships and what they mean that make it complicated to review.

The film raises the issues of divorced husband and wife (ten years on) encountering one another and beginning a new relationship. Why would they do this? Are the reasons and motives the same for the man as for the woman? Does it mean that the divorce process was not finally concluded emotionally, only legally? Since the husband has remarried and has a step-child and his younger wife wants to become pregnant and hauls him off frequently to a fertility clinic does this mean that he is weary of and questioning his marriage? Does the wife (unmarried now) wonder what her life might be like with a relationship (and is being egged on by her middle-aged girlfriends? And what do the three children, close to their mother, think and how they should react? You get the picture. And that is what *It's Complicated* shows us.

So, a lot of ethical and moral issues that we need to sort out as do the characters themselves, Nancy Meyers' screenplay getting the characters themselves to ask and puzzle over the questions and their behaviour.

The strength of the film is in having Meryl Streep and Alec Baldwin (surprisingly effective) as the ex-wife and husband. They bring depth and skills to roles that might otherwise just have been situation comedy performances. In comparison, Steve Martin as the wife's architect plays a somewhat self-effacing role.

With an American serious comedy like this, the characters tend to be all 'out there', a very extroverted display of the issues. Which means that too much exposure runs the risk of their being irritating at times rather than ingratiating. This is a companion piece to Nancy Meyers' other more recent explorations of relationships, *What Women Want*, *Something's Gotta Give* and *The Holiday*.

MOTHERHOOD

(US, 2009, d. Katherine Dieckmann)

Two decades earlier there was the comic Parenthood which ranged over quite a number of parents and children (and then produced a television series). Robin Williams and Billy Crystal appeared in Father's Day. Now we have Uma Thurman in Motherhood.

Well, it's just one mother's story with a few asides from other mothers (and a glimpse of Jodie Foster walking with her family in the park). The park is in New York and, maybe that is the trouble for non-New Yorkers watching the film. The logo says 'I Love New York' but Motherhood offers any number of characters and situations which might have us saying 'I hate New York'.

The day (and the film takes place over just one day) begins at 6.20 and Eliza (Uma Thurman) wearily gets out of bed to confront a long list of must do's. She has an eccentrically absent-minded husband (Anthony Edwards) and two young children, the older on her last day of being 5, with the prospect of her birthday party in the evening. So far, so ordinary.

Eliza is a would-be writer and blogs, especially about motherhood. She comes across a competition, a 500 word piece on motherhood, which she decides to enter but can't find the time to concentrate. We are treated to breakfast hassles, lunches, getting to school, forgetting the dog, walking the dog, going to the park, shopping (once for fun and tension relief, once for groceries, presents and birthday cake). But, it is the stress which is to the fore.

The film could have been called Stresshood.

There is the scurry to move a car and get it back to the parking spot, paying for an occupier to move, finding a film crew has moved in and towed all the cars. There is the pressure of traffic jams, not poop-scooping, smoking in front of censorious passers-by, bicycle punctures. Customers in queues are raging (especially about cell phone conversation intrusion into personal space – well that is not such a bad topic!!) and cannot tolerate line-jumpers. And so on, an so on... ('I love Manhattan, how about you...?').

Minnie Driver has some moments as Eliza's pregnant friend who is upset at being quoted in Eliza's piece. Eliza is upset about her husband's critique of her work. There is momentary relief when a letter delivery is made by an Indian messenger who writes plays and pays attention to her. The nice moments are when Eliza is kind to the lonely old lady next door.

If that sounds like your day, you may not want to empathise with Eliza and indulge in self-pity or you may get some grim satisfaction at finding some of your day mirrored on screen.

NINE

(US, 2009, d. Rob Marshall)

This reviewer was well disposed to liking Nine because of his admiration for the film on which it is based, Federico Fellini's 8 ½, very high on his list of all time great films. Fellini created a memorable character in Marcello Mastroianni's Guido, a director in the 1960s who has writer's block. He is also entangled with a number of women, his wife, Luisa, his mistress, Carla, his cinema muse, Claudia, his mother, and memories of Saraghina, a large woman on the beach of his childhood who initiated the young boys into the mysteries of sexuality. Fellini, drawing on his own experience, created a complex portrait of a man in emotional and career crisis.

Upping the ante by ½, playwright Arthur Kopit adapted the film for Broadway and Maury Yeston wrote the songs for this musical version. It opened in 1982 and won the Tony for Best Musical of that year.

Now, almost 30 years later, Rob Marshall, who directed Chicago and Memoirs of a Geisha, has brought the play to the screen and acted as one of the choreographers. It is a lavish production and has a very starry cast, especially the women, with Daniel Day Lewis as Guido.

There has been quite some dismay that it did not set the box-office alight as Chicago did. But, given the Fellini origins and the musical's following the outline and some details of 8 ½, what is called an art-house film, one might really ask just who is the potential audience for the film. It isn't the broad audience who wants to have a night out see a musical version of Legally Blonde. It isn't the audience that wants a show with toe-tapping rhythms and tunes (though the belting out of Be Italian does have its moments). It's the audience who admire 8 ½ (who don't necessarily approve of a musical version of it) or who respond well to something offbeat and arresting.

Nine is offbeat and arresting. It continues to be set in the 1960s though two years after the release of 8 ½. It is, despite

the showbiz glitter, very Italian in tone and accent. And it is rather downbeat over all with Guido experiencing a breakdown, hurting the women in his life and having to re-assess himself and admit that he is callow, philandering and becoming emotionally and morally bankrupt. Fellini's film ended with all the characters joining hands and dancing in a large circle of life to Nino Rota's score. This exuberance is missing from the end of *Nine* but an arresting substitute is presented as a rejuvenated Guido returns with all his leading ladies on the sound stage as he begins a film on his experience, looking like the opening of the film of *Nine*. And, alive again, he calls, 'Action'.

Needless to say, no expense has been spared on lavish theatrical sets nor, especially, on the musical numbers. These songs and performances contribute to the plot development but are principally a showcase to introduce and explain each of the characters. The musical style is very different for each of them, big numbers, monologues, showstoppers, recitatifs. While most of the cast are not well-known as singers, their acting abilities bring the songs to life.

Daniel Day Lewis is an actor who immerses himself in each role and is completely different from film to film. His last was the Oscar-winning performance as the ruthless oil baron in *There Will Be Blood*. Here, replete with broken English accent, he embodies the Italian director, his talent and his waywardness. The women are all good, each in their own way. Marion Cotillard, who won her Oscar for portraying Edith Piaf, is Luisa and has two songs, one plaintiff, the a striptease grinder. She is a strong character, independent, hurt but refusing to be victimised by Guido. She contrasts with the sexy verve of Penelope Cruz as Carla who has her moments of depression as she is rejected. Sophia Loren, now a grande dame of 75, is the mother. Nicole Kidman who has the difficult role of being the embodiment of goodness and inspiration is Claudia. Kate Hudson has a showstopper as an American journalist for *Vogue*. Stacy Ferguson (Fergie) is Saraghina and sings *Be Italian* to great effect. And, finally, there is Judi Dench as Guido's mentor, costume designer and make-up artist who is given a Piaf-like song, *Folies Bergere*.

A serious piece of musical theatre which shows its stage origins but is dazzling to look at and to listen to and stimulates reflection on its themes.

NINJA ASSASSIN

(US, 2009, d. James McTeigue)

A blogger wrote that a lot of the audience walked out of *Ninja Assassin* during the first fifteen minutes (though one would guess that they went during the first seven) and then remarked, quite rightly, that if they had thought about the title of the film, they would never have walked in. This is definitely a niche film, target audience mostly male, fans of martial arts and action shows of the graphic novel variety. There is not all that much more one can say about it except to admire the skilful direction of James McTeigue (the intriguing V for Vendetta and assistant to the Wachowskis on the *Matrix* films and *Speed Racer*). Also for admiration is the intricate choreography for the Ninja fights (and one can see why Tarantino admires this kind of thing and includes it as a feature of *Kill Bill*). It is the editing that should receive high admiration. The pacing, cuts, angles all make for a, to use a cliché, kaleidoscope of ninja action.

The plot is basic: little orphan is abducted to be trained as a ruthless, feelingless, warrior assassin by a master who is the equivalent of a sect leader in his body and mind control and in his vanity in exercise of power as well as the vicious and sadistic punishment meted out for alleged mistakes – he would be quickly arrested these days for gross physical abuse of children. Warrior grows up and, with the execution of the girl who had pity on him as a child, he rebels against the master, goes to Berlin where he teams up with a Europol researcher (Naomie Harris) and there are fights in Berlin as well as in the school where he is taken once again. In the vein of Indiana Jones shooting a sabre wielding opponent, it is clear that guns, especially automatic machine guns are far more deadly than all the Ninja training and lethal expertise

The hero is played by Korean pop star, Rain. Rain trained as a dancer and this is evident in the athleticism and poise of his acrobatic fighting. And, that's it.

THE PRINCESS AND THE FROG

(US, 2009, d. Ron Clements and John Musker)

An enjoyable Disney feature although the opening does not bode well with a rather soppy song and some gooey scenes of mother reading *The Frog Prince* to two little girls. Then the title comes on and the film picks up considerably.

US commentators were quick to point out that this seems to be the first mainstream American animated film to feature an African American lead. Though Disney had some elements (a song in *Dumbo*, a Southern setting in *So Dear to My Heart*), it is surprising that it was only in 2009 that this breakthrough in colour has arrived.

And breakthrough it does. The setting is New Orleans just prior to and during World War I. And setting is very important for the liveliness of the show. This is New Orleans, the home of jazz, with plenty of music and song (and an

alligator, very friendly despite his big teeth, called Louis who plays trumpet!), with foot-tapping rhythms, colourful characters in even more colourful costumes, and some voodoo into the bargain.

And, Disney has not forgotten an array of animals, some cuddly (well it is difficult to cuddle frogs but one would if one could, even though the heroine screams at the prospect of kissing one, but that was before she was transformed into a frog herself) and friendly, like glowworms, and some fierce, like gnashing alligators.

And there are lots of songs that have tunes and rhythms, the work of Randy Newman who has composed for so many of the Pixar films (like Toy Story and Monsters Inc). Every principal character gets a showstopper – which means that The Princess and the Frog is going to follow Beauty and the Beast and The Lion King and be transformed into a spectacular and joyous theatrical event.

And the characters are strong. Tiana (Anika Noni Rose) is no blushing violet but rather a strong girl with an ambition to open her own restaurant (daring for the times) and working hard for it. Charlotte, her featherbrained wealthy white friend wants to marry a prince. Prince Naveen (Bruce Campos) arrives, penniless and disinherited and is conned by the sinister Shadow Man, Dr Facilier (Keith David is compelling in this role). There are also the above-mentioned creatures and some parents (Oprah Winfrey as Tiana's mother, Terrence Howard as her father and John Goodman as Charlotte's father).

Plenty of colour, action, humour and, surprisingly a final deathbed scene and funeral before the happy ending and a witty way of remembering that it is a princess (even if she looks like a frog) who has to kiss and redeem Prince Charming. Entertaining.

ROMEO AND JULIET

(Indonesia, 2009, d. Andibachtiar Yusuf)

The story of Romeo and Juliet has been told and re-told. Here it provides a basis for an Indonesian story about football fanaticism and hooliganism. Which means, of course, that the fans of Jakarta and the rival fans of Bandung become the equivalents of the Capulets and the Montagues. And the enmity is literally deadly. In this situation, a Jak is smitten by a Viking girl (the name for the Bandung fans), the latterday Romeo and Juliet.

For a western audience, this is a surprisingly accessible story (as well as for many Asian audiences, though the film has been banned from screening in neighbouring Malaysia). This is the world of young adults all around the world, students and workers, in their T shirts and jeans, with popular music, with a much less traditional approach to moral behaviour, communicating in their slang and being hostile in local swearing. It seems that secularisation is not just a phenomenon of older Christian countries but with so many of the Muslim countries in Asia or in Africa.

There is quite an amount of hooliganism and brawls in the film, staged quite realistically and, for the audience, rather overwhelmingly.

As with West Side Story and Baz Luhrman's Romeo+Juliet, the interest is in looking at and appreciating whether the contemporary equivalents of Shakespeare's plays work or not, or how well. One thing is that this picture of Djarkarta youth shows them behaving and sounding like tough youth anywhere, especially with their language and preoccupation with sex. That is the world of Romeo, who is a leading hooligan. Juliet's world is that of college and study, though she has mechanic brothers who can be as belligerent and violent as the hooligan's in Romeo's world.

And, as we know, it ends badly and tragically, just as Romeo is coming to his senses and could be the better for it.

Indonesian films are not seen widely. Audiences might be surprised at the 'universal' style of young Indonesian filmmakers.

SHRINK

(US, 2009, d. Jonas Pate)

Sounds promising. Kevin Spacey as a Los Angeles psychiatrist whose wife has killed himself and, while he is still practising, has opted out of ordinary life and taken refuge in drugs. However, it is not quite as engrossing as it might be. Perhaps it is the patchwork nature of the plot, with the focus on the shrink and then the focus on the stories of some of his clients. Reaching for an adjective to describe this, one might call it somewhat 'Altmanesque'.

Where the film is a little different is in the client list. They are not just from Los Angeles. They are from Hollywood or aspire to success in Hollywood. This gives the film a rather more wry tone than usual. There is the philandering film

director who wants permission to philander (an uncredited Robin Williams). There is the actress and mother who is no longer the glamorous star (Saffron Burrows). There is the aspiring student (Keke Palmer) and the young man who befriends her but wants to write a script and 'borrows' her life (Mark Webber) and there is the obnoxious producer (Dallas Roberts). The shrink also has his personal dealer named Jesus (Jesse Plemons).

Perhaps that is the trouble. The characters are not all that interesting which means that the shrink's work is not so interesting either.

There are glimmers of hope for some of the characters at the end but this is one of those 'might be interesting if you happen to catch it' films.

A SINGLE MAN

(US, 2009, d. Tom Ford)

Colin Firth has received a great deal of acclaim for his role as George, a Christopher Isherwood-like professor of English in California in 1962. After winning the Best Actor award in Venice, 2009, he was nominated for many awards, including the Oscar. It has confirmed Firth as a strong and versatile actor (despite *Mamma Mia!*) after such films as *Easy Living*, *And when did you last see your father*, *Genova* and even such tongue-in-cheek straight roles in the *St Trinians* comedies.

A Single Man is based (with some variations) on Christopher Isherwood's novel. It takes place over one day in 1962 with news of the missile crisis and Cuba in the background. However, it is a sad day for George. Jim, his partner of 16 years is dead. George goes through the routines of his professorial day, lecturing on Aldous Huxley to uninterested students, except for the precocious Kenny (Nicholas Hoult) who stalks George and who, later that night, offers him something of a new life. George, however, has felt suicidal and remembers his time with Jim (Matthew Goode). There are some flashbacks to their meeting in 1946 as well as some scenes of their life together.

He is also in touch with his old London friend, Charlie (Julianne Moore), has a meal with her and gossips and reminisces. (American Moore plays an Englishwoman while Matthew Goode and Nicholas Hoult are British actors playing American.)

Obviously, this is not a film of action. Rather, it is a film of characters and of reflection.

Colin Firth offers a subtle and quiet performance as George. He is grieving. He receives the news of the death by phone from a mutual friend. He is being stoic at times. At other times, he feels like falling to pieces or opting out. His performance also communicates the gay sensibilities of his character at a time when gay men and women were closeted. George is not welcome at Jim's funeral. George has some discussions with Kenny about minorities where the audience is asked to listen between the lines, about themes of fears and persecutions.

The film is the first directed by Tom Ford who wrote the screenplay. He has been better known prior to this as a world-known fashion designer

ST TRINIANS: THE LEGEND OF FRITTON'S GOLD

(UK, 2009, d. Oliver Parker and Barnaby Thompson)

When *St Trinians* appeared in 2007, it was meant to be a throwback to the British comedies of the 1950s, especially the classic *The Belles of St Trinians* from 1954 (which led to some lower brow sequels). The 21st century version seemed too knowing, too much innuendo and only spasmodically funny. So, it is a surprise to find the sequel so entertaining.

This time the girls are more cartoonish caricatures, much more like Ronald Searle's original sketches. And the dialogue is particularly PGish which makes it more like the original as well.

There are quite a few laughs and smiles, especially in some of the incidental dialogue and one-liners, often at the expense of the pretty but dumb girl. There are far fewer girls as pupils and, apart from Celia Imrie and Toby Jones, no staff except for Rupert Everett's Miss Fritton, the headmistress, can be sighted. While there are some shenanigans in the school, the action takes place outside.

It is all set up by an amusing prologue where Rupert Everett appears as a 1589 pirate confronting the prim and pedantic Lord Pomfret (Dr Who/David Tennant) who feels that women should be subservient and has no time for Elizabeth 1st. Cut to the present and the current Pomfret (photographed with the Queen, President Obama and Simon Cowell) has

plans to recover the Fritton treasure by finding the two parts of a ring which give the latitude and longitude. With debts to such films as National Treasure, the hunt by the girls (via computers, digging up a grave and the head girl being possessed by a la Exorcist, a visit in disguise to a boys' college, a song and dance routine at Liverpool St Station), leads to the ring and then to the Globe Theatre for the treasure.

In the meantime, a sexist secret society, presided over by Pomfret (with debts to Dan Brown) is infiltrated by the inspector of schools from the previous film, Colin Firth, who shows he is still a good sport and allows himself some scenes of buffoonery.

The climax is funny as Miss Fritton and the inspector improvise scenes and pseudo Shakespearian dialogue from Romeo and Juliet on the Globe stage until the treasure is found.

Probably, the screenwriters are more indebted to Shakespeare in Love and Ethel, the Pirate's Daughter, as the final twist will raise eyebrows and give a chuckle or two, or three.

TALENTIME

(Malaysia, 2009, d. Yasmin Ahmad)

Malaysian writer-director was very serious about telling stories that were cross-cultural and cross-religious in a Malaysian context with films like Mukhsin and Septem. Tragically, she died at age 51 in 2009 after completing this film.

Malaysia is a Muslim country but it has many Hindus and Christians – which sometimes makes for contentious relationships and enmities. The Romeo and Juliet archetype can be very important for this society and Yasmin Ahmad made popular films, geared to a younger audience, drawing on the age-old story. She also incorporated the variety of language (and songs) that are used in Malaysia.

Talentime (or, it could be Tale n Time) appeals to contemporary young people (in this case, especially, romantically minded teenage girls). It is the 21st century everywhere around the world now with popular music and dance, talent shows and cyber technology. The central youngsters here are Hindu, Indian Muslim and Chinese and Malays (and there is a grandmother who comes from Yorkshire).

Taking a cue from Fame and High School Musical, this is the story of a school's seventh talent show so the teacher responsible holds the usual auditions (some terrible performers for whom the response is a vociferous 'Next!') and wants seven performers and seven students with motor bikes to bring the performers to rehearsals. One girl (Indian Muslim with the British grandmother) is assigned a Hindu boy who is hearing and speaking impaired, the Romeo and Juliet of talentime. Another boy, Muslim, writes songs, is clever, comforts his dying mother and incurs the jealous hostility of a Chinese boy. Plenty of ingredients for drama, melodrama, music and young love.

One hopes that Yasmin Ahmad's films contribute to harmony in Malaysian society. In their popular way, they show outsiders stories which help them understand some of the complexities of the country.

TONY

(UK, 2009, d. Gerard Johnson)

Tony sounds an innocuous title for a film. And Tony himself seems an innocuous type, wandering around north London, but very stilted and awkward in his attempts at communication. He is the kind of person that one might find hanging around and think that he was harmless.

Not so. Tony has been jobless for 20 years and is virtually unemployable - we do have the opportunity to see him at a job interview, oblivious of what he is communicating about himself and his self-absorption and his unreliability. He has lived in a flat for ten years, munching corn flakes for breakfast, watching violent videos and going for walks. He ends up in all kinds of strange situations: phoning a sex centre with the number on display in the telephone box, offering to join two druggies and taking some speed, staring at a quarrelling couple in a cafe, in a small, upstairs brothel, in a gay bar...

But, Tony kills people, dismembers them and tosses the parts in plastic bags into the Thames.

This is a skilfully made case study of a middle aged man who is almost completely unaware of himself and acts out urges which are reinforced by the material he chooses to watch. He has no idea of guilt, compunction or remorse. There are no explanations given of how he came to be this way. He is just there.

Peter Ferdinando, a cousin of the director, is completely believable as Tony. While the film has some gruesome moments, these are presented graphically but exploitatively.

Tony would have very limited appeal but might find a life on specialist television.

TROUBLED WATERS

(Norway, 2009, d. Erik Poppe)

A moving film.

Troubled Waters takes its title from Paul Simon's song which is played twice during a crucial scene and its repetition. The troubled waters are evident. However, the full title of the song is Bridge over Troubled Waters and exploring that theme opens up the drama and the spiritual dimensions of the drama.

Here is a film which is commercially interesting but which incorporates into its plot aspects of Lutheran spirituality and practise without embarrassment. Norway, even though like other European countries it is marked by an increasing secularism, has a Lutheran tradition which is part of its heritage and, as the film indicates, can contribute to religion, morality and to its culture.

The film is in two parts. We see an abduction of a child as the film opens. There are painful consequences. One of the young men responsible (though he won't admit it) is released from jail and finds a job as an organist at a local church. The first part of the film is the young man's story, of his being rehabilitated, becoming friendly with the local priest. She has a young son (presented as a mirror image of the abducted boy). The second part of the film takes up the abduction once again and we follow the life of the family, especially the mother, whose son was taken. Each story has two sides and the second part fills in detail of what we have seen in the young man's story. The climax brings the man and the mother together to face what took place.

The mother is distraught and the effects of the tragedy are very deep in her. She needs to hear what actually happened to her son before she is able to consider any kind of forgiveness.

The screenplay draws attention to themes of forgiveness but also of atonement. Confessing, and the inability to confess, are significant. Communion is seen as a step in healing brokenness. And, despite what the young man has done, the manager of the church business has to tell the mother that, in terms of second chances, where else can this be done best but in the church.

The film has been made with elegant craft, has several sequences of organ music, but tells a story of everyday headlines and the lives behind the headlines, with both insight and a challenge to the possibilities for compassion.

UP IN THE AIR

(US, 2009, d. Jason Reitman)

Up in the Air can mean that something is uncertain – and the central character of this light drama with serious overtones finds that his life and choices are up in the air. But, he is also up in the air, literally, as he strives to clock up ten million air miles (on American Airlines which get lots of publicity throughout). He is continually on the move around the US from his home and his company base in Omaha, Nebraska, feeling at home in airports and familiar with their check-in rituals, security rituals and boarding rituals (although he does a double take as the flight attendant seems to ask him, 'Cancer?' but she is offering him a soft drink, 'Can, sir?').

The reason he is up in the air is that his job is one that has been on the rise in recent years. His company sends him out to do a dirty job for companies, firing their employees. Through the film there are collages of disbelieving Americans, the whole range of gender, ethnic background, social status, facing being fired – and a whole range of responses from resignation to despair and threatening suicide. The company tries a soft sell (but relentless) manner which many see through. They are also offered a folder with severance terms, presented as if this was the greatest opportunity for a new life.

This expert in dismissal is Ryan Bingham (George Clooney in an Oscar-nominated performance). He picks up women as he travels. Commitment is not one of his characteristics. The film shows one relationship with a travelling businesswoman (Vera Farmiga, Oscar-nominated) which has its moments and an unexpected comeuppance. He also has a most resolute, theory-bound trainee (Anna Kendrick, Oscar-nominated) who tries to be relentless though her inexperience in dealing with people is shown up.

In the meantime, he visits his sister in Wisconsin for her daughter's wedding and has to pep the groom who is getting cold feet.

It is a perfectly ordinary drama with characters well-drawn and something to reflect on both about human nature and the current economic situation. But the reasons for its Oscar nominations, which also include Best Picture, Director and Adapted Screenplay, elude this reviewer.

YOUTH IN REVOLT

(US, 2009, d. Miguel Arteta)

Somebody said that youth are always revolting! Not so, would say Nick Twisp (though probably with a larger and more elegant and linguistically adventurous and sophisticated vocabulary), the hero (though probably anti-hero in the 1960s sense would be more appropriate) of three novels by American writer, C.D. Payne. They have a cult following in the US.

It may be better to get to the hand-wringing part of the review first: the film does reflect some of the permissive aspects of contemporary society, especially in adult divorces and partnerships and their impermanence, and teenager's preoccupation with sexuality (especially the opening scene in Nick's bedroom) and virginity (as in loss of). That said, the point of view of the screenplay and of Nick Twisp is that maturity and commitment are best, especially after the immediate experience of the loss of virginity whether it be in happy circumstances or in stupid circumstances. And that is positive.

Much of the film is very funny and would have most audiences chuckling rather than laughing uproariously. Much of this is due to the writing, the one-liners, the word-play, the juxtaposing of nerdish expertise in language, literature, arthouse cinema with the mundane realities of teenage life and friendships.

Much of the humour comes from the performance of Michael Cera as Nick Twisp. He has had a career on television in many episodes of *Arrested Development*. On screen, he seems to give the same performance over and over (from *Juno* to *Superbad* to Nick and Nora's *Infinite Playlist* to *Year One* – and to *Paper Heart* where he is, allegedly, playing himself). He does it here, only more so. And it works. One wonders can he do anything else. The film offers the answer, 'Yes'.

Nick Twisp is too intelligent and too cleverly well-informed to make a good impression on his peers. He has no relationship with girls. When he and his rather slatternly mother (Jean Smart) and her current boyfriend (Zach a bit the same as in *The Hangover*) go to a caravan park to escape some vindictive sailor creditors, Nick meets Sheeni (Portia Doubleday) the nice but rebellious daughter of strictly religious parents. They bond – as friends. Can anything every come of this friendship?

Nick has a brainwave after Sheeni tells him that to get kicked out of his mother's house and come to live with his father (Steve Buscemi) and near her, he needs to be really bad. Enter Nick's alter ego, the suave, fashionably dressed, cigarette-smoking, moustachioed, French-accented Francois Dillinger. As played by Michael Cera – and quite differently from his usual screen persona for Nick.

Francois leads Nick into all kinds of trouble, including crashing cars, burning down a restaurant, infiltrating an elite boarding school.

Of course, the whole film is slight, is geared towards Nick's age group (and bemused parents), but there is a thoughtfulness and humanity behind it and, one might call it, 'a Michael Cera film'.

This month's films do not stand out as extraordinary. There are some Oscar nominees: Crazy Heart and El Secreto de Sus Ojos and Tim Burton's Alice in Wonderland. There are also two continental films about World War II, Oorlogswinter (Winter in Wartime)/ Holland, and Anonyma: a Woman in Berlin/Germany.

ALICE IN WONDERLAND
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VALENTINE'S DAY
WINTER IN WARTIME (OORLOGSWINTER)
WOLF MAN, The

ALICE IN WONDERLAND

(UK. 2010, d. Tim Burton)

And filmed in 3D.

Tim Burton, who is fascinated by the unusual, the bizarre and the imaginative, and his screenwriter Linda Woolverton (who worked on screenplays for Beauty and the Beast and The Lion King) have tried to be creatively different with this new version of Lewis Carroll's stories which have been filmed so often.

We first meet a six year old Alice who has nightmares, falling down the hole, following the White Rabbit and encountering the familiar characters, Tweedledum and Tweedledee, Mad Hatter, March Hare, Doormouse and Cheshire Cat, and, of course, the Queens.

Now she is 19 and, at a lavish Victorian garden party, is proposed to by a silly-ass wealthy young man. She needs some moments to think – and there is the White Rabbit and down the hole she goes again. She is now in Underland (she had made a mistake before, hearing it as Wonderland) and Tim Burton territory it is, and looks it with its graphic design and colours, its sense of mystery and eeriness, and the old characters are here again, some enhanced by CGI (like Helena Bonham Carter's Red Queen yelling 'off with his head'), or designed as eccentric (like Johnny Depp as the Mad Hatter – after all Tim Burton has put him on screen bizarrely as Edward Scissorhands, Willy Wonka and Sweeney Todd) or looking storybook fey (like Anne Hathaway as the White Queen).

The voices of the characters are excellent, very British: Stephen Fry as the Cheshire Cat, Alan Rickman as the blue caterpillar, Absolem, Timothy Spall as the Beagle, Michael Sheen as the White Rabbit, Barbara Windsor as the doormouse and some sinister words from Christopher Lee as the Jabberwocky.

Speaking of the Jabberwocky, the plot is a kind of quest to destroy it on frabjous day. And Alice is meant to be the champion of the White Queen to kill it. More than a touch of dungeons and dragons.

Many of the well-loved stories from Carroll's books are enjoyably staged and performed. The finale of executions, white and red card/guards fighting and Alice's doing a St George and Joan of Arc against the Jabberwocky are impressively presented (and may upset some younger audiences because of their vividness).

Mia Wasikowski is a strong and determined 19 year old Alice.

ANONYMA: A WOMAN IN BERLIN

(Germany, 2008, d. Max Farberbock)

In 1959, an anonymous journalist published a memoir based on her experiences and those of other Berlin women during the final weeks of World War II and its immediate aftermath. It focused on the exploitation of the women at the hand of the victorious Russian military, on rape and continued sexual oppression. In the late 1950s, this was considered taboo material and the book was not re-published until recent years and the identity of the author remains anonymous.

This theme could become more important for films about war. Rape has been used as a weapon in African civil wars and made headlines in the 1990s with the wars in the Balkans. It is a subject that needs greater exposure since, in the past, nations have tended not to acknowledge this horrendous experience of war and the sufferings and humiliation of the women. The press kit for the film indicates that General Eisenhower had decreed before the D-Day landing that anyone who committed rape would be executed. The first rape occurred six hours after the invasion.

Anonyma becomes a significant German film in its portrayal of this crucial period. Where the film makes a challenging point is that Anonyma and many of the other women portrayed were deeply imbued with Nazi faith and German destiny. An opening sequence of the Nazi glitterati at a party extolling the regime reminds us of the commitment to Hitler's ideals by many Germans.

The rest of this quite long film begins on April 26th 1945 with the women, children and the elderly of a typical street in Berlin, from a typical apartment block, are hiding in the basement from the advancing Russian troops. When they tentatively emerge, treated to some potatoes, it is clear that the Russian men, angry with the Germans who have oppressed them for four years and killed their loved ones and heady with the achievement of conquering Berlin, are going to take advantage of the women and exploit them. They are rough, even brutal men, many of them, not always following orders from their commanders.

Nina Hoss plays the anonymous journalist who returned from overseas appointments to be in Germany for its triumph and has farewelled her husband to the front. She is a strong personality and, while she is raped, she also allows herself to enter into a relationship with a more cultured officer. She supports the range of women who are allowed back into the apartments as well as secretly sheltering a frightened young woman. We see her writing up these experiences for her husband in some exercise books, writing about the detail of what happened day by day up to the surrender of Germany and the early weeks of uneasy peace. She also writes up her feelings and her ways of coping.

The film is worth seeing just to immerse oneself in the experience of the Berliners (ideologically unsympathetic as they are) in encountering the vanquishing Russians whom they despise but realising that they will have to collaborate with them to survive. We see the street fighting and battles, the arbitrary deaths, scavenging for food, the women terrified that the Russians will turn on them.

It would be important to compare this review with the perspectives of those written by women who will be disturbed by the content and empathise with the pain and suffering of the women.

BATTLE FOR TERRA

(US, 2008, d. Aristomenis Tsirbas)

Another animated film about another world and an invasion. This time it is the planet Terra and the invaders are Earth people who have a colonising and colonial attitude towards this planet as a refuge because Earth is collapsing. They have little or no regard for the residents of Terra and are prepared to conquer, even destroy them.

In fact, that sounds more than a little familiar with the release of Avatar where the human exploiters are doing something similar. to the inhabitants of the moon Pandora (which, as many have noted, is the story of the British and Pocahontas). Another similar film is Planet 51 which offers the same message but more entertainingly – the aliens are living a lifestyle familiar from the US in the 1950s and, while they are initially afraid of the humans, one of them becomes their rescuer and hero. In Terra, we don't see much of the life of the aliens (who are designed something like tadpoles) in their strange, thin city, except those who fly around happily, along with blue whales in the sky. The humans

are aggressors except for one who is hidden, just as in Planet 51, and then helps the aliens against the humans.

Made in 3D, there are some good effects in visualising space and the universe. There is also a huge familiar cast list of voices.

However, it is not particularly gripping and much of it plays like the equivalent of a space action video game.

CASE 39

(US, 2009, d. Christian Alvart)

Stories about government child care agencies can raise very sensitive issues, especially with examples of care workers failing to see the damage wrought on children by cruel or neglectful parents. These stories are usually told in television reports and documentaries or in telemovies.

On the other hand, stories about children who wreak destruction on parents and on carers are the material of horror and terror movies. And there have been many. The Bad Seed gave us a phrase to describe these children. More recently, we have seen Orphan, The Unborn, The Uninvited and many others. Which puts Case 39 in a group of films. It leads us to think that Lilith (now there's a name that dares a horror story) is a nice 10 year old and that her parents, trying to destroy her and send her to hell are monsters. But most audiences will be immediately on the alert and know that this is not the case.

Busy and harassed agent, Emily Jenkins (Renee Zellweger) accepts case 39 from her organised boss, Adrian Lester. She is so charmed by Lilith and horrified by her interviews with the parents, with some help from her psychologist friend (Bradley Cooper) and her police friend and confidant (Ian McShane) that she takes Lilith into her home to care for her. As we all know, big mistake.

The several strands of interest in the story include watching Lilith exercise her sweetness and light until it turns nasty and diabolical, seeing how Emily manages and when she wakes up to the truth (and visits the poor parents in custody), and waiting for Lilith to exercise her diabolical powers on Emily's friends. There is quite a vivid scene as one victim confronts his fear of hornets who overwhelm him.

German director, Christian Alvart, made the much more tense and eerie Antibodies and went on to make the eerie science fiction film, Pandorum.

Jodelle Ferland is very good as Lilith and gives some credibility to this not unfamiliar terror story.

CHLOE

(Canada, 2010, d. Atom Egoyan)

A film about adult issues designed for a thoughtful audience.

Chloe is based on Anne Fontaine's French film of 2004 with Fanny Ardant, Emmanuelle Beart and Gerard Depardieu. This time the wife is played by Julianne Moore, the prostitute, Chloe, by Amanda Seyfield and the husband by Liam Neeson. A very strong cast and strong performances.

Catherine (Moore) and David (Neeson) have been married for 20 years but each has become involved in their professional life, she a gynaecologist, he an arts lecturer, that they have grown used to each other and take each other for granted. When Catherine suspects David of having an affair, she pays for Chloe to make advances to David and report back to her. As always, events do not follow expected paths and people distort the truth, fantasise and are seduced by desires they were not aware of.

Director Atom Egoyan usually writes his own screenplays (Ararat, Adoration) but did not write this one. It is more straightforward than his usual films even though Chloe's reports and behaviour need our constant evaluation. At times, the film is quite explicit in its presentation of the relationships bringing forcefully to audience awareness the strange attractions and the moral dilemmas the characters, especially Catherine, find themselves in - and the mature response the film demands from its audience.

THE CRAZIES

(US, 2010, d. Breck Eisner)

George A Romero, of the Living Dead films, made a small film in the early 1970s which had good reviews and something of a cult status, *The Crazies*. Almost 40 years on, here is a remake that brings the story up to date.

As remakes go, this is a pretty good one, and not a bad terror story either.

Set in a small midwest town, the film opens with streets and buildings on fire and people running amok. It then goes back 48 hours to show how disaster struck – and continued.

The heriff is an upright man and his assistant loyal and helpful. The sheriff's wife is the local doctor and is pregnant. The baseball match is going on. On to the field comes a man with a shotgun and a quietly crazed look. The team and the watchers flee for cover and there is a shootout. Then someone else seems mad. A house is burnt down. Communications are cut off (although the audience knows that someone is watching this town with a kind of google earth device).

Where the film works well is in the writing and the performances and the growing tension. Some explanations are discovered – human error and not something weird or from another world or the supernatural. Masked military arrive to take charge and herd the residents into trucks to intern them or to kill them.

Finally, of course, there is a remnant trying to reach safety against impossible odds. Plenty of tension with the mystery of what is going on and how this all came about.

Timothy Olyphant (who can be villainous or cynical in roles) brings a sturdy integrity to the role of the sheriff with British Joe Anderson very good as Russell, the Deputy. Australian Radha Mitchell is the wife and doctor.

Familiar enough but much better than the average film of this type.

CRAZY HEART

(US, 2009, d. Scott Cooper)

For decades, Jeff Bridges has been an impressive performer. He is still seen as *The Dude* from *The Big Lebowski*. However, his performance here as an alcoholic singer who is struggling at 57 to keep his career going, whose inspiration for writing songs has dried up (or been drowned by his drinking) and who has never settled down (four divorces all told) has received many awards and an Oscar nomination. He deserves them.

Bridges' character, Bad Blake, always turns up to his gigs but his performances are sometimes perfunctory or cut short – and he is glancing around to find his female fans. We see him singing in bowling alleys or in hotels and then moving on through Arizona, New Mexico and Texas.

But, he gets a chance when he meets the niece of his piano-player in Santa Fe, a local journalist, divorced with a four year old son. She is played with both a genial tone and some determination by Maggie Gyllenhaal, also Oscar-nominated. They hit it off and Bad takes an interest in her and relates well to her son. Could this be a turn around in his life?

He has been a mentor and composed songs for a successful young singer but tries to avoid him. However, when he has to agree to open a Phoenix concert for him and the younger man not only shows respect but joins him on stage for a duet, he has to re-appraise his opinion of him.

But, Bad's life was not meant to be easy and he makes a big mistake which demands that he confront his alcoholism, his relationships and his lack of responsibility.

Perhaps not the most original of stories and Robert Duvall's appearance later in the film as a reformed alcoholic reminds us that for his role as a singer in need of some kind of saving, Duvall received his Oscar for *Tender Mercies*.

However, it is Bridges' film, and he does his own singing of T Bone Burnett's country songs. So does Colin Farrell who is very good as the young singer.

Not a great film but satisfying - and its has some fine performances and a great one by Jeff Bridges.

EVERYBODY'S FINE

(US, 2009, d. Kirk Jones)

In recent years, Robert di Niro has seemed more eccentric and mannered on the screen, whether it be as the father in the Focker films or in some of his crime dramas like righteous Kill. It is a pleasure to see him rather underplaying his role here.

He is Frank Goode, a recent widower and misses his wife dearly. She had been the point of contact for his family, two daughters and two sons. He does his daily routines and spends a lot of time in the garden. He decides to invite the children for the weekend, a chance to see them and for them to see one another. And, of course, they ring with their various excuses that they cannot come. He makes up his mind to visit them.

This is an American adaptation of an Italian film, *Stanno Tutti Bene*, *Everybody's Fine*, by Giuseppe Tornatore, made after his Oscar-winning and popular *Cinema Paradiso*. Marcello Mastroianni was the star of the Tornatore film, an eminent star of Italian cinema as De Niro still is of American cinema.

The film becomes a road movie (Frank's health means that he has to travel by bus rather than plane, though when he finally travels by plane, his fears and his health are a dangerous combination). He has an artist son living in New York City. He is not home. The audience knows more than Frank, that the son has been involved in drug difficulties in Mexico. Off to Chicago to see his older daughter (Kate Beckinsale), married with a son. They all put up a good front but the audience becomes aware that all is not well here. Then to Denver to see his other son (Sam Rockwell) who he thought was a conductor but leads a quiet life and plays timpani. His younger daughter (Drew Barrymore) lives in Las Vegas and says she is a dancer with a lavish apartment. Actually, her problems are quite complicated.

Everybody's Fine. Of course not.

As the children begin to speak more openly with their father, he learns that his wife had protected him from problems. The children found it difficult to communicate with him and he drove them hard with his perfectionistic expectations. Frank is in denial about all of this but is forced to face facts, re-appraise his attitudes and the achievements as well as the problems of his children. But, he does discover that his artist son did appreciate his father's urging him to be an artist.

While *Everybody's Fine* is a movie entertainment (and it does entertain, although some audiences have found it a bit too emotional), it is not a documentary about families. Nevertheless, many will identify with the characters and the issues – and realise that honesty and hope are a better recipe for life than demands and severity which in fact diminish self-esteem.

EXTRAORDINARY MEASURES

(US, 2010, d. Tom Vaughan)

The extraordinary measures of the title of this film about disease and cure are those of the scientists who research in order to find cures and the business people who want to provide healing drugs (and/or those who are interested in large profit margins).

The film is based on a true story, that of John Crowley and his family, with Crowley acting as consultant for the film (and appearing in a cameo as a business executive at a finance meeting). Perhaps the subject or those like it are more familiar from television series and movies. However, a lot of audiences will be caught up by the plight of the Crowley family who have two of their three children affected deeply by Pompe Disease, a rare neuromuscular disorder (more information quickly available from Wikipedia, plus a photo of Crowley who actually looks more photogenic than the bulky Brendan Fraser who plays him).

Crowley worked in Biotechnology and his investigations led him to Lincoln Nebraska and the work of an academic scientist, Robert Stonehill. He is played with gruff introversion and workaholic prickliness by Harrison Ford, who executive produced the film.

Meeting Stonehill was not easy for Crowley and their association over the years meant many conflicts between the theoretical and the pragmatic.

However, the film shows how much time, energy and finance is required to research theories and to test them and document trials of the drugs under development. It also reminds the audience that many researchers are in love with the abstract and need to come into contact with people, especially those with the illnesses. And it also reminds us that medication is big business and discussions can focus on profits rather than the healing of the patients. (An interesting comparison is the determination of the Odone family to find medication to help their son in *Lorenzo's Oil* as well as a modest British film for television, *Breaking the Mould*, with Dominic West as Howard Florey and the development and

testing of penicillin during World War II.)

THE FATHER OF MY CHILDREN (LE PERE DE MES ENFANTS)

(France, 2009, d. Mia Hansen-Love)

An impressive film from a director still in her 20s. A film about family and relationships but also a film about the film industry.

The first part focuses on Gregoire (Louis-Do de Lencquesaing), a very busy producer. In fact, the first ten minutes show him making phone call after phone call on his mobile phone, as he leaves the building, walks along the street, finds his car, drives (speedily and without seat belt), the camera tracking him. (Perhaps this is a record for showing mobile phone use in cinema – an opening that would have been impossible twenty years earlier.). He does get pulled up by the police!

At his country home, he has a loving wife, Sylvia (Chiara Caselli), and three daughters, the younger two devoted to their father, the young teenager (de Lencquesaing's daughter, Alicia) moody and reclusive. There are some exuberant family sequences, but the phone is never far away.

When tragedy strikes the family, the film moves attention to the wife and her skills in handling the crisis in the film company. She shows a great deal of courage and energy trying to save the business side of the company.

The last part of the film shifts to Clemence, the older daughter, and how she handles the situation and her feelings – and the possibility that she will move into the film industry.

In her early career, the director was helped by Humbert Balsan, an energetic producer who, with extreme good will towards film-makers, especially from countries whose industries were developing, over-extended himself and took his own life in 2005. The film serves as a tribute to him, an acknowledgement of gratitude and an insight into the pressures of the film business, the continual need for money and trying to deal delicately and diplomatically with the moods and performances in real life but artistic types. This makes for an interesting and satisfying film.

FROM PARIS WITH LOVE

(France, 2010, d. Pierre Morel)

Slam-bang – and more.

Luc Besson, who directed some classics in the past (Subway, The Big Blue) and a film on Joan of Arc (The Messenger) has for a long time written and produced a lot of over the top action shows like The Transporter series or Unleashed. And he relies here on former cinematographer, Pierre Morel, who also directed Taken with Liam Neeson to direct his screenplay.

It's the war on terrorism and it's right there in Paris. And John Travolta is let loose to wage and win the war.

Jonathan Rhys Meyers is not usually in this kind of show but obviously enjoys the opportunity to be the American embassy fixer in Paris, bugging offices and that kind of thing, but wanting to be out there with guns blazing. And he does get the opportunity. He contrasts with Travolta, head shaven, big moustache, bulky but agile, with an R-rated mouth on him, who seems to be always right in picking who are the bad guys with a shoot first, answer questions second approach. He gets lots of opportunities to do this. And the stunt doubles have plenty of work to do as well.

Basically, the plot is a plan for a terrorist attack during a Paris international meeting on Africa and some betraying going on – though if there was to be a bomb victim, the obnoxious American official would be a not unwelcome candidate as she ignores warnings and then whinges.

Some moments when there is a chance to admire beautiful Paris but there are always Chinese, Pakistanis, Arabs to be hunted and confronted. Rhys Meyers has to go through some disillusionment before he knows what the 'real world' is like. And Travolta leaps, sometimes literally from rooftop to rooftop, at the chance to be a mixture of James Bond, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone and whoever the younger versions of these old heroes are today.

LEAP YEAR

(US, 2010, d. Anand Tucker)

For years, American film-makers have mistaken Blarney for the whole of Ireland. And that is what they have done here.

A souffle-light (or whatever the Blarney equivalent is) of a story. Amy Adams wants her partner of four years to propose to her – but he is too busy being Dr Big Cardiologist to get round to it. When her father (John Lithgow) reminds her of an old family story which claims that women can propose to men in Ireland on Leap Day, she flies off to Dublin only to strike turbulence, landing in Cardiff and trapped there by stormy weather. She does the obnoxious American thing to all and sundry and demands to be taken to Dublin only to be appropriately rebuffed by Welsh irony. So, she hires a boat and lands, allegedly, in Dingle.

For the Irish and those who have visited Ireland, the geography of this film makes no sense at all! And, because the film-makers see Blarney instead of reality, there are cosy villages of yore, peopled by characters who have overdosed on *The Quiet Man*!

Since Dr Cardiologist is not worth proposing to, as will be revealed, there has to be someone else to fill the romantic requirements. And, there is. The manager of the local pub who has a chip on his shoulder but who needs the money and decides to drive the American to Dublin (taking many side roads instead of the highways that could have got them there in five hours, and, perhaps to keep her miserable, bypassing Cork into Tipperary). The film then becomes a kind of *It Happened One Night* in the Blarney backblocks. Matthew Goode is the driver who will eventually propose.

The lightest of date movies.

LEGION

(US, 2010, d. Scott Stewart)

A weird one this one! And how weird it is.

In recent years, we have seen lots of strange angels in our pop movies. What about Christopher Walken in the *Prophecy* series? What about Keanu Reeves and Tilda Swinton in *Constantine*? And a small-budget thriller from Australia which has some theme similarities to *Legion*, a film called *Gabriel*? This time it is Paul Bettany as Michael the Archangel.

The screenwriters have been dipping into biblical sources as well as movie traditions. Michael arrives on earth as the film opens and offers a strange theology, that God has got sick of the human race (as happened at the time of the flood) and is ready to destroy it by sending loyal angels to do the job (rather brutally with a nod to George A Romero's *Living Dead* horror movies). (The heroine tells us a story from her mother who had lost faith in God after family tragedies – she still believed in God but thought that God had become tired of the all the human bullshit – and repeats this unusually phrased thought at the end.) The opening quote from the Psalms speaks of the fear of God, but it is interpreted as being afraid of God rather than its actual meaning of being in awe of and reverence for God.

Then we find that Michael has disobeyed God and is saving the life of a child about to be born (the date the film opens is December 23rd) of a single mother who does not know who the father is. The young man at the service station in the isolated Mojave desert is called Jeep (Yank for Joseph, perhaps, although the mother is surprisingly called Charlie). Thus the Gospel references.

However, this mother of a saviour who will lead the human race in hope has more than several echoes of the *Terminator* films. So a pot-pouri of angelology, theology, with lots of movie references (the TV is showing *It's a Wonderful Life* here Clarence is telling George Bailey he is wanting to earn his wings – Michael has just cut off his to identify with the humans). *Assault on Precinct 13* and other siege films (like *Westerns*) come to mind as the final group of humans, with the mother of the saviour, defend themselves from angel/diabolic attack as they surround the service station.

The director acknowledges the sources but says the film is not about religion (though many groups in the US who have an apocalypse now or soon point of view may think it is). Rather, the film is an exercise in movie religionism!

This is one of those films that seems preposterous even as it tries to ground itself in serious sources. The only thing to do is to sit back and enjoy the siege and Michael, the angel warrior, trying to protect the human race – and does final battle with a steely-winged Gabriel. If this seems too impossible to sit through, fair enough. It's just a concoction. But, as usual, apocalypse happens in the US and the saviour is, of course, American. That thought is not particularly theological!

MICMACS

(France, 2010, d. Jean-Pierre Jeunet)

Once upon a time, there was a very strange, intriguing and enjoyable French comic fantasy, *Delicatessen*. In the 1990s it became something of a classic with its strange characters (odd-looking too) and bizarre goings on and humour. There was also *City of Lost Children* and *Alien Resurrection* and film buffs found a significantly different film-maker who had a rather wild and exotic visual imagination as well as flair for storytelling. By 2001, there was *Amelie* who charmed millions of people. On the other hand, there was the serious World War I epic, *a Very Long Engagement*, which starred Audrey Tautou who had been *Amelie*. Jean-Pierre Jeunet seemed to be something of a character, something of a movie magician. Then, some projects that did not eventuate – and no film for seven years.

The movie buffs breathed a sigh of relief when *Micmacs* appeared and, it seems, Jeunet has lost nothing of his magical qualities.

The story is rather preposterous (and some elements of wish-fulfilment) – but what does that matter when he tells it so entertainingly. Dany Boon (who made a comic impression in *Welcome to the Sticks*) is Basil, whose father was killed by a landmine and who, as an adult, is wounded in the head by a bullet bouncing around his video store. He lives. But, wandering Paris, he comes across a group of eccentrics who work in a cave on all kinds of inventions. They welcome Basil. In the meantime, two of the biggest and wealthiest arms dealers in Paris are rivals in getting contracts – and it is their companies who have been responsible for Basil's situation.

This leads to all kinds of comic situations as Basil and his friends (scientists, misfits, a surveyor who is a whizz at assessing heights, weights and distances, an acrobatic contortionist) eventually wreak mischief and then havoc on the two dealers.

Basil is the innocent abroad who is a nice man who has been victimised – and he and his associates use comic means to achieve a comeuppance.

Plenty of smiles and some laughs. Fascination for the set designs and costumes. And a mischievous delight in following Basil and co in their sometimes entertainingly outlandish escapades.

ONDINE

(Ireland, 2010, d. Neil Jordan)

The story of *Ondine* is the old fairy tale of the mermaid saved by a fisherman.

Neil Jordan has gone back to Ireland, where he made his first feature, *Angel*, almost thirty years ago, and found a way to bring the fairy tale into today's world and give it a wry twist.

This is west coast Ireland, the water, the docks, the village, the hills, a beautiful if sometimes rugged Ireland.

Syracuse (abbreviated to Sircus by the townspeople because of his drinking and being considered something of a clown) has been off the drink for a while but begins to doubt his senses when he finds a drowned woman in his trawling net. She does not die. Rather, she revives and depends on Syracuse while wanting no-one to know she is there. Later, someone will speculate that she is illegal.

Annie, Syracuse's daughter who lives with her mother and her mother's boyfriend, suffers from kidney failure. She loves her father who takes her to her dialysis appointments. And he tries to tell her stories. And one about a woman fished from the sea. Annie, who is very well read and uses a quotidian and sometimes erudite vocabulary, thinks of this woman as a mythical Irish seal creature, a Selkie, but is down-to-earth enough to go and find the woman, who says her name is Ondine.

What follows is a mixture of the faerie and the realistic, with Syracuse still wondering if Ondine is really real. She is soon discovered and has the whole town talking. Syracuse does his talking in the confessional to the local priest (Stephen Rea who makes him a decent and humane priest), not confessing but wanting the confidentiality.

The idyll is too good to last, despite its lyrical moments, and Ondine's past comes to take her back. Quite a few plot developments, some melodramatic, some sad, before some kind of closure can be achieved and, maybe, the fairy tale can come true.

Colin Farrell shows again how versatile an actor he can be and makes Syracuse quite believable. Alison Barry (Annie) had never acted before. Alicja Bachleda (Trade and some Polish and German films) is Ondine and Irish stalwart (especially from TV's *Ballykissangel* days – in which Colin Farrell appeared – is Syracuse's alcoholic wife).

PONYO (PONYO ON THE CLIFF BY THE SEA)

(Japan, 2008, d. Hayao Miyazaki.)

Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea is aimed at very young children – and reaches its target excellently. It does not condescend, tells a plain and simple story with touches of delight, humour, moments of fright. This is a satisfying combination. Because it works at this level, it is also agreeable for adults who enjoy animation films.

Director Hayao Miyazaki has been involved in Japanese animation since the 1980s. However, he had some years of study in the United States, especially with John Lasseter from Pixar Studios. He received the Academy Award for the best animation film of 2003 with Spirited Away. He followed this with the strong animation film for children and adults, Howl's Moving Castle.

The film has a fairytale tone to it, sufficient realistic aspects that children can identify with. Just as Finding Nemo showed that audiences around the world respond to an entertaining film about fish, so this film about a goldfish who wants to become a little girl, is befriended by a little Japanese boy, is threatened by her sorcerer father but rescued by the Queen of the Sea, her mother, has all the ingredients to make an attractive film.

PERCY JACKSON AND THE OLYMPIANS: THE LIGHTNING THIEF

(US, 2010, d. Chris Columbus)

A Clash of the Titans Jr.

Or, perhaps, a Night at the Antiquities Museum and Theme Parks.

Based on a novel (2005 plus four sequels) very popular in the US by writer and historian, Rick Riordan, who told his original story to his son as a bedtime story, this is an enjoyable fantasy for younger audiences. The presupposition that the Gods of Olympus are still around and, in fact, still active in controlling the world, is more than fanciful but, having accepted it, we go with this story of demi-gods, the children of gods and humans – quite a lot of American demi-gods, in fact, but no indication whether the Olympians indulged in visits to any other countries let alone Greece!

Logan Lerman is Percy Jackson who discovers that his father is Poseidon who had come to earth and met Sally, Percy's mother, but then disappeared at his brother, Zeus's orders. Capricious and jealous these deities.

At this juncture, the unknowing Percy is chief suspect for having stolen Zeus's lightning bolt and Zeus (Sean Bean) confronts Poseidon (Kevin McKidd) and lays down a deadline for the bolt to be restored. Well, what happens when the wrath of the gods pursues you, for example in the form of a literature teacher who is in reality a Fury? You get help from Chiron (Pierce Brosnan) who moonlights on earth as a wheelchair bound museum guide (which conceals his horsy parts as he is a centaur) but is in charge of training at Camp Half Blood, the camp for the demi-gods.

If that all seems too far-fetched, then forget Percy Jackson. If not, definitely persevere because there will be a confrontation with Medusa (Uma Thurman plus snake hair), with a huge CGI Hydra and a visit to Hades (Steve Coogan the character, under Los Angeles the location) and a mission to find three pearls that will help Percy to recover his mother (Catherine Keener). His companions on the road are a satyr, Grover, (Brandon Jackson) and the valiant daughter of Athena, Annabeth (Alexandra Daddario). Percy's age has been upped from 12 to 17, so there is attraction between Percy and, of course – and provides a romantic ending which does not end in a clinch or a kiss but in sword fight practice!

This is an outing for younger audiences who have imagination and a sense of adventure. It is directed with zest by Chris Columbus who directed Home Alone, Mrs Doubtfire and the first two Harry Potter films.

POWDER BLUE

(US, 2009, d. Timothy Linh Bui)

Powder blue could be anything but seems to relate to the snow shower in Los Angeles at the climax of this film where Forest Whitaker comes out of a church and finds blue snow falling.

Maybe that is symbolic of how the film works. On the one hand, it is set in the gritty, realistic and sometimes ugly world of Los Angeles. On the other, it is something of a fable about human loneliness, loneliness in a city as densely

populated as Los Angeles where there are mysterious links between people.

Because it is set at Christmas and involves interlinking LA stories, it has been compared with *Crash*. It is certainly in that vein but the stories stretch credibility at times and play with audience emotions.

The principal story is that of Rose Jonny (Jessica Biel) a desperate single mother with a dying son in hospital who works as a stripper/exotic dancer at a club managed by Patrick Swayze (several performances included).

Then there is the story of Jack, out of prison after 25 years, meeting up briefly with Kris Kristofferson, and then on a quest to find his daughter whom he has never seen and who has always longed for him. This is a role that enables Ray Liotta to look sinister as well as more sympathetic than usual.

Eddie Redmayne is Qwerty (an unusual 'type' of name!) who works in a mortuary, looks as if he needs some good meals but lives by himself and finds it difficult to relate.

Forest Whittaker is Charlie, a desperate man who remembers the death of his wife for which he blames himself – and the flashbacks indicate that he is not wrong – who is driving around at night, railing against God for what God has done to him, then offering people money to shoot him. They include Qwerty, a taxi driver and a transsexual, Lexus, with whom he has a final shocking meeting.

Each of the stories has its interest but they are not always gripping, perhaps too contrived for the screenplay. The film was written and directed by Vietnam-born Timothy Linh Bui (brother of Tony Bui who made *Three Seasons* which the brothers wrote) who also directed *Green Dragon*, about refugees from Vietnam, starring Forest Whittaker and Patrick Swayze.

EL SECRETO DE SUS OJOS (THE SECRET OF HIS EYES)

Argentina, 2009, d. Juan Jose Campanella.

The Secret of His Eyes was Argentina's nomination for best foreign language Oscar for 2009. It is a strong genre film.

Ricardo Darin, a prolific actor in Argentinean films, plays a legal man who investigated a murder case twenty-five years earlier, decided to write a book about it, goes back to the case and tries to investigate and discover what really happened. Soledad Villamil is the attorney working with him. (In terms of makeup, Darin's makeup over the twenty-five years marks a strong difference in skin tone and beard while Soledad Villamil remains exactly the same.)

The film recreates a brutal murder, the reaction of the husband of the victim, the tracking down of the alleged killer and his violent reactions. He is also released from jail in an amnesty and moves to work as a thug and gangster. He arranges the assassination of the police inspector's partner.

The film is interesting in its detail about the police investigation, the work of the lawyers. It also has a twist at the end, an alternate presentation of individual, even vigilante, justice.

SOLOMON KANE

(UK, 2009, d. Michael J. Bassett)

In these years of comic book hero films, here is another who was the brainchild of Robert E. Howard, the creator of Conan (and who was played by Vincent D'Onofrio in the biographical film on Howard, *The Whole Wide World*).

The difference with Solomon Kane is that he is located within British history rather than in a fantasy era like Conan. The world is barbaric but it is the Elizabethan and Jacobean world (which, as Shakespeare's plays of this time, was a brutal and violent period).

According to this story, Kane served with Drake and became a mercenary. The film opens with him defeating Moors in Africa and then being confronted by demons and devils. He makes a pledge to redeem himself and become a man of peace. He does this in a puritan way, especially as he travels with a Puritan family on their way to leave for America (Pete Postlethwaite, Alice Krige and Rachel and Peter Hurd-Wood). Somerset and Devon are in turmoil with magicians holding nobles in thrall and bands of thugs, possessed by evil, roam the land and attack the innocent.

Solomon's dilemma is whether he should defend the family when it is attacked and their daughter abducted or break his vow of peace and risk hell. Of course, he does, only to find that he is confronting his brother and a mad and powerful

sorcerer (Jason Flemyng) who has imprisoned his father (Max Von Sydow). Finally, he must fight a gigantic and fierce demon.

This one is quite good of its kind. It has a familiar but reasonable story line. It is always fascinating as it locates itself in British history. There is enough sword and sorcery for the fans. And it has a better than average British cast led by a sturdy and grim hero played by James Purefoy.

VALENTINE'S DAY

(US, 2010, d. Garry Marshall)

It's really a 2 hour plus movie equivalent of valentine's day cards, posters and romantic gifts, roses and chocolates and dinner dates, in fact, the date movie par excellence. It was made for the romantic audience at the multiplex for a light night out. To that extent, it is critic proof.

This is a Los Angeles story, so geared principally for US audience sensibility, more extraverted than introverted. There is a lot of travel in and around LA, especially with the delivery of flowers as the shop at the centre of the film has a busy, busy day. (Even Julia Roberts is seen in a stretch limousine at Rodeo Drive and the chauffeur asks her whether she has ever shopped there and she replies that she did once and it was a big, a huge mistake – that joke is in the final credits!)

So, Julia Roberts, not in so many films in recent years, is one reason to see the film even if for most of it she is sitting next to Bradley Cooper on a long haul flight. It is probably the rather starry cast appearing in quite a number of stories which are gradually interlinked that is the main reason for buying a ticket to see it. And, it depends on whether you like the stars or not.

The film opens with Ashton Kutcher, which seemed something of a bad move, but he is at the centre of the story, proposing to Jessica Alba, helping his best friend, teacher Jennifer Garner, who is in a relationship with Patrick Dempsey (but you know something is wrong). Actually, Ashton Kutcher's character is rather nice as is Jennifer Garner so there is a pleasant happy/sad story there. Oldies will appreciate Shirley MacLaine and Hector Elizondo (who has appeared in every Garry Marshall film for nearly 30 years). There is also Jamie Foxx, Queen Latifah and Jessica Biel, Eric Dane for Grey's Anatomy fans, let alone Patrick Dempsey, Taylor Swift for the music fans appearing with Taylor Lautner for the Twilight fans. For the young adults there is Anne Hathaway with Topher Grace. Something for everyone – even Bryce Robinson, aged about seven who has a crush on... (no spoiling the plot!).

At the beginning, TV executive Kathy Bates orders sports reporter Jamie Foxx to go out and report on Valentine's Day from people in the street – and tells him she wants plenty of 'fluff'. So that is what this film is, plenty of dream fantasy, plenty of romantic fluff.

WINTER IN WARTIME (OORLOGSWINTER)

(Holland, 2008, d. Martin Koolhoven)

2008-2009 saw quite a number of films from continental Europe going back over World War II and Resistance movements: Flame and Citroen from Denmark, Max Manus from Sweden, L'Armee du Crime from France, let alone Tarantino's Inglourious Basterds.

Winter in Winter is based on a novel for younger readers by former politician, Jan Turlouw, in 1963 and considered autobiographical in some parts. It is a wartime memoir, set in January 1945 with Nazi forces still occupying Holland, the Resistance mounting attacks but being betrayed by locals to the military who wreak hostage reprisal deaths.

Michiel is the 14 year old son of the mayor of a small town. His uncle Ben, who is part of the resistance comes to stay. When a pilot crashes in the forest near the town, circumstances involve Michiel in caring for him in his hiding place. Michiel's sister, Erica, a nurse, is brought into the forest to treat the pilot's leg, something which brings out quite some possessiveness and jealousy on the part of Michiel who wants to do something for the resistance on his own.

Everything is seen from the point of view, the limited point of view, of the boy. He wonders whether the father he loves is a collaborator. He entrusts messages and packages to his Uncle Ben to get to England and authorities. He is dismayed when his father is arrested as a hostage. He makes plans to help the soldier get to a neighbouring town but accidents happen and things go wrong, especially when he realises that everything in the town is not as it might seem. Ultimately, Michiel has to make life and death decisions that any 14 year old should not have to make.

By focusing on a small town, one family and one downed British pilot, the film captures the experience of the war in

miniature. It pays great attention to details of life in the snow-covered wintry town that makes the audience feel it has been there. It is interesting to note that over 60 years since the events and almost fifty years since the publication of the novel the story is still worth telling.

THE WOLF MAN

(US, 2010, d. Joe Johnston)

A very satisfying and even elegant horror film for those who prefer classic horror movies rather than the contemporary slasher fads. It is based quite closely on the 1941 film of the same name with Lon Chaney Jr, Claude Rains and Evelyn Ankers, written by Curt Siodmak. The 40s film was set at that time. This version goes back to 1891 and amplifies some aspects of the story, especially in the role of the father of the wolf man, Sir John Talbot.

First of all, the film looks very good indeed. The attention to detail and design to take us back into this Victorian period has been painstaking. Sets, costumes and effects mean that the audience is taken into this world to feel at home in it as well as to feel quite uncomfortable once the eerie proceedings begin. Danny Elfman's atmospheric score is reminiscent of the music themes by Wojciech Kilar for Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* – which also immersed its audience in the 1890s.

One of the best features of the screenplay and direction is that there is no tongue-in-cheek ironic dialogue or send-up of the genre. It is played seriously and straight and with quite some intelligence.

There have been myths of lycanthropy throughout the ages. The film industry since the 1930s has not been slow in providing many a movie of wolf men, including the classic *An American Werewolf in London* (whose make-up artist, Rick Baker, is responsible for the transformations here), *Wolf* with Jack Nicholson and the more recent *Underworld* series. This version, however, as with the recent ironic graphic novel treatment of Sherlock Holmes by Guy Ritchie, delves into the literature of the 19th century and seems, in its settings to draw on *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and many Dickens' stories.

When Lawrence Talbot (Benicio del Toro) is touring in London from the US (we see the Yorick scene from *Hamlet*), he receives a letter from Gwen Conliffe (Emily Blunt), his brother's anxious fiancée. It soon emerges that his brother has been savagely killed and the villagers (out of Hardy and other novelists, perhaps) suspect local gypsies and their carnival bear. But, the full moon soon makes everyone realise that a wolf is on the prowl – and indiscriminately killing its prey.

Lawrence promises Gwen that he will search for his brother's killer. Meantime, he is reconciled with his father, Sir John (Anthony Hopkins).

There is a trend in literature and cinema that human beings can be at the prey of meaningless malevolence (think of *The Birds* or *Jaws*). Lawrence, worthy as he is, is wounded by the wolf and...

An inspector from Scotland Yard (Hugo Weaving), who had headed the Ripper case some years earlier, is sent to investigate Lawrence. His father has Lawrence committed (there is a history of alleged insanity after the violent death of his mother) and an arrogant doctor (Anthony Sher) uses him as a display case for delusions. Unfortunately for him and many others, he times his display at the full moon.

The cast (which also included Geraldine Chaplin as a gypsy) give a sense of elegance and decorum even to the horror. Director Joe Johnston (who made *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*, some time ago as well as *Jurassic Park III*) keeps the tension simmering. In fact, there are two moments when we might jump in our seats even before the title appears (and several after that). *The Wolf Man* is very well done.

SIGNIS FILM REVIEWS APRIL 2010

This month's reviews include two fine, very serious dramas, Shutter Island and Green Zone. There is also The Blind Side for which Sandra Bullock won the Best Actress Oscar. Families will enjoy Nanny McPhee and Hachi. Entertaining action (and 3D) with the best animated film so far this year, How to Train Your Dragon, and with Clash of the Titans. (A pity about Kick Ass.)

BLIND SIDE, The
BOUNTY HUNTER, The
CLASH OF THE TITANS
DOUBLE TAKE
GIRL WITH THE DRAGON TATTOO, The
GREEN ZONE
HACHI: A DOG'S TALE
HAPPY EVER AFTERS
HOUSE OF THE DEVIL
HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON
I LOVE YOU, PHILIP MORRIS
KICK ASS
KREUTZER SONATA, The
MY LAST FIVE GIRLFRIENDS
NANNY McPHEE AND THE BIG BANG
NIGHTWATCHING
REMEMBER ME
SALVAGE
SCOUTING BOOK FOR BOYS, The
SHANK
SONS OF CUBA
SHUTTER ISLAND
SPY NEXT DOOR, The

THE BLIND SIDE

(US, 2009, d. John Lee Hancock)

If you are a fan of American football, you would know what the term, blind side, means in terms of play and tactics. The rest of us don't know and so the title, at first glance, is a mystery. The makers seem to know this and so offer an illustrated explanation as the film opens and we are introduced to the game, the play, a particular instance where a blind side violently ends a player's career and introduces this play into mainstream games. At least, that is what I got out of this prologue. I'm still not sure what the consequences of this episode really were. However, Leigh Anne Tuohy of Memphis, who is doing this explanation, then informs us that it changed her life. This involved her and her family's adoption of a young African American man, Michael Oher – this part everyone in the audience can understand.

So, The Blind Side is a film that features football (with some practices and some match highlights) but is more a film about a family and doing good. They are Christians and their children go to a Christian school, so there is a religious dimension behind what they do.

Michael Oher (Quinton Aaron very effective in the role) is a 17 year old big, very big, youth, usually known as a gentle giant. His mother is an addict. His father tries to get him and one of his brothers into the Christian school via sports ability through the coach. It is not plain sailing as Michael is more than reticent and the staff are not impressed except for a science teacher who spots his attentiveness and finds one of his poems which reveals a great deal about his outlook on life and his sensitivity. At the same time, while he is wandering the streets to the gym where he shelters, Leigh Anne spots him and, determined woman that she is (and that is an understatement!), she has him at her house, the family consenting when asked, and, eventually, as part of the family.

This is heartwarming stuff and presented with touches of humour. Michael begins to thrive. The children, especially the younger boy, bond with Michael and soon regard him as a brother. The father acquiesces in all his wife's energy and plans (though her charity lady friends do not and she tells them 'shame' on their attitudes). There is still an amount of racism in Memphis (as appears also in the football games).

For those who have an inbuilt mechanism against heartwarming, do-gooding movies, maybe the curiosity to see Sandra Bullock's Oscar-winning performance will overcome it. She is strong, forceful and a power for good. (Those who like her compare her to Erin Brockovich, those who don't have called her the Sarah Palin of the South!.) Hard to assess what puts some people and critics off the overt presentation of goodness on screen – perhaps they interpret this as too preachy. However, the film was extraordinarily popular in the US, making more than 200 million dollars in the cinemas.

Singer Tim McGraw plays the genially quiet husband and Kathy Bates turns up with her usual vigour as Miss Sue, the tutor who works with Michael so that he can get satisfactory grades for a sports scholarship. Several of the actual coaches who were trying to recruit Michael appear as themselves trying to recruit him.

This is feel-good Americana.

THE BOUNTY HUNTER

(US, 2010, d. Andy Tennant)

Easy to review. For those who like seeing Jennifer Aniston romantic comedies and/or Gerard Butler romantic comedies and action films, then it is obviously for you. If not, and you find Jennifer Aniston much the same in every film and that Gerard Butler is repeating his scruffy big tough guy, his The Ugly Truth persona, and they do not appeal, it is obviously not for you. All these ingredients seem to irritate and aggravate critics into loud harrumphing and a high intolerance quotient.

Actually, it is some romantic comedy, some screwball comedy, some battle of the sexes plus some police investigation, some road movie and some car chases and shootouts, a recipe that should have something to appeal to most multiplex moviegoers and DVD renters and buyers.

She is an ambitious reporter who is on to a mysterious police alleged suicide. He is a bounty hunter whom we see getting his man (in a 4th July parade where the target is doing an Uncle Sam on stilts!). Oh, and they are divorced. She has skipped out on a court hearing, so she is a fugitive and he promises to bring her in and relishes the prospect. The tagline reads, 'Taking your ex to jail. Best job ever'. Indeed, easier said than done, so lots of antagonism, some moments of possible reconciliation, some dangerous moments and an ending that relies on the law and jail detention!

Undemanding fare, light and entertaining without strain as long as the above Aniston and Butler provisos are taken into

account.

CLASH OF THE TITANS

(UK, 2010, d. Louis Letterier)

Well, there's no doubt you get your money's worth of action and special effects. And for audiences who declare that they 'love a good stoush', there are lots of them. After all, Perseus is the son of Zeus, part human, part god, who vanquishes Hades and his plots, Medusa and the monstrous Kraken.

Thirty years ago or so, there was what seemed a rather highbrow cast for this kind of thing: Laurence Olivier as Zeus, Maggie Smith as Thetis (and Ursula Andress as Aphrodite) and written by scholar and dramatist, Beverly Cross. The creatures were a culmination of wondrous cinema creations by expert, Ray Harryhausen, and his Dynamation. He would probably enjoy all the effects here. And the cast includes some highbrow British actors this time. Liam Neeson is Zeus and Ralph Fiennes enjoys himself thoroughly and articulately (and with superb black and fiery effects) as Hades. This makes for some rhetorical confrontations between the two brothers and with Perseus. Perseus is played by Australian Sam Worthington (sounding as if he had been whisper-dubbed by Jason Statham and wanted to make sure that nobody would think he would do a posh pommy accent). Worthington made a great hit in 2009 with his leads in *Avatar* and stealing the show from Christian Bale in *Terminator: Salvation*. (Probably many a review will make some comparisons with Russell Crowe and *Gladiator*.)

Director Louis Letterier is best known for action, action, action (*Unleashed*, *Incredible Hulk*). He rarely lets up here. He is not known for dramatic encounters and one suspects that some of these (for example the sequences on Olympus, where Danny Huston as Poseidon gets one line) might appear as extras on the DVD edition.

Whatever, the decisions about editing, it is a rattling good show. Perseus grows up with his adoptive fisherman father (Pete Postlethwaite) who assures him he has a destiny. Demigod Io (Gemma Arteton), his protector, reveals that his mission is to save humans (who, in Argos, had decided they did not need the gods any more) from the vengeance of Zeus and Hades (Poseidon not getting a look in). With a cast of thousands in Argos, just like the epics of yesteryear, the film then concentrates on Perseus' mission and the battles. He is accompanied by warrior draco (Danish actor Mads Mikkelsen, *Casino Royale* villain), Solon (Liam Cunningham) as well as some battle-scarred and defeated giant scorpions, with some deathly once-human creatures, with the kind who ordered his mother's and his death, a deformed Jason Flemyng, with Medusa and, finally, riding Pegasus on the bigger, better and beastlier Kraken. Meanwhile, a false prophet bays for the sacrifice of Andromeda, daughter of the king of Argos, who is strung up (feeling some Andromeda strain) to be devoured by the Kraken.

One is tempted to say that this is a crackin' good show, but, no, we are dealing with the deities and myths of Ancient Greece – which will probably receive a new surge of interest because of this entertainingly exciting action show.

THE GIRL WITH THE DRAGON TATTOO

(Sweden, 2009, d. Niels Arden Oplev)

For readers of crime fiction, Stieg Larsson's *Milennium* trilogy is a top series of novels, widely read, not only in Scandinavia, but also worldwide. The three novels have all been filmed. This is the first.

At two and a half hours, this is a long film that does not seem so long. It enables the adaptors of the novel to remain close and to develop strong characterisation and include many dramatic situations.

It is often observed that there is a certain darkness about Scandinavian storytelling – especially when it focuses on crime and family secrets (as is the case with the Wallander novels of Henning Mankell and the Swedish and British television series of his stories). Since the murder being investigated here is from 1966, the family extends back to the 1930s and Nazi sympathies right up to the present where the leading female character has piercings and nose rings. It takes in quite some perspectives of the 20th century.

Each of the three stories has as its centre the investigative journalist, Michael Nyqvist (played effectively and in rather more of a lower-key style by Michael Blomkvist) and a young woman who has been in an institution who is an expert hacker, Lisbeth Salander (Noomi Rapace), who is taciturn but certainly not low-key). The film takes its time in setting up each of the characters – he being found guilty of libelling a wealthy industrialist as an arms dealer but asserting that he had been set up, she being hired by individuals and companies to do background checks and briefings, including on Michael Blomkvist. Then they come together at the request of an elderly patriarch of his family (Sven Bertil-Taube). Or, rather, he is hired and she hacks into his computer and they form a partnership.

The investigative research is presented in some detail, back into newspaper archives, studying and enlarging photos from the 60s, digging out business documents and receipts. Eventually, the mystery is unravelled, but it is a complex path of secrets and lies, vicious murders and sexual violence (rather graphically portrayed), religious and anti-Semitic feeling and a chilling climax to the investigations.

One of the satisfying aspects of the film is that the many strands are brought together or explained – no loose ends. In act, the word that does describe this crime thriller is satisfying.

GREEN ZONE

(US, 2010, d. Paul Greengrass)

Everybody has said it, 'Bourne in Baghdad' – which is no reason to say it again, but also no reason not to say it. Paul Greengrass directed *The Bourne Supremacy* and *The Bourne Ultimatum* as well as *United 93* and Matt Damon was Jason Bourne. In fact, Greengrass uses many of the techniques and the pacy editing of his other films to great effect here. But Matt Damon's Chief Miller is a much more straightforward character even when his Iraqi world becomes a morass of conspiracies.

While based on a book by the Washington Post's correspondent, Rajiv Chandrisakaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City*, and the screenplay is written by Brian Heligoland (*LA Confidential*, *Robin Hood*), this is a fictionalised account of some American activity in Baghdad within weeks of the invasion of Iraq. Chief Miller is in charge of missions searching alleged depots for weapons of mass destruction. He begins to be disillusioned with the quality of the supplied intelligence.

Most of the action takes place over one day and night. A local Iraqi offers information about a meeting of army chiefs. It emerges that the CIA expert (Brendan Gleeson) wants to make contact and is in favour of keeping the army commissioned to avoid or contain the sectarian violence. A Washington official, who planted the story about the weapons with a DC journalist (Amy Ryan), is actively promoting and scheming for democracy at all cost in Iraq and arrogantly and righteously manoeuvres the Washington decision-makers, the CIA and Miller as well as using his military henchman (Jason Isaacs) to interrogate and torture suspects. The official is played effectively by Greg Kinnear who is usually so charming in movies, which makes his manipulation and calculated plotting even more alarming.

There are skirmishes, chases, confrontations, all filmed excitingly. There is also the reality of television and newspaper reporting, press conferences and briefings, official documents, cover-ups and exposes.

And, while the film is very firm on where it stands on the policies of George W. Bush and his advisers (anti), which some have interpreted as propaganda and preaching, it is the questions and issues it raises, primarily about the weapons of mass destruction information and pretext for the invasion, as well as the continued assumption that American style democracy is best for everyone whether they like it or want it or not, which gives the film a power to challenge.

HACHI: A DOG'S TALE

(US, 2009, d. Lasse Hallstrom)

Dog lovers prepare to weep. Not so sure about those who are not attached to dogs and their leaping, licking and nuzzling playfulness. Perhaps, just sit back and enjoy.

Based on a 1987 Japanese film which was, in turn, based on a true story from the 1920s and 1930s (with the real Hachi's photo appearing at the end as in many a biopic), this is a story of how strong a dog's best friend credentials can be.

We see Hachi being sent from Japan to the US and, by a series of accidents that do no credit to postal or transport and delivery services, poor little Hachi finds himself, label-less, except for the luck emblem around his neck, wandering a railway station in smalltown USA. Fortunately for Hachi, music professor Richard Gere runs into him, tries to find his owner but, despite his wife Joan Allen's antipathy towards having a dog in the house, they bond. Having seen dog owners and their bonds with their dogs, I soon realised that Gere's bonding with Hachi was Bonding (with a capital B). Actually, Gere's delight in performing with Hachi is such a strong factor for the film that the story becomes quite credible, especially in the latter part of the film where Hachi for years goes daily to the train station to wait attentively for his master – with a lot of help, love and care (and constant treats) from the hot dog stand owner, the book shop manager and the butchers, husband and wife, both advising Hachi to keep it quiet because the other does not know that they are sneaking out to feed him.

Whether the Akita breed of dogs is more 'human' than most, I don't know, but with the training and the photographic

angles and the direction, you would be sure that Hachi not only knew what was happening but really understood – a range of smiles, eager looks, cute looks, quizzical looks... (And, at times, the camera goes black and white to show Hachi's point of view and sight of what is going on.)

This is a film suitable for all. Adult dog lovers will empathise with Richard Gere and, eventually, Joan Allen. Children will be well focused on the dog. Then the thought came: who is the better example of canine love and loyalty, Greyfriars Bobby or Hachi? Probably, a draw.

HAPPY EVER AFTERS

(Ireland, 2009, d. Stephen Burke)

Lots of Irish films these days – and lots of blarney. This one, as the title suggests, has quite some unhappiness now rather than happy ever afters. It takes place over one day and shows us two weddings. One is a Green Card affair with a marriage to help a migrant from Africa stay in Ireland. The other is a second attempt after one of the parties has spent some time in an institution and in therapy.

At first we think we are seeing the two central characters who are to marry each other. Then we find that there are the two weddings, with all the hesitations, reluctance and pressures to go through with the ceremony. Both parties arrive at the same hotel and some mix-ups, some funny, some corny, and a whole lot of misunderstandings lead to what looks as if it is going to be unhappy every afters.

Happy Go Lucky's Sally Hawkins is the bride for the migrant. Tom Riley is going through the second time around with his marriage.

This is the kind of film that, if you happened to catch it on television or saw it on DVD, might be an amusing but undemanding watch.

HOUSE OF THE DEVIL

(US, 2008, d. Ty West)

The title is very straight forward, so no surprises. This is a small-budget that is more than a bit like those British horror films of the 1970s which surface on television.

We are told instantly that in the 1980s, 70% of Americans believed that there were Satanist groups active in the country while 30% believed that the government was covering up these activities. They don't give a statistic for the complete sceptics!

So, the 1980s is re-created well here and we are back in scream territory, though not for the first half hour or so.

The first third of the film establishes the characters, a young student (Jocelyn Donohue engaging the audience at once) who is moving into a better apartment but needs the money for the rent and accepts a mysterious babysitting job from a well-mannered gentleman who wants her to be in his house with his mother while he and his dominating wife go out. Tom Noonan from *Manhunter* and *The Last Action Hero* and Mary Woronov, a star for Warhol and in exploitation films, are just right as the couple.

The second third has the girl wandering around what is a very large and creepy house. This creates an even creepier atmosphere as well. We, however, have been warned, as the girl's best friend (Greta Gerwig) is suddenly killed.

Before you can say Boris Karloff or Christopher Lee, we are in Satanist territory, curse of the crimson altar and that sort of thing – but this third third goes so fast that we are left breathless and the film is suddenly over. You can't help admiring the film-makers for the courage of their convictions and so the film is a (half?) guilty pleasure for horror fans.

HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON

(US, 2010, d. Chris Sanders and Dean DeBlois)

Alert to all devotees of Hagar the Horrible and his family – and wider audiences beyond. This is a very entertaining film.

While the village of Berk, somewhere up there beyond Scandinavia, is not that of Hagar, it looks as if it could be. And fans of 'Another Dragon, Another Day' will resonate with the plotline and themes of this fine animation movie.

How to... is very good to look at, especially in 3D, the craggy island, the brooding sea, the comic characters and fiery dragons, very good to listen to, with a witty script and fine voice cast, exciting to watch with the swooping dragons (lots and lots of them), the battles and the sheer exhilaration of dragon riding (like the rides in Avatar). The film reminds us of and appeals to the thrillable inner child most adults possess!

Based on books by Cressida Cowell (who surely must have been a Hagar fan when she lived as a child on an isolated island off the Scottish coast and was left to her imagination), the tale shows an isolated Viking community with a long tradition of fighting marauding dragons. They are led by Stoick the Vast (voiced by Gerard Butler with his own Scots accent and making Stoick a fierce warrior but a dismayed father). His son is Hiccup, a scrawny lad who does not want to kill dragons and, fortunately, finds one, Toothless, whom he has wounded – and, you know, children bond with pets and...

There is a gallery of eccentric characters, of course, Gobber, the peg-leg blacksmith and trainer, (Craig Ferguson, Scots accent too). Speaking of accents, it is very strange that the adults have Scots brogues and the next generation's accents are unremittingly American (Jay Baruchel as Hiccup, America Ferrera as the tough but tender Astrid)!

On the one hand, there is the rollicking life of the warrior Vikings – and, even though the dragons steal their bewildered sheep, they do not look as if they have ever fasted in their lives. But, Vikings like Hagar and Stoick should be bulky. On the other, there is the underlying theme that fighting gets you only so far and perpetuates prejudice. When you make friends with your dragon, harmony is possible and creativity as well. This means that, despite the oomph of the battle sequences, this is a peace-is-best story. It moves apace, with some welcome quiet and reflective moments. It is amusing. And it should appeal to children of all ages (even if we look like adults!).

I LOVE YOU, PHILLIP MORRIS

(US, 2009, d. Glen Ficarra and John Requa)

Had the King of Siam seen this film, he might have said, 'A puzzlement'. Some of it is played for laughs. Some of it is serious. It is the story of a con man. It is a love story.

What makes it different from the usual movie is that the two central characters are gay men.

The screenplay has no hesitation in presenting its characters, its situations, its crises, its sensibilities, its language, as gay. Most audiences are not used to spending this amount of time in the company of gay men and being asked to identify with them, share their experiences and be accepting. They may feel the atmosphere makes them uncomfortable (and remind us all about explicit and implicit homophobia in society). In fact, much of the film's budget came from Europe, rather than the United States, which is more accustomed to telling stories of sexual orientation.

The main star is an advantage as well as a difficulty. It is Jim Carrey extending his range, trying for a different performance and venturing into a role and a story that might test his fans' loyalties. When he is performing very seriously, he makes an impression, helping us to understand this eccentric man. The difficulty is that often enough, he suddenly makes a face, shows an expression or reacts in the way that he did in some of his wilder comedies, reminding us that this character, Steven Russell, is Jim Carrey on screen. Phillip Morris is played more subtly by Ewan McGregor, a gentle man who has been put down in life and comes to depend in every way on Steven Russell.

Steven Russell narrates his story, his childhood, his adoption, his family and religious life, his police work. After a car accident, he decides to come out – and how! Flamboyant, extravagant, clubbing, buying without limits, a boyfriend – and the realisation that he needed money, so he indulges in a number of frauds. And then to jail where he falls at first sight for Phillip Morris.

Lots of tricks and frauds in prison, then they are out and living the high (highest) life with a top job in a finance firm. It can't last – and there is a final elaborate con which we do not anticipate.

The film is based on a book by Steven McVikar who interviewed Russell in prison where he is serving a life sentence (made during the time of George W. Bush as Governor of Texas) under the strictest supervision. Phillip Morris advised on the film and has a cameo.

KICK ASS

(UK, 2010, d. Matthew Vaughn)

The title says it all: content, style and tone.

What might have been quite an amusing parody of the hero graphic novels, comics and superhero movies (and there are some amusing moments) has become something of a Sin City (which is referred to in the screenplay) for a younger audience. Sin City was clever but had a nasty and sometimes brutal atmosphere. Kick Ass could be far cleverer if it didn't rely so much on sending up the clichés while indulging them at the same time. This makes it something of a hotch-potch and the writing and the performances (generally very good) compound this.

There are several strands of story as it opens. Dave and his slacker friends are the targets of muggers and bullies and Dave dreams of overcoming them as a superhero. So far, so good and zany, especially when he buys a kind of scuba suit on-line and uses it as a costume. British Aaron Johnson (John Lennon in *Nowhere Boy*) seems effortlessly American high school student as Dave who sells himself on line as a kind of helper/vigilante and calls himself Kick Ass. (He also has hormonal and sex fantasy problems which are given undue attention.)

Meanwhile, the rich boy of the class (Christopher Mintz-Plasse, *Superbad*, *Role Models*) is revealed as having a nefarious gangster, drug-dealing father who is unscrupulously violent. The action soon becomes like father, like son as the son tries to trap Kick Ass whom his father blames for most of his troubles, and sets himself up as a helper hero, Red Mist. The father is played by Mark Strong, so good in so many films and showing what it is really like to act. (He has icious language problems – amongst others.)

Meanwhile again, retired policeman, Damon Macready, coaches his precocious 11 year old daughter, Mindy, in the details of weaponry, even helping her by firing at her bullet proof vest so that she will be ready for the real thing. This too is amusing with Nicolas Cage giving a nicely judged performance as the eccentric father who dotes on his daughter. The daughter is played by Chloe Moretz who must be precocious in herself to have given such a performance. She has become the subject of some media controversy as to whether it was appropriate for a young girl to take on such a role – and say the swearing things she (often) does. They become true superheroes, Hit Girl and Big Daddy and to say they have vigilante destructive power is an understatement.

Then it all comes together for the hotch-potch, the funny bits, the satiric bits, the violent bits (no mercy and no prisoners taken), the foul-mouthed bits, some sexy bits. And, of course, the shoot-out ending, complete with bazooka, is slam-bang and multi-bang – for all and sundry in New York City to watch on TV (which decides it's too much for viewers, so then everybody rushes to the internet).

Too much of the comedy and the language is geared to leering laughter or disbelieving chortling. Of course, it is not meant to be taken seriously. Had the makers taken their comic intentions more seriously, it could have been a better and funnier movie.

KREUTZER SONATA, The

(US, 2008, d. Bernard Rose.)

The Kreutzer Sonata is Beethoven. The story is Tolstoy. Tolstoy listened to a performance of the Sonata in 1888 and wrote a story which was banned for some years in Russia. This updated version does not look like or sound like what we might imagine Tolstoy's writing to be like. It is the work of writer-director, Bernard Rose, who collaborated with actor, Danny Huston, on another Tolstoy story, *The Death of Ivan Illych*, which became the film, *Ivan xtc*. The Kreutzer Sonata is to be followed by a third updating of a Tolstoy story, *Boxing Day*, again with Danny Huston.

Beethoven's Sonata is played throughout the film along with other classical pieces (despite the central character, Edgar, as he listens to his wife accompanying a violinist playing the Sonata, stating that he loathes classical music – you can't dance to it, you can't hum a tune) offering a 19th century musical imagination to a 21st century cinema imagination of a wealthy playboy type, who also runs a charitable foundation with his sister, and his sexual infatuation with the pianist who becomes his wife and then his growing paranoid suspicions of her and of the violinist.

This is small-budget, digital film-making, taking advantage of the possibilities of getting the camera close to the cast and insinuating itself and the audience point of view into the action, much of it quite personally intimate. Rose also edited the film.

Danny Huston is often a powerful screen presence and he is here, in the film in almost every scene. He is not an admirable person in any way, initially seductive, giving only half his attention to the work of his charity and the meetings with its representative's discussion of education for disadvantaged children in Africa, then settling down to

marriage and children – but then obsessive and ultimately violent.

Elizabeth Rohm plays his wife and there is a brief, very effective and alive sequence when Edgar goes to visit his sister, played by Danny Huston's own sister, Anjelica.

Whether the musical imagination corresponds to the narrative, the images and the passion, is certainly open for discussion – and depending on music appreciation and interpretation. Whether this update corresponds well to Tolstoy's story is yet another discussion. But, as a brief picture of contemporary passion, family life and philanthropy it is quite effective for a discriminating audience.

MY LAST FIVE GIRLFRIENDS

(UK, 2009, d. Julian Kemp)

A brief romantic comedy – or, perhaps, an anti-romantic comedy, British style.

Duncan is lovelorn and writes a suicide note to his last five girlfriends and is seen to proceed to do the deed. Then the film rewinds and we go through five short stories, Duncan and his love for the girlfriends. Brendan Patricks is engaging enough to persuade us that the girls could be interested in him and that we should be sympathetic towards him as each episode ends – though he really is a doofus, or one of those words. The women who portray these girlfriends do quite a good job, attractive, with their own eccentricities but unable to make a go of it with Duncan.

Apart from the good performances and some humorous and some witty dialogue, it is the inventiveness of the director's imagination which makes lots and lots of visual jokes in different filming styles, a blend of realism and Duncan's fantasies, that makes the film better than the average romcom.

There is a joke at the end with the credits and Duncan's suicide attempt and the reminder that the romantic quest is a never-ending story.

NANNY McPHEE AND THE BIG BANG

(UK, 2010, d. Susanna White)

Why are screen presentations of nannies and governesses so intriguing, a Mary Poppins syndrome, perhaps. Governesses seem to be nannies with an education/academic extension to their care and nurturing. Deborah Kerr was a governess at least three times, *The King and I*, *The Innocents* (based on Henry James' *Turn of the Screw* with the sinister side of nannies) and *The Chalk Garden*. Julie Andrews was also Maria Von Trapp. And there have been assorted nannies (especially in collages of interviews where the least likely and most unattractive candidates were rejected by parents or, sometimes especially, by mischievous children) from Miss Clavel and Madeline to the probably NFP befuddlement of Margaret Rutherford's Miss Prism in the 1952, *The Importance of Being Earnest* with her wayward handbag.

And, lately, there has been Nanny McPhee - twice.

Nanny McPhee is the brainchild of Emma Thompson who wrote both screenplays, *Nanny McPhee* (2005) and *Nanny McPhee and the Big Bang* (2010). She based her screenplays on those of Christianna Brand and her Matilda stories. Is Nanny McPhee the nanny type – or, at least, the British nanny type? And, of course, what is the British nanny type?

Mary Poppins is very precise in her language and articulation, no wasted words (and no wasted syllables in supercalifragilisticexpialidocious), objective at all times, clarifying her use of terms, focused on the here and now (look how she tidies a room with magical Sensing powers), and getting things done in swift spick and span manner. She manages. And, even the lyrics of her songs have this direct quality: 'A spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down in the most delightful way; a robin feathering its nest has very little time to rest while gathering its bits of twine and twig...' No frills lyrics. (Compare Julie Andrews Austrian nanny in *The Sound of Music*, and the cuddly emotional melodies and lyrics of *My Favourite Things*.)

The other British movie governess is Anna Leonowens who goes to Siam: Irene Dunne in *Anna and the King of Siam* (1946), Deborah Kerr in *The King and I* (1956), Miranda Richardson in the animated *King and I* (1999) and Jodie Foster in *Anna and the King* (1999). These are determined women who know what they want, are not afraid to demand it of the recalcitrant king, and get their way. Though, it must be said, that the lyrics of many of the songs from *The King and I* show Anna veering towards her feeling function – take *Getting to Know You* and all the liking going on and 'doing it my way but nicely' and the Siamese children oohing and ahhhing in response.

Nanny McPhee certainly follows these precedents. She is articulate and clear, quietly spoken but none the less determined. Discipline and the learning of moral lessons are her forte – and she does have the advantage, like Mary Poppins, of being able to invoke magical help when necessary. She lists the lessons by number and wears the medals to prove her expertise. By and large, she brooks no nonsense from children or adults (or from her crow whose name is Edelweis!). She comes when children 'don't want her but need her' and departs when children 'don't need her but want her'. And, it is made clear that she is not one for any emotional show and dislikes goodbyes. However, like the children in Mary Poppins who are made to say, 'isn't she wonderful', when she has been ticking them off and urging them to work and to tidiness, so Nanny McPhee's former charges remain very loyal to her.

One endearing symbol with Nanny McPhee is her face, warts, buck tooth and all. When she appears (in both films), she looks like a dignified crone and scares the children. However, after each lesson has been learned by the children (not to fight, to share, to be brave...), a disfigurement disappears from her face and she finally emerges, black dress, black bonnet and all as the Emma Thompson we know and love.

The film is set during World War II with children in the country and city boys and girls sent to the farms for safety and avoiding the bombs and any big bang. The setting is rather picture-book quaint, idealising those war days – it is the same kind of situation as for the children who venture into the wardrobe to Narnia. But, rural England is more literally down-to-earth (and in the opening with huge emphasis even with Dame Maggie Smith sitting on a large cowpat because she thinks it a cushion and more comfortable!) and is explicitly 'poo-oriented' for child laughs from both children and adults. But, there are still good formative lessons to be learnt. For anyone wondering about the Big Bang itself, a bomb does fall in the family barley crop because a sneezing German pilot overhead jerks his face on to the bomb lever – but the bang (you had better see it for yourself) will probably make the Guinness Book of Records as the largest break-wind explosion in cinema history and as the most constructive use of such a function on screen!!

Nanny McPhee is in the business of coming to the help of harassed parents (here Maggie Gyllenhaal sporting a fine British accent and saying 'jolly well...' and things like that) and teaching children not only to behave but have good motivation for their behaviour (otherwise they could end up with the stiffest upper lip and concealed emotions and awful formality with their children as displayed by Ralph Fiennes as a War Office official, a repressed type).

The British nannies get on with a job well done!

NIGHT WATCHING

(Holland, 2007, d. Peter Greenaway)

Night Watching is Peter Greenaway's interpretation of the career of Rembrandt, focusing on his painting of the Night Watch.

Greenaway, with his artistic and architectural background, came to prominence in the 1980s with *The Draughtsman's Contract*. His films were something of an experience and not necessarily a narrative kind of storytelling. The visuals were important, hidden messages in the visuals, particular codes - this was true of *The Draughtsman's Contract*, and, especially, of his interpretation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, with John Gielgud and *The Pillow Book*.

Having made a name for himself with such films as *The Cook*, *The Thief*, *His Wife and her Lover* and *The Baby of Macon*, he ventured into more explicit explorations of human nature and sexuality. This was true of *The Pillow Book* as well as *Eight and a Half Women*. Greenaway then made the esoteric series of films, the *Tulse Luper Suitcases*. These were more art house installation films than features. So, it is something of a surprise to see him returning to his old way of making films as well as presenting a narrative.

The film is a visual delight. Many of the scenes are tableaux, imitating the style of Rembrandt's paintings. Many of the sequences are done on sound stages in a stylised way with only a few outdoors.

What is also of interest is Martin Freeman's impersonation of Rembrandt. Martin Freeman is better known as a comedian (*The Office*, *A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*) but he brings this comic talent as well as seriousness to the portrayal of the artist. One gets an impression of eccentricity from the artist, his poor background, his clashes with the burghers of Amsterdam, his shrewdness in getting funds. It also shows his love for his wife, Saskia, and their son, Titus. He is distraught by her death, taking up with the widow Geertje and then finally falling in love with Hendricka, the maid in the house.

It is difficult to know how much truth there is in Greenaway's interpretation. He may be following the leads of his earlier films with secret codes - and the importance of the Da Vinci Code in interpreting the Last Supper and the Mona Lisa.

The film has a lot to say about Dutch society at the time, power, greed, intrigue. The interpretation of the painting is that it is Rembrandt not only painting the significant characters in the story but also giving clues that it is a plot, a murder, as well as a condemnation of the moral values and stances of particular people in the painting. When it is finally exhibited, the fathers of

the city take a dim view - but decide that it should hang and that ultimately Rembrandt would destroy his career. The film is graphic in its portrayals of sexuality, in its more contemporary earthy language. However, it is another experience as well as some insight into the life and career of Rembrandt, especially seen in his times.

REMEMBER ME

(US, 2010, d. Allen Coulter)

One of the reasons for making Remember Me is to provide a star opportunity to display Robert Pattinson on screen after his extraordinary success in the Twilight films. He had been in the Harry Potter films and appeared as Salvador Dali in Little Ashes. But, as Edward the gentle and chaste vampire, he had the sixteen and unders around the world swooning – and buying tickets (with two more Twilight books to be filmed).

He is better in this one than in the Twilight films.

This is a sad story which begins with a startling murder in the New York subway and ends with September 11th, 2001. 9/11 is certainly seared into the American consciousness and its remembrance is very emotional.

Robert Pattinson plays Tyler, aged 21, the disaffected son of a broken family, still grieving the suicide of his elder brothers to whom he constantly writes in his journal, a therapy for his sadness as well as an opportunity to try to understand all that happens to him. He is at college and shares shambles-looking digs with his loud-mouthed friend, Aidan (Tate Harrington). He loves his mother (Lena Olin) who has happily re-married and his 11 year old sister, Caroline, a lively young girl, bullied at school, but a talented budding artist (Ruby Jerins).

The principal difficulty is Tyler's father whom we first see sitting aloof with and from the rest of the family after a visit to the dead brother's grave. Charles Hawkins is the consummately business-oriented and obsessed wheeler dealer on Wall St who has no ability to demonstrate any deeper feelings who clashes with his son and seems to ignore his daughter. This is one of Pierce Brosnan's most telling performances.

In the prologue to the film, we have seen a young girl and her policeman father (Chris Cooper). She (Emilie de Ravin) has grown up and attends the same college, and some of the same courses as Tyler. In the meantime, Tyler and Aidan have got into trouble intervening to help in a street brawl and are arrested by the same policemen who hits Tyler brutally.

Here are the ingredients for a romantic story, a potentially tragic story, a story with tangled relationships of love, of family ties and tensions, of confrontations. And a sad 9/11 ending.

SALVAGE

(UK, 2008, d. Lawrence Gough)

If you have seen George A Romero's The Crazies (1973) and/or the 2010 effective remake with Timothy Olyphant and Radha Mitchell, the plot of Salvage will seem quite familiar: a mysterious virus, military intervention, citizens at peril.

The difference here is that the setting is around Liverpool, with suburban housing estates and beaches, a British version of being frantic rather than frantic American franticism, and the action after the opening car ride in the bright light of Christmas Eve, is confined to the interiors or houses, a bit on the streets outside and the woods behind the houses. This makes for claustrophobic terror rather than horror, although there are several gruesome deaths and mutilations.

This is above average terror. The film is brief, sets up the personal side of the story as a separated father drops his 14 year old daughter, she very unwilling, to stay with her mother. They clash, but there is little time for anything to be done towards reconciliation because the terror piles on almost at once. We have seen a puzzling scene where a neighbour goes berserk pursuing a paper boy – fatally - but during the film we hear what has happened with a container that has landed on a beach and the army have been trying to contain the contamination (without scruple in killing risky civilians).

The burden of the dramatic terror falls on Neve McIntosh as the mother. A strong personality, she is persuasive as the frightened woman, the mother desperately searching for her daughter, willing to go into risky situations. Audiences can identify with her – reinforced during a welcome lull in the terror when she explains to the man with whom she is

trapped what she has done and why she has alienated her daughter.

The man, as the screenplay shrewdly and alarmingly suggests, immediately thinks that this must be a terrorist attack and breaks into anti-Muslim rants, even when the woman explains that the man who went berserk next door is not Muslim but a Hindu doctor. Later, a wounded guard maintains the secrecy of what has happened and feeds information to the man that it is an Al Qaeda attack.

While it is not original in plot, it is effective in performances and in maintaining a sense of terror that is local and suburban enough to be credible – and alarming.

THE SCOUTING BOOK FOR BOYS

(UK, 2009, d. Tom Harper)

A tantalising title – and audiences will need to be attentive to notice the copy of the book in the cave sequence in the middle of the film. The setting is the Norfolk coast, a trailer park, the cliffs and the beaches – filmed very attractively and, at first, very sunnily. And we are immediately introduced to two young teenagers, David and Emily, sharing their friendship and their joy in each other's company, part frolicky, part mischievous. The two young stars are naturals and we believe that they are their characters. Holiday Grainger is Emily and Thomas Turgoose (from Shane Meadows' *This is England* and *Somers Town*) is David. They live in trailers, David with his neglectful pub entertainer father and Emily with her slatternly mother (Susan Lynch). Emily has also taken a shine to the young security man (Rafe Spall).

Emily clashes with her mother and runs away with David's help and connivance. As things begin to become more serious, the police (with Steven Mackintosh imagining he is a big fish officer in this small pond) organising searches.

Now we wonder where this is all leading. Emily is very much in control of the situation, full of bravado but also naïve, but she also depends on David. He is a boy with something of a hang-dog character (and naïve puppy love) whose generally unsmiling face is somewhere between dour and melancholic.

While the film effectively creates the atmosphere of life within this rather enclosed community, it leads us into darker areas, especially for David and the consequences of his love for and devotion to Emily.

Well-crafted and with interestingly developed characters, it is an ultimately disturbing experience.

SHANK

(UK, 2010, d. Mo Ali)

Shank, on the London streets and with the gangs, means a knife cut. The London streets shown here are five years ahead, in 2015. And a dismal and dingy place London is. Food is scarce and gangs look for food supplies and loot them and use them for power and control.

The avowed intention of the film-makers is to show the ugliness of street violence and to take a stand against it. One of the difficulties of this kind of film is how much violence to portray to make the anti-violence stance. And there is some violence here – although it shows it as vicious and repugnant.

It is not as if this kind of story has not been told before, but each generation is entitled to offer their interpretation. So, while there is nothing new apart from the future setting and the food issue, the film is made with quite some professional craft. It looks good, is well acted. It is 2010 contribution to the arguments about weapons, gangs and violence in the UK, especially in London.

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SHUTTER ISLAND

(US, 2010. d. Martin Scorsese)

For four decades, Martin Scorsese has been directing strong, often grim, intense films from Mean Streets and Taxi Driver in the 1970s to his Oscar-winning The Departed in 2006. Here is another film in that vein – and very intense.

Recently, two films based on novels by Boston-based Dennis Lehane have been acclaimed: Clint Eastwood's Mystic River and, perhaps unanticipated, Ben Affleck's Gone Baby Gone. They were crime and police stories, very effectively told. His Shutter Island is rather different. It is set in the 1950s, memories of World War II still powerful, and for the central character here, flashbacks to his experiences at the liberation of Dachau, the victims, the commandant and the guards. It is also a time of transition in the understanding of treatment for mental patients and the criminally insane. The chief psychiatrist on Shutter Island, the isolated rock mass in Boston harbour which serves as the principal US institution for the criminally insane, explains that there had been barbaric treatments for beating out the behaviour and attitudes by punishment; then techniques for brain surgery like lobotomy followed as well as the developments of tranquilising medication; at this stage of the 1940s and 1950s (Freud died in 1939) psychiatrists were proposing talk, understanding and therapy.

The action of the film takes place over a few days as two US marshalls, Leonardo di Caprio and Mark Ruffalo, arrive on the ferry to investigate the disappearance of an inmate. As with some of the Gothic movies of the 1940s and 1950s (Dark Corner, The Snake Pit), the buildings can be intimidating (described as being a fort built during the Civil War), the corridors frightening and the behaviour of doctors and orderlies mystifying.

The film offers a lot of detail as the two marshalls conduct interviews, search the grounds and the buildings, much of it in a raging storm accompanied by a melange of music from a range of composers, from pounding chords, cacophonous tones and classics like Mahler. The dialogue is stimulating, offering many ideas about mental illness and its treatment.

Leonardo di Caprio, in his fourth film with Scorsese, looks older and bulkier and gives a thoughtful performance. Others in the cast include Ben Kingsley and Max von Sydow as the doctors and some distinctive performances by Michelle Williams as di Caprio's wife, Emily Mortimer as an inmate, Patricia Clarkson as a doctor, Jackie Earle Haley as a high security patient.

The screenplay demands constant attention right up to the last image on screen and the dilemma in the final question posed by di Caprio.

SONS OF CUBA

(UK, 2009, d. Andrew Lang)

This interesting and effective documentary tells a story as well as offering insight into Cuba and some glimpses of the country.

The subject is boxing, something of which Cubans have been very proud in recent decades, thinking Olympic gold. As in other socialist regimes, like Mao's China (see Bruce Beresford's Mao's Last Dancer), young children are selected to leave their families and enrol in a specialist school with a competitive ethos and a disciplinary way of life. In Cuba, it is under 12 year olds in each of the provinces. Sons of Cuba follows the boys in the Havana school and culminates in the championships.

One of the things that strikes the viewer is how hard the regime is on the boys, up at 4.00 am, then rigorous exercises, followed by school and back to the exercises by 4.00pm. The boys are not only lean, some of them look a touch emaciated and talk about being hungry. Their limit is 34 kilos – after that, running to get the weight off. The other striking factor is the amount of weeping during the film – the hard regime does not preclude the tears of hungry young boys, boys who have lost their bouts and are dismayed – and coaches who also weep with disappointment as well as with joy. An emotional group of people.

Several boys are singled out for more concentrated attention, one who becomes the champion, whose father was a boxer

and did not expect so much of his son – and he too weeps as does the boy's mother.

Throughout the film we see the die hard attitude inculcated into the children about Fidel, the Revolution and the ongoing cult of Castro. But, the film was made during the period of Castro's 80th birthday, his illness and his retirement from the presidency, something which struck hard on the ordinary people's sense of loyalty and being used to Castro being there.

There are visual glimpses of the country, poor but not impoverished, partly run-down (though there is a great deal of rebuilding and historic reconstruction going on), partly dilapidated. But, from this portrayal of the people, lots of Caribbean spirit.

THE SPY NEXT DOOR

(US, 2020, d. Brian Levant)

Knock, knock, who's there?

Irish stew.

Irish stew who?

Irish stew you in the name of the law.

Actually, this knock, knock riddle is told twice during the film – and indicates some of the style of humour in this variation on Spy Kids in Jackie Chan land.

There is one thing about Jackie Chan. He is always cheerful. There are actually many things, of course, about Jackie Chan who has been featuring in action films since the 1970s. He is a most agile acrobat which serves him well in the ingeniously choreographed fight scenes and the stunts he does himself. Part martial arts, part balletic moves, part slapstick, his films have been popular and often endearing: the Rush Hour films, Shanghai Noon, Shanghai Knights...

Chan has said that he had to be far more careful than usual in this one because he was working with children and he had to be sure of their safety. He also wanted to have a PG film that would be acceptable to the widest audience. This means that a lot of the fights are in rooms in houses, in a warehouse and in a Chinese restaurant and a lot of furniture and kitchen implements find themselves enlisted to fight the villains (the Russians again!) who are more comic cyphers than international terrorists despite the virus threatening formula they are searching for. They all have those pseudo-Eastern European accents that they display with great gusto.

And the plot? Chinese agent, Bob Ho (Chan), seconded to the CIA and working in Albuquerque, New Mexico, which does not seem to be the most dangerous part of the US, lives a quiet suburban life, replete with wearing spectacles to make him seem very serious. He has fallen in love with the mother next door (Amber Valetta) who has three Hollywood-obnoxious and outspoken children. The oldest is beginning teenage moodiness. The boy is more than a touch arrogant. The littlest is, well, five and more cutesy than nasty. Of course, they are going to warm to Bob Ho though they despise him as a loser and try to humiliate him and drive him away from their mother.

When he is unmasked as a genial spy, it gives Jackie Chan to go full steam in action sequences – and, for the kids (on screen and in the audience), they get the opportunity to share many action credits with Jackie. Needless to say, mother is shocked and wants to give Jackie his marching orders. But... George Lopez is the CIA boss and Billy Ray Cyrus, without Miley, is his assistant.

This is Saturday matinee material that most young kids will enjoy and is a basic entertainment for tolerant adults accompanying the kids.

SIGNIS REVIEW, MAY 2010

There are some fine non-English language films in this group: City of Life and Death, Revanche and A Room and a Half.

Popular films include: Ghost, The Joneses and Iron Man 2.

For controversy, especially for UK satire on racial prejudice and suicide bombers, there is The Infidel and there is Four Lions.

BACKUP PLAN, The
BOOGIE WOOGIE
CEMETERY JUNCTION
CENTURION
CHERRYBOMB
CITY OF LIFE AND DEATH
CRYING WITH LAUGHTER
DATE NIGHT
DEAR JOHN
DISAPPEARANCE OF ALICE CREED, The
DOGTOTH
DONNE-MOI LE MAIN (GIVE ME YOUR HAND)
FOUR LIONS
FURRY VENGEANCE
GHOST (GHOSTWRITER)
I KNOW YOU KNOW
INFIDEL, The
IO SONO L'AMORE
IRON MAN 2
IT'S A WONDERFUL AFTERLIFE
JONESES, The
LAST SONG, The
MARKET, The, A TALE OF TRADE (BAR TICARET MASALI)
NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET, A
PSYCH 9
REPO MEN
REVANCHE
ROOM AND A HALF, A
SHELTER
WHIP IT

For AGORA and THE CALLING, see SIGNIS Statements on each film, attached. (Statement on LOURDES and NO GREATER LOVE previously sent.)

THE BACKUP PLAN

(US, 2010, d. Alan Poul)

This may be one of the screenplays that Jennifer Aniston turned down. And she would have been more effective in it than Jennifer Lopez – though Jennifer Lopez was pregnant with and gave birth to twins in real life.

The first premiss of films like this remind us of what a topsy turvy world we live in, especially in the personal morality areas. Zoe (Lopez) desperately wants to have children, the clock is ticking, she doesn't think any of her men friends would make good fathers, so in a consumerist culture, she goes out and buys some sperm and has herself inseminated. She also joins a support group for single mothers. (The advertising makes the point about falling in love, getting married, having a baby but not in that order.)

Having made this decision and relying on support group rather than father or father-figure, she goes and falls in love with a handsome stranger (Alex O'Loughlin) who got in one side of the cab she hailed as she got in the other. Fate brings them together again and the film turns into a romantic comedy, punctuated by a lot of detail of pregnancy, physical health and and bodily functions. After seeming to fall out with her group, after being wary about trusting Stan, after being urged on by her nana (an energetic senior about to be married to a 93 year old in the home – played by Linda Lavin and Tom Bosley), after getting a lot of pep talks, Zoe turns the film into a pro baby, pro love, pro marriage comedy.

BOOGIE WOOGIE

(UK, 2010, d. Duncan Ward)

A film about the filthy rich, or the filthy and rich. These are not people that most people would like to mix with (though many are pleased to read about them in gossip columns). This is a film about the contemporary art world in London, written by an artist and novelist who also lived in New York, held exhibitions and knows this cutthroat (and knife in the back) world, Danny Moynihan.

The title refers to a painting by Mondrian. There is a certain curiosity element for audiences to see how this other small percentage live. The screenplay aims for comedy and satire but the antics of artists, dealers and collectors are not particularly funny, especially when they spend a lot of their time and energy, emotional, professional and business double-dealings. There are some humorous moments but more moments that are likely to provoke distaste.

The main advantage the film has is its unusual cast, quite a number of movie high flyers. Most of them give performances on the edge – and sometimes over the top. Danny Huston is a screen presence who can command attention. He does here as an avaricious, principle-less, shrewd art dealer. Skellan Skarsgaard is also effective as a smug and wealthy art connoisseur and collector, with Gillian Anderson as his wife. The owners of the Mondrian, in need of income and eager to sell, are played by Christopher Lee and Joanna Lumley, with Simon McBurney as their somewhat sinister butler and adviser. Americans Heather Graham and Amanda Seyfried turn up in London as do Alan Cumming and Jaime Winstone (sounding very much like her father, Ray) as a rather warped and ambitious video installation 'artist'.

Had these roles been taken by less known or unknown actors, the film might have made much less impact.

CEMETERY JUNCTION

(UK, 2010, d. Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant)

Ricky Gervais and his comic style are an acquired taste – and many audiences of the television programs, *The Office* (UK version) and *Extras*, have acquired it. He usually does obnoxious deadpan (the Museum director in the *Night at the Museum* films) but did dentist-victim-ghost nicely in *Ghost Town*. He tried more variety in *The Invention of Lying*. While he does have a role in *Cemetery Junction*, he and writing partner, Stephen Merchant, have something more ambitious in mind here. It is a visit to the working class Britain of the 1970s, the narrow outlooks of populations stuck in towns where their families have always been, which expresses itself in bigoted and racist comments as well as disbelief that anybody in the family would want to get out of there.

It is a film of episodes more than a developing narrative, although the central young characters do move emotionally and decisively in their lives.

Freddy (Christian Cooke) has an interview for a job in an insurance company, kow-towing to the manager and his on-the-rise salesman. While he gets the job, he has to put up with the taunts of his friends, their antics and family criticism (Gervais plays his factory-working dad). Bruce (Tom Hughes) works at the factory and goes home to his alcoholic father whose wife left them long since. He despises his father, suppresses his rage until he lashes out violently. Snork is the local dork with self-designed inane tatoos on back and front and who puts his foot in it as soon as he opens his mouth. Local dead-endism looms for Bruce and Snork.

When the film opens, and we either laugh at the lads or are irritated by them, it may seem that the film is not going to go too far either. But, it grows on you and the range of characters are well observed and written.

This is definitely the case with the adults. Ralph Fiennes (after chewing the scenery and more as Hades in *Clash of the Titans* and then doing the most impassive, stiff upper lip military office in *Nanny McPhee* and the *Big Bang*) is excellent as the self-absorbed, self-made chauvinist insurance manager who has imposed on his wife, Emily Watson also excellent, and dominated and ignored her into submission. Matthew Goode is persuasively and unscrupulously go-getting, engaged to the boss's vivacious daughter, Julie, who could be in danger of eventually becoming a replica of her mother. However, when she meets up with Freddy, her friend from school days, she is challenged, as are Bruce and

Snork, to leave the drab life and future in Cemetery Junction.

The film is not presented as exact realism. The characters are just that bit caricatured, the situations heightened. However, with the sharp dialogue (particularly from a shrewish, obviously bigoted Anne Reid as Freddy's grandmother) and some emotional interactions, especially from the policeman who defends Bruce's father and tries to knock some sense into Bruce, there is a sufficient sense of realism below the surface.

Gervais fans should not be expecting a funny comedy but, rather, a wry serious comedy with some funny moments.

CENTURION

(UK, 2010, d. Neil Marshall)

The early 2nd century AD clash between the Roman imperial legions and the Picts on the British frontier of the empire was harsh and violent. Centurion is not afraid to show either the harshness or the violence (often quite graphically, especially a lot of throat-slitting). There is an extraordinary harshness in the filming of the craggy mountain landscapes, a terrain for survival for a group of Roman soldiers.

Writer-director Neil Marshall offers a credit of thanks to director Walter Hill and Greek historian, Xenophon (for Xenophon). Hill is a director of the tough and visceral school and Marshall quotes his film Southern Comfort. Xenophon chronicled the escape of a group of Greek soldiers fighting their way back to base and safety. In fact, Marshall's three previous films were all about small groups struggling for survival, menaced by hostile and violent enemies (Dog Soldiers where a group of soldiers confront werewolves, The Descent where a group of women cave explorers battle dead monsters, Doomsday a group in an apocalyptic future).

The narrator here is a soldier, Quintus Dias, son of a freed gladiator slave, captured by the Picts and tortured. In the meantime, the Roman commander sends the 9th legion (the subject of a forthcoming film from Kevin MacDonal, The Eagle of the Ninth) to vanquish the Picts. The opposite happens and most of the men of the Ninth are massacred. A small group, including Quintus, who had been rescued by the legion, leads the small group on a flight north through the wintry Scottish landscapes, pursued by a crack group led by Etain, a tracker, whose family had suffered under the Romans and she had been raped and her tongue cut out. There are some moments of respite when a woman, exiled as a witch, does assist the fugitives.

The flight and chase are gruelling (even for the audience). The cast is strong: Michael Fassbender is Quintus, David Morrissey and Liam Cunningham are two soldier stalwarts. Ulrich Thomsen is the Pict leader. Dominic West the Roman General and Olga Kurylenko, fierce as Etain.

At times the voiceover from Quintus is literate and sonorously delivered followed by 21st century idiom and swearing.

While it re-creates the grim conditions for the legions and the clashes between empire and 'barbarians', the film is geared towards an audience (probably male) who prefer their films with action and toughness.

CHERRY BOMB

(Ireland, 2009, d. Lisa Barros D'Sa and Glenn Leyburn)

Another film about disaffected young people, resenting their parents and acting out in the usual rebellious ways, sex, drugs, drinking, brawling, graffiti... but this time in Northern Ireland. So, if that sounds interesting, here it is. But, if it doesn't, then then give it a miss. They are a wearying group of teenagers, self-indulgent until they strike disaster and their regrets are too late.

One of the advertising catch-lines is that we will see the wild side of Rupert Grint, Harry Potter series Ron Weasley. Actually, he is far more wild and agreeably interest as Ron. He is rather sombre here, a bit stolid and unbelievable as a tearaway in his attempts to behave as the script asks him to.

CITY OF LIFE AND DEATH

(China, 2009, d. Lu Chuan)

Winner of the SIGNIS award at the San Sebastian Festival, 2009.

This fine film provided two of the most gruelling hours I have spent watching films.

In recent years, there have been a number of films dramatising the Japanese Imperial Army's attack on Nanking in 1937, the subsequent siege and massacres (and the short-lived safety zone), sometimes referred to (and the film reminds us of the literal reality of this) as 'the rape of Nanking'. Officials and leaders left the city which served as the capital of China. Soldiers of the surrendering army were slaughtered. Women were taken and raped, supplementing the work of the 'comfort women' imported from Japan for the soldiers. The callous attitudes of the occupying forces were both cavalier and brutal.

Personally, I was glad to have already seen the German-Chinese co-production, *John Rabe*, which offered a stronger narrative background to the events as well as dramatically delineating key characters. The film featured Ulrich Tukur in a fine performance as John Rabe, the longtime German representative of the Siemens company in Nanking. As a loyal German, he was a member of the Nazi party – which linked him with the Japanese invaders. However, he was a man of compassion and, after international discussions in the city, he undertook the establishing of a safety zone which was, for a time, honoured. The film's cast included Daniel Brühl, Steve Buscemi and Anne Consigny.

The same characters are seen, sometimes rather sketchily, in *City of Life and Death*, but the overall communication of the film is less by narrative than by graphic depictions of events (at times disturbingly graphic) with a cumulative effect rather than a story which proceeds by cause and effect. It is like a dramatic installation which would enable a viewer to spend as long as they wished contemplating one story before moving on to the next.

The film was shot in black and white, at times with newsreel immediacy, taking the camera and the audience into the middle of the action.

The Chinese are portrayed as the victims of terrible imperial hubris and unlimited cruelty. The Japanese are presented as militarily and culturally barbaric, the ordinary soldiers moving from sadistic treatment of prisoners, abusive treatment of women, and then being just ordinary men doing ordinary things. It is alarming how human beings can move so easily from despicable behaviour to 'normal' behaviour and so quickly and unreflectively.

The film-makers have included, however, along with recognisable characters like John Rabe, the Chinese assistant to Rabe, Mr Tong, and his family, Miss Jiang, translator and liaison, the international characters, a focus on a Japanese soldier, Kadokawa, who participates in the Japanese domination but who begins to question commands, is repelled by some of the behaviour and comes to a final tragic realisation of what has happened to the Chinese, to the Japanese invaders and to himself. While the frustration of John Rabe, the sad story of Mr Tong and his wife and child, the decisions that the young women have to make to save the bigger group are emotionally harrowing, this more sympathetic portrayal of Kadokawa is presented with a generosity of spirit by the Chinese towards the Japanese.

This is a compelling film that highlights one of the messages of the aftermath of war, 'lest we forget'.

CRYING WITH LAUGHTER

(UK, 2009, d. Justin Molotnikov)

Not much laughter here – but, surprisingly after the first somewhat repellent 15 minutes of the film, quite a lot for tears and reflection.

This is a film about a stand-up comic, Joe Frisk (played effectively, except in his comedy routines, by Stephen McCole). Last year, Adam Sandler in *Funny People* showed the inner unhappiness of the comic and a preoccupation with illness and death. We don't quite know, at first, what is the inner sadness of Joe Frisk whose comedy is of the crass and crude and unfunny variety (sorry, very little variety) as is his own personal behaviour, drinking, snorting cocaine, irresponsible towards ex-partner and their daughter, welshing on debts, altogether someone that you would hesitate spending 90 minutes with.

Things take quite a turn for the odd when Joe encounters Frank, someone from school that he does not immediately recognise, who invites him to a reunion. Joe tries to avoid Frank but becomes ever more entangled when Frank identifies Joe in a line-up and he is sent to rehab. Frank, who has a considerable hurt agenda of his own, gets him out and tries to involve him in a plan to abduct their headmaster, now suffering from dementia, from a nursing home.

By this time the film is more interesting than anticipated. But, it is the reason for all this effort on Frank's part that is the key, something which is very much in the headlines these years, sexual abuse of minors. Joe has repressed memories, especially after the school burnt and he was sent to a Borstal where he says that he had to try to be the funniest to survive. However, Frank has the revelations and our attention is fixed on the headmaster, bewildered at first but then reverting to his old self and unselfconsciously re-enacting the beginnings of his abusive behaviour and being unpitiable in asking them to keep his behaviour secret and from the police. By this stage, the film is very serious indeed.

For those who have persevered beyond the offputting opening and, despite the Bullpit Club's audience chortling at very unfunny performances, there is a lot to think about, especially in how Joe handles his audition for an American agent, recounting his experiences and what he has decided to do with his life from now on.

DATE NIGHT

(US, 2010, d. Shawn Levy)

One of the great advantages of seeing film previews is that we often don't know a lot of details about a film or its plotline. That was the case here – and very enjoyable to discover what the date night was really like. But, advertising and trailers have let many audiences know something of what they are going to see, so there are some plot details mentioned here – but not to spoil enjoyment, rather to boost it.

Part of the attraction is the pairing of two fine comedians, Steve Carrell and Tina Fey, as Phil and Claire, a husband and wife with two bumptious children. They live in suburban New Jersey, rather conventional but comfortable, with good jobs and good friends and neighbours. There is the usual tension with their being so busy and the kids being energy-draining. They are often too tired for love and intimacy. And Claire is a controller and doesn't give Phil enough credit for initiatives.

So, it looks like a romantic comedy for 40 year old suburban couples with humour and some serious points.

Then Phil and Claire go on a date night in Manhattan, to a new seafood restaurant, Claw, and claim a free table that isn't theirs. Then the night goes beyond their wildest fantasies as they are confronted by two standover men with guns.

Watching Phil and Claire cope with a continually deranged night, which involves them eluding the pursuers, contacting police, enlisting the aid of Claire's former client, a shirtless Mark Wahlberg (who irks Phil), using wits and phony voices to discover the phone number and the address of the actual couple (amusing turns by James Franco and Mila Kunis), a Manhattan car chase with a taxi locked on to their car, a visit to a sleazy club and attempt to mingle as pole dancers where they try to make contact with the DA (William Fichtner) and fall foul of a gangster (Ray Liotta).

So, a different kind of romantic comedy! Which shows that date nights have the potential to enhance marriages!!

DEAR JOHN

(US, 2010, d. Lasse Hallstrom)

The title sets the tone, the Dear John letters and their emotions. The opening of the film seems to confirm this as the wounded John (Channing Tatum) speaks a voiceover of a letter about what came into his mind before he lost consciousness. We make assumptions about the letter which are not correct. In fact, there are some pleasing dramatic twists in the plot reminding us that we always think this kind of romantic movie is quite predictable. In many ways, of course, it is. But this one is not quite as predictable as we might think.

It is based on a novel by the very popular best-selling author, Nicholas Sparks. Film versions of his novels include *Message in a Bottle*, *A Walk to Remember*, *The Notebook* and *Nights in Rodanthe*. If you know those films and his books, you know that you are expecting to see a love story, some sadness and, definitely, some tears.

Dear John fulfils the expectations exactly – unless you are one of those who so loves the novel that no version can do it justice. What helps Dear John to be so entertaining and sad for its niche audience is the direction from Lasse Hallstrom who has shown over the years that he can do classily-crafted emotional films (*What's Eating Gilbert Grape*, *Cider House Rules*, *Chocolat*, *Hachi: a Dog's Tale*).

Channing Tatum's performances are usually of the solid (stolid-looking) young American who is a bit inarticulate though ready to fight. What we see here is his transformation from that type to a man more in touch with his inner self and his feelings. This happens on two levels. He falls for a young woman after diving into the water to retrieve her bag which she had dropped. They click, especially on the level of friendship which deepens into love. She is Savannah and is played by Amanda Seyfried. However, John is a Green Beret and has to go back to service. They begin a series of letters.

The path of true love certainly does not go in the expected direction here which gives more edge to the story.

But, it is on the other level that Dear John is so moving. It is John's relationship with his father. Dad is played by that excellent character actor, Richard Jenkins (Oscar-nominated for *The Visitor*). He does not communicate with his son

very well and is reserved with everyone. Savannah, who lives next door to a friend (Henry Thomas) who cares for his autistic son, realises that the father, with his exact cooking routines and with his meticulous care of his extensive coin collection is also autistic. While John cannot accept this, it makes a lot of sense to the audience and is a reminder that many adults who are dismissed as odd or impossible may actually be autistic. (The six year old son is played by an actual autistic boy.)

There are some moving letters eventually from John to his father.

Obviously, this kind of film is made for a special audience, those who like to be moved by sentiment and emotional stories. Dear John fulfils those conditions, which means that anti-sentiment audiences should keep far away.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF ALICE CREED

(UK, 2010, J. Blakeson)

The film opens in a very businesslike manner as two men set up a flat for an abduction. They go to the shops, are careful and thorough in their purchases and then proceed, very efficiently, to prepare the rooms as soundproof and secure. They do the same with a van. With the title, we are aware of what will probably happen.

When they do abduct the struggling Alice Creed, they bind her and put her in the back of the van and then tie her to a bed in the flat. So far, so effective.

It is the money they are after, not any injury to Alice, so they are also careful in keeping her hydrated, careful with the toilet although this is completely humiliating for Alice.

Then come some plot twists. You know that there will be twists – otherwise what is the point of a mere abduction and ransom story? It is trying to anticipate what might happen that keeps the audience interested and guessing – and prevents a reviewer from going much further in giving any indication of developments.

While the action is mostly confined to the three rooms and the focus is only on the two men and Alice, the photography and camera movement ensure that it is not a claustrophobic experience (except for Alice). Suffice to say that each of the three characters get a chance for acting and character development.

Gemma Arteton is Alice. The versatile Eddie Marsan (who seems capable of any kind of role, serious or comic) is Victor, the brains behind the enterprise. Martin Compston is Danny whom Victor took a shine (and more than a shine) to in prison.

Not the most cheerful of stories, of course, but well scripted and developed, and the characters behaviour credible in the situations.

DOGTOTH

(Greece, 2009, d. Yorgos Lanthimos)

A festival winner (Cannes, Un Certain Regard, 2009) and a challenge to its audiences. Since the film was made, news stories have emerged about parents imprisoning children in their homes and subjecting them to physical and/or sexual abuse. So, this strange story of a wealthy Greek family may not seem as surprising as, a few years ago, it might have been.

This is a comparatively quiet drama, working its power on its audience cumulatively rather than shock tactics. In fact, the home looks quite elegant and the three children, young adults, whose life is restricted to the house and grounds and swimming pool, are generally cheerful having no idea what is happening to them. A strange clue is given as the film opens, making us wonder what is happening. It seems that the parents re-define words so that the children will not know how much of the outside ticks. They have been trained to think cats are humans and that the planes flying overhead are only toys. They behave in childish ways, playing games, playing competitions for prizes and rewards. So, this is a kind of (forced) innocent Eden supervised by a possessive father playing god (who is shown going out to work, a successful industrialist) and a passive mother.

Things change because of sexual needs. The father brings a security guard (blindfolded) for the son who becomes friendly with the two sisters and the family.

Needless to say, the pressures mount – and, after building audience tension with a threatening situation, the film just stops, leaving the audience to come to terms with their revulsion at such parental behaviour and its consequences for the

children, and what will now happen as the circumstances have changed so drastically.

DONNE-MOIS LE MAIN (GIVE ME YOUR HAND)

(France, 2009, d. Pascal-Alex Vincent)

A road movie, highways, back roads, forest tracks and some railways.

The film begins with an arresting animated sequence, a boy helping his father in a bakery, clashing with his father, and his twin brother coming to the shop and enticing him to leave. As we take up the live action, the two brothers are hitch-hiking to Spain for their mother's funeral. They take quite a long time to get there (and often it seems that way though the running time of the film is only 80 minutes).

The brothers are played by identical twins, Alexandre and Victor Carril, who have appeared in some short films for the director. Fortunately, for identifying them, because they are strongly identical, one has a scar above his eye – he is the one in the bakery, Antoine. The other, Quentin, does drawings.

Apart from a lot of pretty scenery, which we get plenty of opportunity and time to contemplate, and wondering whom they will encounter next (and will there be sexual activity – there is), the main interest is in watching the twins and how they relate to each other. They both have what we might now call the Robert Pattinson Twilight look. They can be soulful and morose. They can be irascible (and there are quite a number of punch-ups, with each other, that is). They get lifts from friendly people, exploitative people, and stop to earn train ride money helping with a harvest.

A mood piece which, or may not, hold the interest.

FOUR LIONS

(UK, 2010, d. Chris Morris)

Satire and parody. How far can you go?

Some cultures are good at satire and enjoy it. The British comedy tradition is in that vein. Americans are less prone as a whole to appreciate irony. Recent events have made satirists and cartoonists very wary about Islam. With Christianity it seems no holds barred.

Those may be some of the thoughts before seeing Four Lions if you have heard that it is a black comedy about suicide bombers and was made by Chris Morris who has had a strong, if chequered, career as a television satirist. Can you make a film on this topic these days – well, he has made it, so the question is should he have made it. Chaplin mocked Hitler and Mussolini in 1940 in The Great Dictator. Perhaps the lines were so easily drawn then, that it didn't matter if the Germans or Italians didn't like it. Now innocent victims of suicide bombers are in our midst and their relatives and friends grieve. Satire, mockery? The quickest answer is that if this does not sound like your sense of humour, then simply don't go. If you feel that one way of coping with the terrible consequences of fanatical beliefs is to show the ridiculous side of such behaviour and the less-than-heroism and even stupidity of those who believe that they are martyrs with instant entree into heaven, then here you are.

Four Lions is often cleverly written and, at times, makes for some laugh out loud comedy. Riz Ahmed (Road to Guantanamo) has decided that the best thing to do, given the terrible state of the world, is to commit an atrocity and blow bystanders up with himself. Two of his friends (and now disciples) are, to put it kindly, very slow-witted. This offers an occasion for mocking the taping of the video messages, for instance, let alone the inefficiency of the attempts by amateurs like these. The other member of the team is Barry, Anglo-Saxon, but a convert to terrorist Islam where he has made a place for himself that he could not do in real life. He is the critic and the contradictor.

They go to Pakistan for some training but are fairly hopeless and get sent home.

They are also essentially British and they fall back on different taken-for-granted little details of British life and customs, TV and music, food, ordinary jobs in the workplace, which shows the mixed motives that have not been sorted out.

Eventually, they set on a plan to sabotage the London Marathon. Most things that could go wrong do go wrong but in a deadly way – which is a means of questioning the religious and/or fanatical beliefs that would persuade men and women to offer themselves as suicide bombers. (For a very serious look at two bombers from Palestine going into Israel, Paradise Now is well worth seeing.)

FURRY VENGEANCE

(US, 2010, d. Roger Kumble)

Yes, that's what it says. The furry creatures on the warpath are those furry critters from the woods, raccoons, squirrels, skunks... even some turkeys (which offers some bad suggestions to antipathetic reviewers of the film) who resent the developers coming in to destroy their habitats. Fair enough. But is furry vengeance enough?

The initial credits have some cartoon drawings. Soon into the film, which we realise is a live action cartoon, it becomes clear that it might have been funnier and more effective as an entire cartoon given how well animation films work these days. The trouble is that humans acting like cartoon characters can seem too stupid (a word that appears in the dialogue early in the film to describe some human behaviour). Much easier to accept cartoons with human voices than humans aping cartoons. Not that Brendan Fraser who stars and is executive producer and really liked this film is unfamiliar with live action cartoon characters (think George of the Jungle Encino Man, Dudley Do Right or Looney Tunes). But, he is getting a bit old and a bit heavy to do this kind of thing convincingly.

Actually, the live animals (and CG and animatronic animals) communicate via images in cartoon bubbles and with sly and snide expressions. They come off better than most of the humans.

The story is the old one. Greedy real estate entrepreneurs (who pay lip-service only to environmental concerns) want to destroy the forest to build suburbia. Ken Jeong has shown he can do cartoonish characters (Role Models, The Hangover) and gets away with being an idiotic businessman with some silly schtick. Brendan Fraser wants to further his career and is a desperate yes man for the boss. He is the main target of furry vengeance schemes (and skunks seem particularly love to deliver all over him) but, of course, has to come to his senses after being pounded out of them for almost 90 minutes and be the animal's saviour.

Who is the target audience? Younger kids who might like the slapstick and physical humour. And any (very) indiscriminating adults. (Older audiences who haven't seen Brooke Shields for a while will become conscious of their own age as they see her at almost 45, rather tougher looking than she used to, but a good sport for being here as Brendan Fraser's long-suffering wife.)

THE GHOST (THE GHOSTWRITER)

(2010, UK/Germany, d. Roman Polanski)

Robert Harris is a best-selling writer whose conspiracy books include Fatherland and Archangel. He has collaborated here with Roman Polanski in adapting his novel, Ghost, for the screen and has said that in refining, cutting and selecting for the screenplay, the film has some better features than the book. Whether that is true or not, The Ghost is an absorbing contemporary thriller with fascinating political suggestions and implications.

First of all, it is not about Tony Blair. Well, not quite. Harris has said that he had the basic idea before Labour came to power in the UK in 1997. But, with comments about Tony Blair and war crimes in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq, Harris had found a situation to build his novel on. In fact, the screenplay becomes quite explicit at times about the repercussions of the invasion of Iraq for the British and the Americans and the role of the CIA.

Harris has also expressed an admiration for the films of Alfred Hitchcock with their ordinary and central character sometimes caught up in a world of intrigue and international espionage. This film can be described as in the vein of Hitchcock suspense. Roman Polanski showed himself a director in this genre with his 1988 Frantic.

Opening with the seemingly accidental death of the ghost writer of the former British Prime Minister's memoirs, the film quickly introduces Ewan McGregor as the writer being courted to revise and rewrite the memoirs. Ewan McGregor has proven himself quite an engaging screen presence in both serious and comic films and is able to take the weight of the film, appearing in every sequence.

Needless to say, there are complications, twists and some sinister chases and a writer, not used to being in this kind of danger, having to show bits of action and heroism that surprise him.

Pierce Brosnan has proven that he has an acting life after James Bond (well, not a singing one after Mamma Mia) and is very good as the irascible and genial former prime minister. Kim Cattral has a more serious role than usual as his minder and Olivia Williams relishes her role as the wife, a hard woman, strong, with a touch of jealousy but a power behind the throne.

The film is also enhanced by a number of important and effective cameos: Tom Wilkinson as a professor, Timothy Hutton as the official attorney, James Belushi as the head of the publishing company, Robert Pugh as the former Foreign Secretary and a welcome appearance by 93 year old Eli Wallach.

As the ghost writer uncovers more and more information, more possibilities for conspiracy theories arise until a good dramatic ending which we may or may not have been anticipating but which makes some sense (sinister sense) of what has been going on.

THE INFIDEL

(UK, 2009, d. Josh Appignanesi)

The title, *The Infidel*, has the ring of religious intolerance about it. And that is what the film is about. However, it is not preaching in the serious vein about intolerance, it is preaching seriously via comedy. This is a risky enterprise, especially if those in need of learning lessons of tolerance and mutual understanding lack a sense of humour (which anyone with the touch of the fanatic tends to lack). There is probably enough in this comedy, which has quite a light touch but deep feelings about Muslims and Jews, to upset the humourless people.

Omid Djalili has built up a reputation on stage and on television as a strong comedian. Here he portrays a second generation Pakistani minicab manager in London, Mahmud, Muslim but not taking it or practice too seriously. His son wants to marry his sweetheart but her mother has just become engaged to an Imam who has a reputation for stirring up hate. That might be enough for a comedy that wants to challenge extremism but there is more, much much more.

While cleaning out his deceased mother's room, Mahmud finds that he was adopted – and that he was Jewish, Solly Shimshillewitz.

So, on the one hand you have the funny scenes poking fun at Muslims like the visit of the Imam to inspect his prospective son-in-law and Mahmud trying his hardest to give a good and orthodox impression as well as a rally by the smug Imam with his henchmen planted to ask sympathy-eliciting questions with his surprising unmasking (though I don't know what Cat Stevens, who is mentioned earlier in the film, would make of the twist). There is also some comedy at Mahmud turning up at a pro-Palestinian rally and his doing some quick thinking to divert the crowd from thinking he was Jewish.

On the other hand you have Mahmud investigating his Jewish background so that he can meet his dying father and having antagonistic cab driver, Lennie (Richard Schiff familiar from *The West Wing*), coach him in manners and expressions Jewish. The attempts to do the Jewish shrug and say 'Oy' are very funny as is Lenny's taking Mahmud to a Bar Mitzvah celebration and stranding him on the dais and getting him to tell a Jewish story.

The difficulty with a film like this is that, while it is actually quite funny and audiences will enjoy it, it is really preaching to the converted. One would like to think, however, that it may make a convert or two to religious and cultural tolerance.

I KNOW YOU KNOW

(UK, 2009, d. Justin Kerrigan)

An interesting film but one which many people may find alienates them. It begins one way and ends in quite, quite another.

Part of the difficulty may be that the writer-director, Justin Kerrigan (*Human Traffic*), has dedicated this film to his father. And, it seems, the film is something of a heart-felt portrait of his father showing the rapport between a son and a very strange and disturbed father.

It starts breezily with Charlie (Robert Carlyle giving quite a striking performance) and his son Jamie (Arron) returning from a trip. School starts for Jamie, with some loneliness and bullying, and his father wants him to stay with his uncle and aunt. In the meantime, it seems that Charlie has a special and secret commission and suspects a new television satellite company as being behind the problems. It is 1989.

From then on, the film becomes quite complicated, Jamie puzzled and asking lots of questions, his father acting strangely and becoming more and more obsessed with his mission and the enemy.

After a while, we realise what is happening and share Jamie's concern and love for his father and the dangers he is getting into.

The setting is Wales. Much of the action takes place in ordinary circumstances. But, the agent story heightens the melodramatic aspects until a sadly ironic postscript voiced by the director himself with another dedication of the film to his deceased father.

IO SONO L'AMORE (I AM LOVE)

(Italy, 2009, d. Luca Guadagnino)

Italian film-making in the older classical style.

In the 1970s, Italian directors like Mauro Bolognini made films that were portraits of a time and, often, of a family immersed in that time. The films concentrated on the look and the feel of the period and situated their characters and their interactions and struggles in lavish tableaux, in melodramatic interchanges, sometimes quite operatic, with a score than emphasised this mood and this atmosphere. The same could be said of *Io Sono L'Amore*. However, the time and the setting are more of the present, the early 21st century.

The writer-director has had a long association with the star, Tilda Swinton, and they have been in pre-production for a many years. While the film is about a family, an industrial dynasty from Milan, it is very much about her character, Emma, a Russian immigrant who has borne her business tycoon husband three children and has become the lady of the mansion. The long opening of the film shows her preparations for a birthday dinner, the arrival of the guests and their chatting at pre-dinner drinks and then the meal with a speech by the patriarch of the family and his handing over the reins of the business to his son and grandson.

It should be said that the film dwells lovingly and in close-up on rooms and furnishings, art work and, especially, sumptuous meals and table settings.

And it goes on from there... Business issues like selling the company, father eager, son opposed. Emotional issues like the daughter studying in England and coming out. The widow of the patriarch still asserting her influence. But, most of all, the focus is on Emma, her relationship with her husband who is business preoccupied, her love for her son, Edo, who wants to start a restaurant with his friend, Antonio, and eventually an affair with Antonio which transforms her but leads also to some grief.

Many reviewers have found the film elegant and involving. This reviewer admires the elegance but, despite Tilda Swinton's nuanced performance, not so involving. Part of the difficulty (which, it should be said, was a great plus for many including Tilda Swinton, the director and the producers) was the use of selections of music by John Adams. At times the score counterpointed the action but, often, it seemed incongruous, especially in the long credits sequence, tracking through the snowy suburbs of Milan, to a disconcertingly jaunty accompaniment.

It is, however, a strong attempt to embrace Italian traditional film-making and use it for a contemporary story.

IRON MAN 2

(US, 2010, d. Jon Favreau)

Described as 'eagerly anticipated sequel' in the press notes (and that is correct), it is not necessarily as enjoyable as the original film was. That will depend on moods and tastes, of course, but the sequel, well made as was to be expected, is sometimes new but often enough a replay variation on the first film.

Robert Downey's Tony Stark is as entertaining as ever. The world knows he is Iron Man and he is revered as the saviour and enabler of peace. However, a number of people disagree – and that is where some of the good drama takes place. Most obviously, this is with the new villain, Ivan, played with relish and dissheveled glee by Mickey Rourke. His causing mayhem with his powers and his electric currents emanating from his body at the Monte Carlo Grand Prix starts the action sequences. And by the end, especially in the showdown with robots galore and Ivan being terrible again, there is enough clunking, chunking, thunking, plunking (and some bunk as well) to shatter eardrums and nerves.

The other villain is Sam Rockwell as a would-be Tony Stark (the press notes referring to him wittily as a polyester imitation). He is an arms dealer with a gift for patter and Rockwell relishes his role as well.

Garry Shandling, who has the last line insult to Iron Man, is a hostile senator in a government hearing. He and others feel that Iron Man's suit is the equivalent of a weapon which rogue individuals or states could reproduce (with some mockery at North Korean and Iranian nuclear ambitions). In fact, the US government is wary. Samuel L. Jackson's division has their eye on Tony and has its plant, Scarlet Johansson (who gets a chance to do martial arts with flair at the end), in his office. Even the government liaison, Rhodey (Don Cheadle replacing Terrence Howard), Tony's good friend is now wary.

Given that Tony is having difficulties of the heart – his booster against the ill chemical effects of wearing his Iron Man

suit is becoming less effective – and he is still squabbling with his assistant Virginia 'Pepper' Potts (a not very lively or persuasive Gwynneth Paltrow). Plus, Tony sees some old footage of his father and his advice to his son. Legacy is important to him.

Director Jon Favreau's part as Tony's driver and bodyguard has been amplified and his in front of camera scenes indicate how much he is enjoying directing the film.

Robert Downey's pep speech at the Stark Expo at the beginning is a tour-de-force of 'I am' and it is gratifying to note at the end that he concurs with the psychological report that states his is extreme narcissism.

All going commercially normally, Iron Man will be back.

IT'S A WONDERFUL AFTERLIFE

(UK, 2009, d. Gurinda Chadha)

No prizes for realising where this comedy (ghosts instead of angels!) comes from. This is 21st century Capraesque observing of human nature – a wry portrait with optimism.

The most important thing to note is that the setting is West London in Southall and Ealing. The majority of characters are of Indian origin living in England. And the director has made Bhaji on the Beach, Bend it Like Beckham, Bride and Prejudice, and Angus, Sandals and Snogging, all of which offer British Indian characters to the audience portrayed and to a wider audience which helps relationships between ethnic groups in the UK.

There was an immediate consensus amongst the reviewers when they saw that some of the film was made at Ealing Studios – they decided it was less like an Ealing comedy than a 'Curry On...' comedy! And there is more than a touch of Bollywood comedy, engagement parties, weddings and some dancing and music.

It's a Wonderful Life is not the only film referenced here. The director has alluded to Blithe Spirit. There is an extensive pastiche imitation of the bucket of blood sequence in Carrie. The ghosts also watch and comment on television like those in Truly, Madly Deeply. There is an allusion to the famous stomach scene in Alien. Placing this comedy in the movie tradition offers some smiles and laughs.

This is a film about Indian families' preoccupation (obsession) with getting their children (especially as they grow older and are less immediately attractive) engaged and married. Mrs Sethi wants her chubby daughter Roopi engaged so that she can die and join her recently deceased husband. We soon realise, as the police begin to investigate a series of murders (connected with Indian food), that she has not taken too well to criticisms of her daughter. The ghosts turn up, not yet re-incarnated, and decide to help her get her daughter married off (including Zoe Wanamaker as the Jewish next door neighbour and her poodle). The daughter is a down-to-earth woman and is exasperated at all this match-making.

The police (led by Mark Addy) assign an old family friend, the dashing D.S. Murthi (Sendhil Ramamurthi) to infiltrate because Roopi is the main suspect. There are further complications as Roopi's best friend, Linda, has had a trip to an ashram in India, changed her name, become spiritually psychic and is engaged to her assumed soul-mate (Jimi Mistry). She is played with her accustomed verve by Sally Hawkins.

It all seems a lot of good-natured nonsense, though her son tells his mother that her harping on marriage sounds like a broken record. He's right – the repetition and repetition does seem tautologically redundant.

With its broad comic style, it's not meant to be a cinematically literate venture. Rather, as the final credits show, it is all involved having a bit of fun.

THE JONESES

(US, 2010, d. Derrick Borte)

The Joneses is quite a smart comedy with a satirical moral perspective. It gives fuller meaning to the phrase, Keeping up with the Joneses because that is precisely what the Joneses are about. If the Russians could insert sleeper Communist cells and agents into ordinary USA, then why can't the capitalists!

The Joneses are presented and present themselves as the fulfilment of the American dream, the consumerist American dream. They have everything that opens and shuts, everything stylish that does just that bit more than other products. They are skilled in showing them off and mentioning them quite openly but discreetly so that everyone rushes out in covetous glee to buy and buy and buy.

Steve, the fake dad, is played with nonchalant charm by David Duchovny, capitalising on his past career as a car salesman with a genially chatty pitch. He was also a golf instructor. Seeing him in action makes us realise how susceptible competitive players are out on the golf course. Demi Moore fits her role perfectly, glamorous but with that bit of steel as the boss of the cell (it is actually called a cell). Amber Heard is the attractive but amoral daughter who has to learn about life's knocks the hard way. Ben Hollingworth shows a vulnerable ambiguity as Michael.

The focus on the Symonds next door becomes the counterpoint to the Joneses. The wife rehearses a spiel for selling cosmetics to her neighbours. The husband, feeling neglected by his wife, befriends Steve, especially in playing golf, but is the key character keeping up with the Joneses, vainly assuming that Steve is jealous of him, never realising how Steve is playing him, and shows how disastrous is the envious attempt to keep up, how self-destructive with tragic fallout for others. The Symonds are played very well by Glenn Headley and Gary Cole.

While it seems that these family cells are breeding success all over America (and, according to images in the final credits, on all other continents except Australia!), these Joneses have to undergo a crisis of honesty, self-worth and moral stances.

The dialogue is clever. The cast keep the satire believable. And the film, even with its 'American' happy ending, is an effective contemporary warning fable.

THE LAST SONG

(US, 2010, d. Julie Anne Robinson)

Check the credentials before making a decision whether to see *The Last Song* or not.

The first thing to note is that it is a dramatic star vehicle for Miley Cyrus, better known for her Disney television series, movie and concert tours as Hannah Montana. She is more of a presence on screen rather than an actress, though she is still young, 17, and time is on her side.

The second thing to note is that the film is based on a novel by Nicholas Sparks. That is enough to turn the anti-weepie crowds away (and there are plenty of tears here). While Sparks has worked on this screenplay himself, he has such a following (and with film versions of *Message in a Bottle*, *A Walk to Remember*, *The Notebook*, *Nights in Rodanthe* and *Dear John*) that devotees of his stories can get quite upset when the film does not meet their experience of the novels – and comments from dissatisfied fans seem to indicate that this is the case here.

The niche market seems to be teenage girls who can identify with Miley Cyrus and the situations in the story and respond very well to heartthrob, Liam Hemsworth (all the way from Australia to Georgia) with, maybe, an appeal to their mothers who take them to see *The Last Song*.

So, all in all, it is a romantic tearjerker, American style.

Miley Cyrus' character, Ronnie, is initially a surly pain in the neck, especially to her father because of her resentment at his having left his wife (Kelly Preston), her brother (a lively Bobby Coleman) and herself. But, you know it is going to end well, even if tearfully – the point is seeing how the film gets there and how it takes you along.

It is summer on the Georgia coast. Turtle eggs play a significant role (and there are some nice National Geographic sequences in there). So does making a stained glass window for a burnt church. There is scenery, fashion, teen angst, bonding, friendship, falling in love, illness, death, fights, snobbery, sense of betrayal, reconciliation and Greg Kinnear's performance as Ronnie's father to take it up a notch or two.

PAZAR – BİR TİCARET MASALI (THE MARKET – A TALE OF TRADE)

(Turkey, 2008, d. Ben Hopkins)

Though written and directed by British Ben Hopkins, this is a Turkish film. It has won some top awards at Turkish festivals and national awards. However, while it has a strong flavour of Eastern Turkey and Azerbaijan, it has universal interest and appeal.

Hopkins directed the rather striking 19th century fable, *Simon Magus*. His output in the years following is not extensive and includes some low budget dramas and some documentaries. The idea for this film came from a visit to Moldova in the 1990s and an examination of how people survived with trade and the black market after the fall of Communism. However, there is no major film industry in Moldova. Hopkins visited Turkey and made a documentary in the Eastern

region of the country. With the backing of Turkey's film industry and international help, he set his story in this Eastern part of Turkey, Kurdistan.

The film is brief but, with the location photography graphically showing the mountainous landscapes, the deserts and the villages, the audience will feel that it has visited this part of the world.

Mirham is a small-time fixer. Anything you want, he can find it and offer you a bargain. He is an independent, which irks the local black market mini-czar. He is married to a loving wife who sees the good man underneath the surface. He loves his little daughter and his wife is pregnant. Despite being a devout man who prays and visits his mosque, he drinks and gambles at cards.

When he undertakes a mission to buy children's medicine in Azerbaijan because the lorry carrying pharmaceuticals to the village has been hijacked, he takes it as a sign that he should become respectable and set up a shop for selling the coming mobile phones (this is 1994). The journey does not turn out as hoped for – but we see Mirhan in action, smuggling chemicals under his car, letting the border guard have a cigarette mini-bribe. He also engages the help of his old uncle.

The thing with Mirhan is that he has charisma, he is a charmer you can't help but like and hopes that he makes good. And his uncle is a great gentleman of the old school. Together, they keep us watching and hoping.

In the background, of course, are the pressures of capitalism (and some TV footage of how the mineral they are smuggling in Turkey comes from exploited workers in Africa), the globalism of companies like those for mobile phones. And, there is the ever-present local corruption. Interesting, entertaining and thoughtful.

A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET

(US, 2010, d. Samuel Bayer)

Starting over.

But, this version is alarmingly relevant to one of the main problems troubling contemporary society.

It is 26 years since the release of Wes Craven's most successful horror film, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Halloween had appeared in 1978 with several sequels following, highlighting the mad and terrorising Michael Myers. Friday the 13th had appeared in 1980 with the dead and terrorising Jason Voorhees – and at least ten sequels. But, *Nightmare on Elm Street* produced a horror icon to rival or, really, to outdo these, with Robert Englund's Freddy Krueger with his hat and pullover, his burnt face and his glove with razor finger extensions. And it led to six sequels. The first two villains have appeared in recent remakes. Now it is the turn of Freddy Krueger, played by Jackie Earle Haley who lives up to Englund's portrayal.

This is a more polished production than the original. In one way it is more straightforward. There are five victim students who are tormented by nightmares where they fear that if they go to sleep, Krueger will kill them in their dreams and they will die in reality. Their fears are justified. However, the final two decide to combat Krueger in their dreams on the premiss that if he dies in the dreams, he dies in reality. (Sequels seem to preclude this conclusion.)

This time, the plot is basically the same, the names, except for Nancy, being different and the parents having different occupations. It is interesting that the cheerleader and jock looking characters do die while the less glamorous students are the ones to fight another day.

Where this film raises interest, especially in these times of consciousness of sexual abuse of children, is the character of Freddy Krueger and his motivations for torment and vengeance. In the original, he was associated with children, but his crime was murder and he was burned and killed by vigilante parents. This time he is still burned and killed by the parents but the reason is sexual abuse. He is a gardener at a pre-school who plays with the children– and flashbacks throughout the film show him as ordinary (though Jackie Earle Haley at the best of times cannot look very ordinary, being short with features that can easily be made to appear sinister) and then reveal his behaviour with the children. This makes the film and its images more relevant than might have been expected and lead to some reflection on these images.

First of all, the film provides in Freddy Krueger a monstrous iconic image of the evil of sexual abuse. It reminds us of how horrible the experience is for children, especially little children. No matter how charming and seductive the abuser might be and behave, Freddy Krueger reminds us by showing us the monstrously harmful personality within.

Secondly, the film shows that the children might repress their memories, and their parents have encouraged this so that

the children will be safe and psychologically unharmed. The film suggests that, despite the repression of the memories, the reality of the experience and its scars are still there and can re-appear nightmarishly and destructively.

Thirdly, the film reminds us that these crimes lead parents and adults into shock and then into the temptation to vengeance and vindictiveness. The film shows angry parents, for mixed motives of rage and wanting to protect their children, unwilling to stay within the legal system for justice and retribution and taking the law into their own executing hands.

It is surprising to find that watching the re-inventing of a popular 1980s horror film franchise for the 21st century makes us realise how evil sexual abuse of children is – and how we have become so much more conscious of it and the depths of repercussions than we were in 1984.

PSYCH 9

(US, 2007, d. Andrew Shortall)

Quite a creepy film for those who enjoy feeling uncomfortable and fearful at the movies.

The setting is a hospital due for demolition. The only activity is sorting out files – and, of course, the leading lady, Roslyn (Sara Foster) takes on the night shift (her husband, Cole (Gabriel Mann) drives taxis at night, so this gives them some time together). The reason for anxiety is that there is a serial killer on the loose (which is how the film starts) and, it emerges, the victims all have files at the hospital. And action takes place only at night.

This offers the opportunity for Roslyn to wander the abandoned corridors with the slowest possible steps as the music ominously suggests frightening presences, for her to ride up in the sinister lift, look into files, hear noises and, in general, keep herself and the audience on edge. She even begins to suspect that her husband is the serial killer.

There is a kindly secretary (Colleen Camp) who got Roslyn the job despite details in her back story which are gradually revealed. She also meets a genial doctor sorting documents on the fifth floor, a British therapist, who listens to her story (Cary Elwes). And the investigating detective, Michael Biehn, keeps turning up.

There are a whole lot of strange occurrences. Is Roslyn imagining some or all of them, is she dreaming, are her flashbacks, especially concerning her abusive father and his death, actual? Needless to say, there are a few more deaths, some plot developments that are baffling at times so that we are not too sure what is happening. Probably, Roslyn isn't either. But, it doesn't matter all that much since atmosphere and creepy feelings are the most important thing.

The copyright on the film is 2007. Perhaps, the writer had been reading Denis Lehane because Psych 9 has a very Shutter Island feel about it.

REPO MEN

(US, 2010, d. Miguel Sapochnik)

Ugly story. Ugly treatment.

One of the ugliest of contemporary criminal activities is that of trading in body parts. There are frequent headlines about men and women from poorer countries being exploited for body parts for transplants for wealthy clients. Dirty Pretty Things was a 2002 drama on this theme set in London. One of the Kenneth Branagh Wallander films concerned this kind of exploitation in Africa.

However, Repo Men is rather different. This time, in the near future (looking a touch like the world of Blade Runner or I, Robot), a company called The Union supplies transplants but charges exorbitant fees and, like many banks, is demanding when it comes to re-payments. Payment failures mean that The Union reclaims the parts and sends out its staff of repo men who stun the subject and then, with surgical precision but rather unsurgically remove the part (all checked with computer information concerning failure to repay as well as indications for the correct location of the part). Since one of these 'operations' is shown near the beginning of the film, potential audiences will be able to gauge whether this is the kind of incision-excisions scene they want to watch.

The message is fairly clear. The Union represents all those heartless (not exactly, they do supply hearts here) corporations who are merciless in getting their capital back. The message is also clear on the double standards that the repo officials can use in their own lives. They track down victims relentlessly and then can go home to wife, child and barbecues with friends.

The two repo men here are played by Jude Law and Forest Whitaker, serious actors, and one wonders what it was that appealed to them about this project and why they consented to be in it. They give of their best, especially Jude Law, who has to undergo a change of heart (both literally and emotionally). Liev Schreiber is the smooth-talking conscienceless manager of The Union.

Not that there aren't some effective sequences, for instance the fugitives suddenly entering a vast white room where masked assemblers all dressed in white are at their desks. But, soon after this there is a massacre of personnel in a corridor which looks as if the film-makers had overdosed on Kill Bill Volume 1. Taking a cue from a fellow reviewer: this is grim repo.

REVANCHE

(Austria, 2008, d. Gotz Spielmann)

Revanche: revenge, vengeance, retaliation.

This is a well-made Austrian film, a serious drama with touches of police and crime thriller. But, mainly, it is about the inner lives of five people who are interconnected by a tragedy.

There is symbolism in the credits sequence, a still camera focussing on a pool when, unexpectedly, a stone is tossed into the water and the splash sends out ripples. At the end credits there is silence except for birds chirping, sounds of a storm and then rain falling. Apart from a few slight tracking shots, all the sequences are comprised of fixed camera shots, movement within the frame but action sometimes outside the screen frame. A more contemplative style of film-making.

The early part of the film spends a great deal of time and attention on two of those people. Tamara is from the Ukraine, one of the many women from Eastern Europe who are caught up in prostitution. She works in a brothel in Vienna. Fairly impassive about what she has to do for customers, she is concerned about money and future security. But, she is in love with Alex, a middle-aged man from the country who is a general rouseabout in the brothel.

At the same time, we see the tranquil life of a married couple, he, Robert, mowing the lawn, she, Suzanne, cooking the evening meal. He is a local policeman who, by chance, is caught up in a bank robbery getaway and fires a shot after the car. There is a great deal of reflection on bad luck and chance.

The other character is Alex's grandfather, an 80 year old farmer, who lives near the policeman and his wife, the wife being kind to him at the supermarket she runs and giving him lifts to church as well as encouraging him to take up playing the piano accordion again. Alex stays with him, chopping his wood supply.

The bank robbery is not shown, just the getaway and the shot. But, this episode has repercussions for all the characters, especially for retaliation for the shot fired.

The film is very emotional, especially in portraying grief and depression. One can understand the feelings of the characters, the most puzzling of whom is the policeman's wife. Her feelings and motivations are quite complex and we might still wonder at the end what they really are.

Strong performances, dramatic without being melodramatic, ensure audience involvement in the lives of each character, the audience all the time being challenged as to where their sympathies lie and whether there should be revanche or not.

A ROOM AND A HALF

(Russia, 2008, d. Andrey Khrzhamovskiy)

Whether you have heard of or read the poems of Nobel Literature Prize winner, Joseph Brodsky, is not essential to being fascinated by this imaginative Russian film. The makers suggest that it is not related to actual characters even though it serves as part portrait and a touch of biography. It is mainly a creative interpretation of the meaning of his life.

Brodsky, who died in 1996 at the age of 55, was born during World War II in Leningrad, a city which suffered greatly during the war, much of it being destroyed and large numbers of the population dying. The Brodskys were Jewish Russians.

The biographical aspects of the story show the father returning from official work in China in 1948, the young boy's

strong bonds with both his parents but the hardships that increased as the Soviet years went on. He is something of a philosopher and poet and is at times awkward with his peers. That changes somewhat in the 1960s as he is tantalised, as were so many of the young adults of the time, with the post-Stalinist (comparative) freedoms. (There is a scene where a teacher comes almost hysterically into a class and announces the death of Stalin and everyone falls to the floor in grief). Ultimately, Brodsky had to leave Russia and settled in the US, where he became a professor and was naturalised.

However, the poetic notion of this film is that he did return to the now St Petersburg, re-assessing his life and ideas and meeting his dead parents. He says that memory is like a film, scenes flowing (not necessarily in chronological order) and being edited. This is a film of memories, both of what was and what might have been.

The director is a noted Russian animator and documentary maker and there are many animated sequences (especially with a cat who was a family favourite). This is his first feature film (made in his late 60s). Lovers of classical Russian films will delight in his vision, artistry, his visuals, his portrait of St Petersburg (from the elegant city of Brodsky's childhood to the beautiful modern city which does now serve as an incongruous backdrop to contemporary shops and takeaways and casual dress that Stalin would never have approved of.

There are some poignant sequences of phone calls from prosperous America to dingy Leningrad where Brodsky's parents interpret their son's calls as his being ill and deprived of food. There is this yearning in Brodsky for his homeland – he never did return in fact – and for his parents. The parents are the strongest characters in the film, conveying with great feeling what it was like to live through those years - and be thwarted by officialdom in their attempts to get permission to go to the US to visit their son. They are memorably portrayed by Sergei Yursky and (especially) Alisa Frejlindkh. Grigoriy Dityatkovskiy is Brodsky.

Contemplative cinema is still alive – as is the spirit and style of Tarkovsky.

SHELTER

(US, 2009, d. Mans Marling and Bjorn Stein)

Shelter has a very gentle sound about it. But, that is not the case for this psychological thriller which veers into what is often called 'supernatural' elements with some touches of horror. There have been a number of films about, like the 1997 Denzel Washington film, *Fallen*, where the souls of a person can migrate from one human carrier to another. The human carrier provides a shelter.

The film opens with a psychiatrist, Caroline, Julianne Moore, explaining to a committee hearing an appeal for a murderer to be granted a stay of execution that she does not believe in cases of multiple personalities – she says it is a feature of sensationalist Hollywood movies! When she gets home, her father, Jeffrey de Munn, whisks her off to meet his latest case. He is played very effectively by Jonathan Rhys Meyers – and she discovers that, if he doesn't have multiple personalities inside, then there do seem to be several people in there. And he displays quite different performances for each of them as well as mimicking the speaking manner of some of those sheltering.

So far, so familiar. However, God (who actually tops the list of those who are thanked explicitly in the final credits) becomes an important theme. Despite her husband having been brutally murdered by a mugger on the way home from church on Christmas eve, the psychiatrist still believes in God. Her young daughter and her father find they cannot. This becomes important in terms of who become carriers for the migrating soul. This all leads Caroline out into the Pennsylvania backwoods and strange communities with odd religious beliefs, bizarre practices and alleged witchcraft.

The visual style of the film is dark and brooding. It is directed by two Swedish directors – who certainly do not feel any obligation to provide a Hollywood ending.

Many reviewers dismissed *Shelter* as hokum. Of course, it is hokum, psychological and religious. But, despite critical opinion, some of us (this reviewer included) enjoy the speculations, twists and turns of this kind of hokum.

WHIP IT

(US, 2010, d. Drew Barrymore)

Ladylike is not the first, second, third or even umpteenth word that springs to mind in connection with the Roller Derby. It is certainly a contact sport for women, at least as practised in Austin, Texas, here, with plenty of bumps and grinds – and, coming of something of a surprise, as explained throughout the film, with a set of rules and many strategies and plays that remind us of (at least the look of) gridiron football.

Actually, this is yet another variation on the sports film formula – which means that we know pretty well where it is going and what are the likely things to happen. Some people don't like formula films and dismiss them as predictable. Others enjoy them because of the familiarity and seeing how what we expect pans out. By and large, with *Whip It*, you go along with what is happening and where it seems to be obviously going.

This is a directorial first for actress, Drew Barrymore (almost 30 years since *ET*!). She obviously has something of a passion for the roller derby and stages lots of competition scenes. And she gives herself a substantial role as a player who has a propensity for accidents.

However, the focus of the film is on a teenager called Bliss, whose mother believes in ladylike behaviour and in the elegance and charm of beauty pageants, who insists on Bliss competing. A chance poster advertising the roller derby catches Bliss's eye and, with her best friend with whom she works at the Oink Diner, off she goes to watch – and is recruited. Needless to say, her mother doesn't know.

The mother daughter scenes work well because Bliss is played by Ellen Page who made such an impression with *Juno*. Mother is played by Oscar-winner Marcia Gay Harden. In the background is good ole dad who can't tell his wife that he loves to watch football matches on TV (Daniel Stern).

The Hurl Scouts are a tough bunch, as are the main opposition, The Holy Rollers, led by Juliette Lewis, but they welcome Bliss and she finds a home away from home. When a pageant coincides with the Derby final, well..., you know.

For a target audience of teenage girls, it has some messages about excelling in what you are good at as well as some nice, folksy advice about being tolerant with family and sorting out differences honestly – and one can't complain about that.

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ABEL (Screening out of Competition)

(Mexico, 2010, d. Diego Luna)

A brief debut film from actor, Diego Luna, friend of Gael Garcia Bernal, who acts as one of the producers.

This is a modest film about a young boy with mental and behavioural problems seemingly caused by his father's abandoning the family to work in the US and who is not heard from in two years and walks in on the problem and compounds it.

9 year old Abel (a persuasive performance from Christopher Ruiz-Esparza, whose younger brother in the film is his own real life brother – who is also persuasive) has been hospitalised and does not speak. The devoted mother agrees to his coming home in the hope that things could be normal and that he will speak. His younger brother is afraid of him. His older sister is annoyed with him much of the time. Abel watches television – and suddenly makes a breakthrough.

We realise before the family does that he has got it into his head that he is the father and the head of the family and acts the part. There is a lot of wry humour as we see this young boy aping strict and commanding patriarchal rule. Since the doctors advise not confronting or upsetting him, mother and children go along with it. In fact, he is a much better father than his actual father and the children thrive under his tutelage.

The film builds to an anxious climax – but leaves open how Abel is going to get along after he is returned to hospital.

Lots of contemporary Mexican flavour. A first film that Diego Luna can be pleased with and proud of.

LES AMOURS IMAGINAIRES (Un Certain Regard)

(Canada, 2010, d. Xavier Dolan)

'In Your Dreams!' That is where most of the action of this 20-somethings' romantic comedy takes place. Not in their literal dreams, but in their unfulfilled wish fulfilments.

Very much a young adults' film with older audiences admiring the writer-director's zest but finding the two central characters in their search for love and their being lost in their fantasies more than a bit trying.

A 25 year old woman and her gay friend, Francis (Xavier Dolan himself) become infatuated with a young man who is filmed as if he were a statue of a Greek god. He befriends them but not in the way that they hope of imagine and they keep projecting the wish fulfilment on to him. Though friends, they do their bit to edge out each other from the pursuit.

A lot of partying, a lot of soulful introspection, on the road to disillusionment.

ANOTHER YEAR (Competition)

(UK, 2010, d. Mike Leigh)

Another fine Mike Leigh portrait of real human beings, one of his best.

When Mike Leigh says 'Another Year', we surmise, rightly, that he does not mean a happy new year. It is for some, not for others. In fact, one of the characters says, 'same old, same old'. While there are three characters for whom life is miserable – one replies, when asked what would make her happy, 'a new life' – the central characters are not only happy, they are comfortable in the best sense with their lives and they not only love each other, they are patient and kind to their friends, no matter what their friends' woes (and capacity to irritate).

There are four parts to the film, each season labelled (and photographed with different shades and lighting) and work in the allotment garden reminding us of sowing, ripening and harvesting.

There is a wonderful opening sequence with a depressed housewife suffering from insomnia, interviewed by a pregnant doctor and then, quite unwillingly, speaking with a therapist. The woman is played by Imelda Staunton (Vera Drake) and it is pity that we do not see her again. She is a means of introducing the counsellor, Gerri (Ruth Sheen who has been in several Leigh films but shines here in a central role). Gerri is married (40 years) to engineering geologist Tom (a forthright but benign Jim Broadbent). And, in case you are thinking it, Tom remarks that they have got used to the Tom and Jerry quips over the years.

We see Gerri in her dealings with long-term friend and office secretary, Mary (Lesley Manville in a tour-de-force performance as an unwillingly ageing, lonely and drinking woman prone to unrequited flirting) and we see Tom with his drinking and greedily over-eating friend, Ken (Peter Wight), who has nothing in life except his job. Gerri and Tom are also good parents and relate well to their son, Joe (Oliver Maltman), and his eventual girlfriend, Katie. Mary's antipathy towards Katy is palpable.

While nothing much changes on the surface ('same old, same old'), Tom's sister-in-law dies in Derby and he and Gerri arrange the funeral for Tom's taciturn older brother, Ron (David Bradley). This sequence, interrupted by Ron's estranged and angry son, is powerfully real.

The dialogue, created by the cast in rehearsal and then carefully crafted by Leigh, is like life and often moving. And to see such genuinely and unobtrusively good people like Gerri and Tom on screen is really heartening and shows Leigh as a film-maker, not just of themes of unhappiness and failure, but of hope and joy as well.

AURORA (Un Certain Regard)

(Romania, 2010, d. Cristi Puiu)

Puiu's previous film, *The Death of Mr Lazarescu*, was a fine cinema experience and contributed to the flowering of the contemporary Romanian film industry. Anyone familiar with the earlier film would be looking forward to *Aurora*.

Puiu has done it again, in the sense that he takes his time with developing characters and plot, spending a great deal of time and attention on minute details of behaviour, with minimum musical score. However, with the theme of death and

ambulance and hospital care with Mr Lazrescu, audience attention is willingly given. This time, with the film at three hours, audiences may find the experience admirable but sometimes trying (even often!).

When we have to spend three hours observing closely a character who is enigmatic to the point of an audience not wanting to understand him, taciturn and abrupt in behaviour, who, we realise, as he purchases a gun, has killing in mind, it is very difficult. Puiu plays the central character himself, so it is very much his film.

BIUTIFUL (Competition)

(Spain, Mexico, 2010, d. Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu)

Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu has made some arresting and thought-provoking films: *Amores Perros*, *21 Grams* and *Babel*. This is also arresting, thought-provoking – and very sad.

The setting is Barcelona (after a moving opening sequence of two hands and a ring and father and daughter talking about family, then a scene in the woods between Uxbal and his father, both scenes forming the end of the film as well). Uxbal means well, but is involved in all kinds of shady deals, especially with illegals from Africa and from China. He is divorced from his wife who is bi-polar and irresponsible and he tries to care for his two children, quite demanding on manners and good behaviour from them.

We follow him around the city as he tries to deal with street selling Africans who are also selling drugs, with a Chinese sweat factory and with his brother's links with supplying unqualified illegals for the building industry. There is enough material here for several films and the director's vivid picture of mundane, everyday life in Catalonia.

But, very early we learn that Uxbal has terminal cancer and the film is about his dealing with this and his trying to get everything in order, especially for his children. Uxbal also has a gift of communing with the dead and relaying messages to the bereaved. For his own counselling, he goes to a kindly woman, also gifted, who is able to offer him sound advice.

Uxbal is a good man, not without considerable faults, but presented as something of a secular saint (someone reminds him that he is not Mother Teresa), trying to do good and to undo the consequences of what he has done wrong – with the wife of a Senegalese deportee and her baby, with a dormitory of Chinese who are victims of an industrial mistake.

And the title is *Biutiful* (which Uxbal's daughter asks him how to spell). Actually, Malcolm Muggeridge's portrait of Mother Teresa was 'Something Beautiful for God'. Uxbal, according to his lights is trying to do something beautiful for those he encounters.

BLUE VALENTINE (Un Certain Regard)

(US, 2010, d. Derek Cianfrance)

Director Derek Cianfrance has said that one of the major fears of his childhood was his parents getting a divorce. This is evident in the film with passionate sequences of love and the loss of love, even of hatred. The title gives it away as does the song that the husband sings when wooing his wife but is sung again, most ruefully, over the final credits, 'You always hurt the ones you love...'.

The screenplay has action that takes place over 24 hours in the present but, within that framework, retraces the early history of Dean and Cindy, their meeting, love, his saving her, their marriage. The counterpoint of both periods highlights the contrast, often quite harrowingly.

So, in a way, nothing new. The strength of the film is in the episodes and in the performances – though at times they seem to be improvised and somewhat repetitive and strained. However, Ryan Gosling as Dean and Michelle Williams as Cindy really enter into their roles with vigour and empathy which makes the break-up more tragic, especially for their little girl who loves them both so much. If only Dean could have read the situation and Cindy's latter feelings better, and if only Cindy had had the patience and understanding that Dean deserved.

BURNT BY THE SUN 2: EXODUS (Competition)

(Russia, 2010. D. Nikita Mikhalkov)

Burnt by the Sun won the Cannes Palme d'Or and the Oscar for 1994. It told the story of a family in Stalin's Russia prior to World War II. The story now continues into the war, ending in 1943, with the promise of the part 2 of part 2 to follow. (this part runs for two and a half hours.)

Sergei Bondarchuk and Mikhalkov used to make films like this in the Soviet Union of the 1960s and 1970s (Waterloo, War and Peace). It is large in scope, sweeping in its several plots and presenting war and battles most impressively. The standout in this film is a lengthy sequence of a Red Cross boat sailing with German planes doing exercises overhead but not bombing the boat. When an individual does something stupid, and one of the German bombers is doing something stupider, everything changes and there is a heart and gut wrenching attack on the boat. There are also effective scenes of political prisoners in the gulags and the outbreak of war and another wrenching sequence where a group of soldiers deemed criminals are joined by a brash group of tall young elite groups to help stop the German advance – which comes from behind them with tragic results. And there are other war episodes.

This is what Mikhalkov wanted to do, to show aspects of Russia's experience of the war and its unpreparedness and what it suffered, especially in casualties from military to civilian. German soldiers do not come out well in this film.

But, there is political background as the central character of the original film finds himself in prison, escaping at the outbreak of war and serving as a simple soldier. He thinks his wife and daughter (played by his daughter as she did as a young girl in the 1994 film) are dead, but his daughter survives the bombed Red Cross boat.

While showing the war experiences of 1941-1942, there is a sub-plot concerning Stalin's hearing that the general is alive and his sending an officer to track him down. The actor playing Stalin is very effective, appearing in two scenes, one the opening where the General offers Stalin a cake when he visits his house and serves the cake in a way Comrade Stalin would not expect, the second where he makes the officer keep playing the piano while he instructs him on the search for the General. The sly, political nous is suggested quite sinisterly.

So, old-style film-making with more than an influence of Saving Private Ryan's war scenes, offering a lot to reflect on with Russia's harsh war experiences.

CARANCHO

(Argentina, 2010, d. Pablo Trapero)

Pablo Trapero has kept his eye on social issues in Argentina for over ten years. He has been concerned with justice, crime and the police. He offers a different angle on these issues this time: accidents, ambulance chasers, litigation and legislation that allows 'foundations' to skim large amounts from insurance payouts.

Carancho starts with an accident where Sosa (popular Argentinian actor, Richard Darin) trying to get a client but being beaten up by his boss's henchman as he is trying to get his independence back – and to do the right thing by clients. He encounters a strict and hard-working doctor (Martina Guzman) who initially disapproves of him but comes to trust him and fall in love. We see from the outset that, despite her hard work (which does not preclude mistakes) and her tiredness, she is also drug dependent.

Many accidents, clients and bashings later (including of the doctor), Sosa and Lujan and the audience are ready for a dramatic showdown. It is violent and highly emotional and, safe to say, problems are not resolved. Darin is a strong screen presence but it is very surprising that Guzman's initially determined doctor turn into an emotional and mushy mess by the end.

CHONGQING BLUES (RIZHAO CHONGQING) (COMPETITION)

(China, 2010, d. Wang Xiaoshuai)

A personal journey by a father who has abandoned his family long since. An investigation by the father into his son's death, like a detective story except that the puzzle is not who did it but who was the personality who did it and what were his motives.

An impressive film in performance, visual style and humane content.

The city of Congqing is photographed in broad cityscapes and in great detail, making the city and its environs like a character in the plot. However, it is Wang Xuequi as Lin, the now dignified and restrained older man, that gives the film its power. As he moves from encounter to encounter, with his working friends, his angry abandoned wife, his son's best friend, the victims in the supermarket hostage situation, the doctor taken as hostage, the wounded security guard, the young man's estranged girlfriend and the policeman who shot the son, we are continually building a portrait of a character as well as a re-creation of the crime which is available only in newspaper articles and in security TV footage.

Each of the persons questioned is given a solid character to reveal even if the time available to them is short.

There is hope at the end although it is puzzling that, while the screenplay makes a great deal of the effect of the father leaving home when his son was ten, Lin himself makes no admission of any guilt. It is the quest that shows the depths of his sadness.

COPIE CERTIFIE (CERTIFIED COPY) (Competition)

France, Italy, Belgium, 2010, d. Abbas Kierostami)

‘What was that all about?’ is a fair question. ‘Who was that all about?’ may be an even fairer question.

This is really a cinema essay, verbal and visual, about art and perceptions of art, about life and about fantasy. It is celebrated Iranian director, Abbas Kierostami, making a non-Iranian film and a film outside Iran (though he did make the short story in Italy which was his contribution to the 2005 Tickets).

A British writer on art theory delivers a lecture in Tuscany. A French art dealer who lives in Tuscany with her young son attends and disagrees with aspects of the book. She takes the author on a drive which leads to much (much) discussion about art, originals and copies, about marriage and relationships. An Italian lady mistakes them for husband and wife and the woman follows through with this role play, the author gradually joining in. They encounter young marrieds with the woman elated and the man surly and unwilling to be photographed, trying to be realistic about change in love and life. They argue about a statue in a piazza and she enlists some tourists to bolster his interpretation against his snobbishness. He is also snobbish about wine in a restaurant and does not notice the woman’s putting on lipstick and earrings. Finally, they go to a hotel room which she states is the room of their wedding night fifteen years earlier. Will the author leave for his train or stay with the woman? Here the film stops leaving us to speculate after the credits.

For audiences who like the director and this kind of debate cinema, they will be delighted. Others may not have the staying power, even though Juliet Binoche is the woman and William Shimmell is very good as the man. (Kiersotami fans might be wondering in the first part of the film but there is a Kierostami relief moment when the camera goes on to the front of the car to film the conversation and they indulge in a Kierostami drive!)

DES HOMMES ET DES DIEUX (OF GODS AND MEN) (Competition)

(France, 2010, d. Xavier Beauvois)

One of the finest religious films, and one of the best Catholic films, in years.

The subject is the Trappist community of Mt Atlas, Algeria, in the 1990s. Living their monastic life amongst the local people and ministering to them, especially with medical services, they were viewed more and more with suspicion, especially because they were French expatriates, by government troops who were becoming more active against the increasing terrorist attacks, and by the terrorists themselves. Seven of them were killed in the latter part of May, 1996.

While the film expertly builds up the background of post-colonial Algeria, corrupt government, extreme Islamists, the role of the military, the violence perpetrated by both sides, the centre of the film is the life and preparation for death of the monks.

Filmed in Morocco, the film is both beautiful and austere in its landscapes and in the interiors of the monastery – and in the interior lives of the monks and their commitment to God and to their order.

The director, Xavier Beauvois, shows an instinct for depicting the detail of monastic life with sensitivity and a strong awareness of what it means. The actors look, move, speak and act as if they were authentic monks. Lambert Wilson shows the complexity of a man elected to be superior but who has a tendency to make decisions himself but is willing to be guided in discernment by the whole community. Veteran Michael Lonsdale is the ageing doctor who shows practical wisdom in his medical skills and down-to-earth counsel as well as in his religious life.

The film is able to cover all aspects of the religious routine of the monastery in accurate detail. In fact, it communicates the life and spirit, the prayer, Eucharist, sung liturgy, silence and contemplation, the detachment of the vow of poverty, the taken-for-granted sacrifices of the vow of chastity, the work, the meals and the readings, the community meetings, the outreach. This is shown in episodes throughout the film which are as effective, even more effective, than a documentary.

All the time, the audience is challenged to wonder what they would do in such dangerous circumstances, especially after official advice from the area is given, recommending the monks leave and return to France. At a community

gathering, the superior asks them all to give voice to whether each wanted to stay or leave. Some speak in favour of leaving and explain why: family, illness, the opportunity to continue their work elsewhere. Some are still uncertain. Others wish to stay, intuitively knowing that this is where God wanted them to be. After the advice to leave, the monks listen to the opinions of the local people, especially those who come to the monastery for medical help. Their argument is that the monks remain in solidarity with the people.

For an audience wanting to know and understand something deeper about Christian spirituality, something deeper underlying, despite the sins and failures of the church and of church people and the consequent anger at abuse and scandals, these scenes offer a great deal to ponder.

So does the letter that the superior writes before the monks are abducted in vans, audio-taped for their identity, knowing that they are hostages, and led into the snow and the mountains to their deaths. He goes over the decisions and the motivation but also acknowledges that the monks have lived in a Muslim country with its Quranic ideals and spirituality and its God, far from the fanaticism of those who do not really read their scriptures fully or are caught up in bellicose righteousness.

Faced with the reality of impending death, like many a religious or a secular hero, they found their depths, despite any fear, and discovered a martyr's saintliness in giving a life for others. The director offers this very movingly, without words, as the community sit to enjoy something of a last supper together, the camera focusing on each, their smiles, then their tears, then their deep resignation, drinking a glass of wine together, and all to the rhythms and melodies of Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake.

Perhaps this makes it sound as if the film is offering a sermon rather than a movie story. It is a movie first and foremost and that is how it delivers its message, through story and in words and moving images.

FAIR GAME (Competition)

(US, 2010, d. Doug Liman)

Fair Game is the title of the book written by former CIA agent, Valerie Plame, outed by the Bush administration in 2003 as a tactic to divert public attention from the untruths told in the president's state of the union address and offered as one of the key pieces of evidence for Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction program: 500 tons of uranium bought from Niger. That this was not the fact was reported by former ambassador, Joseph Wilson, Valerie Plame's husband, who published an expose article about this after the invasion of Iraq.

It is a sign of communications today that a film about this important episode could be made in the US within ten years of the events.

Where the film is of interest is in the covert operations undertaken extensively by Valerie Plame and her teams, in the former ambassador's uranium fact-finding visit to Niger, in the workings of the CIA in their analysis of data and how the White House exerted pressure to get the information they wanted for the invasion. It is also of interest to see the machinations against the husband and wife and how the media turned against them as traitors. Joseph Wilson spoke out but Valerie Plame was silent until she testified at an official enquiry, part of which is shown in the final credits.

Noami Watts is Valerie Plame, perhaps too nice a screen presence for the tough woman she had to be in real life. Sean Penn as Wilson doesn't really have to act (though he does most convincingly) given his own personal views and outspokenness in real life. Direction is by Doug Liman (The Bourne Identity and Mr and Mrs Smith) who knows a thing or two about espionage films.

While the film uses familiar conventions for this kind of story, it is still very interesting – and adds to the doubts and scepticism about the motives for the invasion of Iraq (and is linked with Paul Greengrass's Green Zone which showed the search in Iraq for the WMD).

HAHAHA (Un Certain Regard: Winner)

(Korea, 2010, d. Hong Sangsoo)

A kind of Before Sunrise and Before Sunset (and during the day as well). Two young Korean men (and this is very much a male film from the director of Woman is the Future of Man – this time they are the present of man as well) meet and talk over their experiences during the summer. One plans to migrate to Canada, the other is a depressive character. Their various conversations are introduced in stills of them talking – and many of the conversations conclude with a toast and they have another drink. While there is a lot of talk in the film, there is a fair amount of alcohol drunk as well. By the men and by the women.

The depressed friend is married but has a girlfriend whom he says he is in love with and wants to marry. She is rather patient with him in his talk and in his behaviour. The intended migrant takes a shine to a museum guide who sounds rather profound as she does her spiel but is not so bright in real life. She has had a number of boyfriends but seems to take a shine to her new suitor. There is also a poet who is friendly with a young woman who works part time in a restaurant owned by the migrant's mother. And some time is spent there.

If you would like to listen to young Koreans and their interests in life, their relationships and their hopes, then you have almost two hours to do so. Not an unpleasant experience – but they still are very young.

UN HOMME QUI CRIE (A SCREAMING MAN) (Competition)

(Tchad, 2010, d. Mahamet-Saleh Haroun)

A film that begins in bright sunlight in a fashionable hotel swimming pool in Tchad, a father and son competing in holding their breath underwater. A film that ends in darkness with father and son at a river after experiencing the horror and wounds of civil war.

The central character is Adam, a former central African swimming champion and the first pool supervisor in Tchad. He is a man of bearing and dignity, well respected. However, with the activity of the rebels and cross-border incursions, sackings go on at the hotel and calm life deteriorates as controlling troops take to the streets, curfews are imposed and the local head collects money to help the war effort against the rebels – while many father volunteer their sons for active service.

This all takes its toll on Adam, his wife, his son who worked with him at the pool, and his pregnant girlfriend.

Well-crafted and generally accessible for a wide audience, the film leaves narrative holes for the audience (who may not be quick enough) to fill in and does not build up dramatically to the war tension in the city.

However, it is a moving story of contemporary African troubles – with no solution in sight.

HORS-LA-LOI (OUTSIDE THE LAW) (Competition)

(Algeria, 2010, d. Rachid Boucharib)

There was double security at the venues in Cannes for the screening of this film, no food or liquids allowed inside the cinemas and bags more thoroughly searched. Even before the screening it had caused protests and debates in France. The subject: the fight for Algerian independence, especially in the 1950s and 1960s until it was achieved in 1962. Needless to say, this involves an indictment of much French colonial action and dominance. It also raises questions of what is Resistance and what is Terrorism – resistance for the French in World War II, terrorism for the Algerian action for independence. A perennial question and one that is still dominant in the world, especially for Israel and Palestine.

Boucharib has made some quieter and intense films, Little Senegal and London River (both SIGNIS and Ecumenical award winners). He also made the striking Indigenes, about the Algerian soldiers who fought with and for the French but were treated as colonials – the film led to the French government awarding belated pensions to some of the Algerian veterans. Hors-La-Loi follows Indigenes with some of the same cast.

On May 8th 1945, Europe celebrated VE day. The same day there were marches in Algeria for the independence movement which led to protests and fierce shooting into the crowds by police, soldiers and citizens. This film follows the lives of three brothers, each with a different perspective on the independence movement.

One becomes something of a spiv in Pigalle, opening a night club and training a boxer to be world champion. Another has experienced the war in Vietnam and French defeat. The third was imprisoned on May 8th 1945 and served ten years in a French jail where he learned protest and strategies.

It is the latter brother who is the focus of the film, an intellectual who is committed to an ideology rather than to people (the actor who plays him remarked that this man is trapped in his own charisma). He is unscrupulous in using terror methods but cannot kill any individual. It is his soldier brother who does this for him.

The film highlights their lives and action from 1956 to 1961 and immerses the audience in the experience of Algerians living in France and of the ruthlessness of the French police in dealing with them.

The film portrays historical events, tells a narrative that challenges the audience to reflect on the importance of freedom, the evils of colonialism and the consequences and, always, to ask questions about the use of violence to win a cause and to free people.

THE HOUSEMAID (Competition)

(Korea, 2010, d. IM Sangsoo)

A remake of a 1960 Korean classic (the same year as *Psycho*), a suspense thriller in the Hitchcockian sense. As we look at the plot with Hitchcock in mind, we may be reminded of many aspects of *Rebecca*.

There is a mansion, a huge set rather than an actual house, with many lavish rooms for its arrogantly affluent family. The wife is pregnant with twins, the husband a successful businessman. There is a housekeeper who could be a cousin, dramatically speaking, of Mrs Danvers. Into the household comes an eager new servant and nanny, Euny. She likes the little daughter of the house, is charmed by the piano playing master – and is readily seduced by him.

Gossip, hatred, vindictiveness permeate the household – and even an attempted murder, then another attempt at miscarriage. From then on, mania pervades the film until a grim ending (with a corpse unnecessarily and incredibly bursting into flames). Up to this point the film had combined drama, suspense, critique of the selfishly affluent and their quest for power and prestige, but the incendiary moment spoils the ending, even though an ironic postscript tends to return the audience to moral fable realism.

KABOOM (Screening out of Competition)

(US, 2010, d. Gregg Araki)

Gregg Araki back to his former style of small-budget, heightened slices of life, focussing on young adults and their fears, indulgences, sexuality and identity problems. But, now he is older and has the fine *Mysterious Skin* as part of his CV, giving him a certain recognition and respectability.

He is not after respectability here but would not be against recognition (as he has been by John Waters). This is one of those midnight movies of the past where sense and absolute credibility are not the order of the day – or night. It is a concoction of campus drama, sex exploration, science fiction, apocalyptic madness and more than a *Kaboom* ending than we might have expected.

Thomas Dekker (one of the dispatchees in the new *Nightmare on Elm Street*) is Smith, an undergraduate, gay, with a confidante, Stella (Haley Bennett), who keeps him in line with her sardonic quips but who is herself entangled with vamp Lorelei who may or may not be a witch. There is an 'end is nigh' character, Messiah (James Duvall from Araki's films of the mid-90s) who suggests warnings and doom. There are also pursuers with animal masks, a secret sect, abductions and various spies and agents.

It is all tongue in cheek and happy in its silliness.

LIFE, ABOVE ALL (Un Certain Regard)

(South Africa, 2010, d. Oliver Schmitz)

A moving story based on a novel, *Chandra's Secrets*, by Allan Stratton. Chandra is at the centre of this South African story, a young girl going into her teens but who has strong reserves which she needs to take responsibility for all that happens to her family.

The film is particularly geared to a South African audience with its subject of AIDS and HIV infection, its prevalence in Africa and South Africa, the secrecy that can still surround it, community fears and the shame they impose on those infected and their families, and the difficulties in getting effective treatment.

No, Chandra does not have AIDS. Her stepfather does and has infected her mother leading to the death of their young baby. Chandra is full of common sense, arranges for the funeral, retrieves the money down at a bar stolen by her stepfather, and tends her weak and shamed mother as well as looking after her small step sister and brother who want their father and behave badly towards Chandra. Chandra also incurs the criticism of the villagers (most of whom are prone to gossip) by befriending an orphan girl who goes down to the local truckstop to service the drivers. Ultimately, Chandra has to confront members of the family, the wealthy woman next door who is a friend of her mother, and stand,

with the friend, boldly against a crowd who want to, literally, stone her.

Some austere audiences will find the sentiment presented strongly and feel it is too sentimental. The film is not for them. It is a film of the heart intended to touch South Africans and tell them a story which could encourage change in attitudes and behaviour.

LOS LABIOS (Un Certain Regard)

(Argentina, 2010, d. Ivan Fund and Santiago Losza)

More of a worthy film with semi-documentary overtones than a fiction feature.

Three women leave Buenos Aires to go to the countryside to meet with people, question them about their conditions and then make reports for planning and for statistics. They do this, with the audience going about with them, listening to the interviews, responding emotionally to problems and needs, while getting to know the three women and the man who has responsibility for them in their work, in their accommodation in an abandoned hospital and in their personal lives in the town.

LUNG BONMEE RALUEK CHAT (UNCLE BONMEE WHO CAN RECALL PAST LIVES) (Competition)

(Thailand, 2010, d. Apichatpong Weerasethakul)

Palme d'Or winner 2010.

Director Weerasethakul has built up a festival following, especially with his recent films, *Tropical Malady* and *Syndromes and a Century*. While he does portray the Thai present, he goes into legendary and mythical areas and the past in a way of storytelling that is not familiar to the west. He often juxtaposes elements of story or symbols which audiences have to work on to see or intuit connections.

This is the case here, not only with legends but also with ghosts and spirits – with one ghost acknowledging that they do not live in a place but are connected to people.

The bulk of this story is that of a man who is ill, whose relatives arrive as well as the ghost of his wife and an odd creature, part monkey, part human who is his dead son. They all trek to a cave where he dies.

The last part of the film is puzzling, set in a routine present where a monk has a shower in a hotel and changes into ordinary clothes for a meal and two others watch television at some length. We have to make the connections.

MARTI, DUPA CRACIUN (TUESDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS) (Un Certain Regard)

(Romania, 2010, d. Radu Muntean)

Yes, another film about an affair and a marriage breaking up. But, no, it is not your usual drama on this theme.

Because the director has chosen a different style of film-making from the hurried plot snippets of so many contemporary dramas, with their TV-like action and reaction quick edits, the film is more real, more natural and more insightful. The film consists of a series of long takes for each sequence, often several minutes long. This means that the performances are extended, played out in a manner that is both akin to theatre as well as being as mundane as real life. It means that the screenplay has had to have much more care in the writing of dialogue that illustrates the experiences of the characters at some length as well as being more 'naturalistic', the way that people speak in life rather than in contrived dramatic form.

As expected, the plot is nothing not seen before: the banker who has fallen in love with a younger woman (actually, his young daughter's dentist). He has been married for years to a competent woman who has become 'at home' in her role as wife and mother. Other characters include the husband's friend and his parents. But, by and large, the action is confined to the central adult characters and the daughter, opening rather daringly with a post-lovemaking, naked sequence introducing the characters from the affair point of view, their jokes, playfulness, intimacy and carefree attitude towards any hurt they may be inflicting. The next sequence is a shopping sequence where we are introduced to the wife.

Particularly impressive is the single take where he reveals the truth to his wife and she moves from stunned, to hurt, to angry, to calculating. It is a fine addition to the number of substantial films coming from Romania in recent years.

Marriage counsellors might well welcome this film for clients to compare their own behaviour and its consequences.

MY JOY (Competition)

(Germany, 2010, d. Sergei Losnitzer)

Two hours of joyless slices of fairly savage Russian life. The director, who has a documentary background, says that he intended a more sentimental initial story and his title, *My Joy*, was for that tale. When he cut that and turned grim, he kept the title, with the under-understatement that it was ironic.

He also speaks of his palette, which may be the best way to interpret the succession of stories which don't necessarily follow each other but are juxtaposed like colours on the palette. Most of the stories are in the present, set in the area south of Moscow, stories of truck drivers, thieves (plenty of these), prostitutes, corrupt police, soldiers, people going mad. The two flashback stories to the end of World War II have a stronger narrative thrust and are, to those of us who like stories, more dramatically satisfying though emotionally straining: a soldier robbed by a superior officer, then a pacifist schoolteacher robbed and brutalised by the soldiers returning from the German front, to whom he had given hospitality.

The film opens with a corpse being buried under concrete – the foundations of contemporary rebuilding of Russia symbolised as murderous? In fact, corpses seem to bring to a close several of the stories, with five at the very end. Aesthetic joy, perhaps, but little emotional joy in *My Joy*.

LA NOSTRA VITA (Competition)

(Italy, 2010, d. Daniele Lucchetti)

An Italian slice of life from the socially conscious historical film of Italy in the 1960s and 1970s, *My Brother is an Only Child*. This time the film is socially conscious but not explicitly political.

A seemingly simple story of a builder, his love for his pregnant wife and their two boys, with plenty of loving scenes and extended family gatherings, becomes tragic and difficult with two quite diverse deaths. The husband has to cope with his children and opts for a financial focus to cover his grief. He is inexperienced and falls into difficulties with payments and finishing the apartment block he has undertaken to build.

This brings some darker aspects to life around sunlit Rome and Ostia.

Finance is never straightforward in Italy. There are always deals, corruption, illegal workers, migrant workers without papers, the demands of the building consortium, walkouts... We see them here. But, while the man is an ordinary type, he fights hard to succeed and is helped by his pimp neighbour and friend as well as his family solidarity.

An experience of Italian working class life, with some optimism despite grief and with a great emphasis on the worth of family and children.

OCTUBRE (Un Certain Regard)

(Peru, 2010, d. Diego and Daniel Vega)

A brief film and we are plunged straight into it without any background explanation. The film can be called a slice of life in the poorer suburbs of Lima. We stay mostly within this limited world, though there is a visit beyond the neighbourhood and one of those intense Marian processions for Our Lady of Miracles, with band, statues, belted devotees and incense.

We stay almost all the time with an unsmiling middle-aged man, Clemente, who lives alone, visits a local prostitute and lends money, fairly it seems, but always wanting a guarantee. The film is going in this direction when Clemente arrives home one night and fears that he has been robbed. Instead, a baby in a wicker basket has been left in his house. He begins to take care of it and employs a local Marian devotee to care for the baby and his household. She is intense, has her own sexual preoccupations and misinterprets Clemente.

And that's about it. The value of the film is in the performances, the glimpses of life in Lima and the effect of being placed in the middle of this world and being challenged as to what we think and feel about what we encounter.

OUTRAGE (Competition)

(Japan, 2010, d. Takeshi Kitano)

Despicable things done by despicable people in despicable ways – and filmed to highlight how ugly and despicable they are. This is a Yakuza story with characters who exhibit no redeeming human features and about whom, at the beginning, we couldn't care less, whom at the middle we couldn't care lesser about and at the end couldn't care lessest.

Since Takeshi Kitano wrote, edited and directed and stars as the hitman who does the most violent torture and killing, it all lies at his door. He has made some interesting Yakuza films in the past (and some violent ones) and some fine films like Hana-bi and Zatoichi. But this is a brutal film about brutes.

POETRY (Competition)

(Korea, 2010, d. Lee Changdong)

A film of great beauty, poetry, yet a film anchored in the harsh realities of daily life as well as crime and punishment. Lee Changdong, with his screenplay and his direction, has been able to bring them together in a memorable film (as he did in Secret Sunshine and his SIGNIS award winning film, Oasis).

Most audiences will not know his leading actress, Yun Junghee, but, from the assuredness of her performance, we would guess, rightly, that she has been one of Korea's most significant and award-winning actresses, though absent from the screen since 1994. Hers is a completely creative and convincing performance.

At first, with her hat and flowery, stylish dresses, we might think she was a wealthy lady of leisure. It turns out she is a maid and looks after an old man who has had a stroke. She also cares for her grandson, who must be one of the most obnoxiously self-absorbed teenagers on screen, treating his grandmother as his maid. However, he has been involved with fellow-students in a sex crime that has led the victim to kill herself.

Meanwhile, the grandmother, unaware of this, has decided to attend a poetry course and this gives her new life, looking closely at nature and events, in order to write a poem. She attends poetry readings and this is a transforming experience for her.

In the meantime, the fathers of the other culprits decide to cover up (with the consent of the school and some teachers) and make a payment to the mother of the girl. The financial demands are too much for the grandmother but she finds a way to get the money, which then makes her ashamed. She is also deputed to visit the mother to hasten the settlement. She goes but converses with the woman happily and leaves without mentioning the settlement.

The film brings the two plot strands together in a poem, first spoken by Mija, then continued by Agnes, the girl. We see her at the bridge over the river and contemplate, as we have been asked to do during the film, the flowing water, of life and of death, linked with Agnes' baptism (Mija goes into her requiem mass).

In these days of sexual crimes, it is interesting (and alarming) to see parents and institutions covering up, instead of going to the police, protecting the assailants, thinking money settlement is the only solution, without real regard for the grief of the parent let alone any acknowledgement of the pain of the abused girl. This aspect makes the film timely over and above its poetic contemplation.

THE PRINCESS OF MONTPENSIER (Competition)

(France, 2010, d. Bertrand Tavernier)

Bertrand Tavernier has made fine films for almost four decades but not, so far, a period costume drama. Here it is.

The setting is the 1560s with the wars between Huguenots and Catholics in France, truces and battles, leading up to the massacre of St Bartholomew's Day in 1572. (The background of the film, Queen Margot.) The first words of dialogue in this film are, 'In the name of Christ, fire', as a Huguenot soldier attacks a Catholic home. Disgusted by what he has done, he gives up fighting, outlawed by both sides for deserting them. He is Francois de Chabanne who, through his friendship with his former student, Philippe, becomes the tutor to his wife, Marie. This is an arranged marriage and the young woman has loved Henri, duke of Guise, all her life.

While there are battle scenes and sword fights (and Tavernier is no slouch in staging warfare), this is more of a serious drama of political intrigue, of pressures on women in the 16th century, on love and people trapped in marital contracts, of religious bigotry and cruelty. It is always intelligent and interesting.

Melanie Thierry is impressive as Marie who has to grow from being a carefree girl to a serious woman whom destiny

has not been kind to. Lambert Wilson has a fine role as Chabanne, a wise man whose life is not as he planned but who is able to be a mentor to those in his care.

A good opportunity to learn some French history and enjoy the experience.

ROBIN HOOD (Opening film – a kind gesture since it shows the English defeating the French)

(US/UK. 2010. d. Ridley Scott)

An adventure, a historical drama, a re-creation of the early Middle Ages. But, only the beginning of the legend of Robin Hood as we have come to know him in the various guises of Douglas Fairbanks, Errol Flynn, Cornel Wilde, Richard Greene, Patrick Bergin and Kevin Costner (at least). Just as Batman Begins took us back to Bruce Wayne's past and offered explanations of why he became Batman, so this could have been called Robin Hood Begins – which is what the final caption tells us.

For those expecting swash and buckle, there is plenty in the battle sequences, a siege of a castle in France, the confrontation with the French troops on the south coast of England. And there are some sword fights as well, especially between Robin and the more than dastardly villain, Godfrey.

However, this is history more than legend, and geared for more of an adult audience (after all both Russell Crowe and Cate Blanchett are in their 40's). It is an intelligent look at history as well as action – and, considering some of the themes, the social problems of the time, the divine right of kings and the Magna Carta which would be signed later, it is something of an intellectual look at history.

Director Ridley Scott knows how to bring past periods alive, whether it be the Roman Empire in Gladiator or the 12th century crusades in Kingdom of Heaven. Here he re-visits the aftermath of the Crusades as Richard the Lionheart and his very loyal soldiers fight and plunder their way back to an England that has been impoverished by the taxes for the crusades. Richard dies and his wayward younger brother, John, inherits the throne and immediately moves on the barons and their estates for more taxes. He is manipulated by his seemingly loyal friend, Godfrey, against the advice of his chancellor, William Marshall, whom he sacks only to find that Godfrey is intent on dividing England so that King Philip of France can invade.

This is the background for the story of Robin Longstride, a master archer in Richard's troops, who takes the place of the dead Robin Loxley of Nottingham, returning the crown to London and Loxley's sword to his father. Nottingham, a small village, has been overtaxed, and Robin stays (in the vein of The Return of Martin Guerre and Somersby) to be Loxley. His first deed to rob the rich to give to the poor is, with the aid of Friar Tuck, to steal the confiscated grain seeds and sow them for Marianne, Loxley's widow.

As can be seen from these comments on the history, there is a lot more going on than bows and arrows and merry men in Sherwood Forest.

Russell Crowe can do earnest uprightness as well as leap on a horse and charge, sword flailing. Cate Blanchett can do vigorous work and grief but her moments of remembering that she had played Elizabeth I and taking to armour and horseback stretched credibility a little.

There is an excellent supporting cast with Mark Strong (who has shown how repellent a contemporary villain he could be in Kick Ass) is excellent as the traitor, Godfrey. Oscar Isaac (whom devout audiences may remember as a young and nice Joseph in The Nativity Story) does very well as King John. Eileen Atkins is the strong Eleanor of Aquitaine (Katherine Hepburn's Oscar-winning role in The Lion in Winter). William Hurt is Marshall, Danny Huston is King Richard, Mark Addy is Tuck and Matthew McFadyen is the local daft villain, the sheriff of Nottingham. Max von Sydow is Walter Loxley.

Perhaps not as emotionally engaging as Gladiator but an admirable historical experience.

PS. However, for peace lovers, there is a nagging concern that the battles in all their vigorous detail, do make war an adrenalin-pumping experience and seem mightily heroic, even for unjust wars – though it is balanced by showing the hardships that war causes at home, let alone the grim body count.

REBECCA H. (RETURN TO THE DOGS) (Un Certain Regard)

(France, US, 2010, d. Lodge Kerrigan)

A brief experimental film that will have the audience puzzling. Lodge Kerrigan has made few films. His Keane was a significant character study.

This time he is in Paris making a film about singer Grace Slick. His star is the French actress, Geraldine Pailhas. He edits, without warning, scenes of Geraldine Pailhas, interviews and takes of his film, along with the character of Rebecca H. who has mental problems but wants to go to the US to be a singer. Pascal Gregory plays himself as well as Rebecca's brother.

There are songs from Jefferson Airplane. There are long tracking shots following behind Rebecca and Geraldine Pailhas. So, this film about film-making and performers is an experiment and an experience – for those who relish this kind of experiment.

ROUTE IRISH (Competition)

(UK, 2010, d. Ken Loach)

If you are wondering what the route Irish is and where it is exactly, the film tells us that it is one of the most dangerous roads in the world, the road between Bagdad airport and the city's green zone (already the title of Paul Greengrass's film about the search for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq).

And, if you are wondering whether Ken Loach is making a political and social commentary film, the answer is yes... but he is also making a thriller in the classical mode of such films.

Loach's focus here is on the companies who went into Iraq to help with the rebuilding and won themselves enormous contracts. Many of the individuals, and some companies, have been accused of abuse and violence against Iraqis (as one character states here after a mate has been killed in Basra, he was so angry he had to go out and get himself a towelhead). These cowboy tactics have been widely criticised and some perpetrators have been brought to trial, but it is an area of reprehensible behaviour that needs more spotlighting, especially for justice towards Iraqi victims and their families.

While there are some sequences in Iraq (filmed in Jordan), most of the action takes place in Liverpool where the film opens with Fergus (Mark Womack) going to the funeral of his friend, Frankie, whom he had persuaded to go to work in Iraq for the money. Frankie has died in mysterious if not suspicious circumstances. The rest of the film shows Fergus' determination (both relentless and angry and often mouthed in wearisome crass language) to find out what exactly happened and who was responsible. That is not too difficult to fathom but the drama of the film is in what it does to Fergus himself, the danger of becoming as monstrous in his pursuit of truth as the violent and indifferent men who killed Frankie. Loach and his constant film-writer for almost 15 years, Paul Laverty, take an almost pessimistic view.

The Loach justice concern is to the fore, but in a style different from his usual social dramas.

SIMON WERNER E DISPARU... (LIGHTS OUT) (Un Certain Regard)

(France, 2010, d. Fabrice Gobert)

Based on the experiences at school of the writer-director, this seems to be a murder mystery, a jigsaw puzzle. At the opening, a body is found in the woods. The action goes back ten days and we see events from the point of view of four of the students at the local high school. The action overlaps and we see quite different interpretations of what has happened.

The resolution may seem something of an anti-climax (but Simon was murdered). What the film is doing is creating characters of high school students, exploring their attitudes, behaviour, relationships and the consequences of speculation and gossip about one another and the teachers. To that extent it is something of a welcome change from the usual teen comedies and melodramatic behaviour.

THE STRANGE CASE OF ANGELICA

(Portugal, 2010, d. Manoel de Oliveira)

If an audience did not know who the director is and his style of film-making for almost 80 years (there is no evidence apart from de Oliveira to suggest how a centenarian makes films; he was born in 1908), they might well give it a miss as a throwback to romantic film-making and a style that owes much to the visuals of the silent era. They might find it quite fey as a romantic fantasy.

But, we do know who made the film and his extraordinary film legacy, beginning his career soon after the advent of sound. He has maintained the effects of this style for years. But, de Oliveira is a classic artist in film and in poetic imagination. And, that is what this film is, a poetic look at a photographer who becomes obsessed with the dead young woman whose photograph he has been commissioned to take.

There is some irony in the fact that he is a refugee Sephardic Jew and the dead Angelica's family, as seen in her nun sister, wary of Jews if not anti-Semitic.

This is a Portuguese world which is both modern and which represents the director's past, a land of aristocracy and snobbery, catholic devotion and old world manners.

A poetic indulgence in romanticism and essential, of course, for the complete works of de Oliveira.

SZERID TEREMTES – A FRANKENSTEIN TERV (TENDER SON: THE FRANKSTEIN PROJECT) (Competition)

(Hungary, 2010, d. Kornel Mandruczo)

The key to this film is that it states that it has been 'inspired by' Mary Shelley. This sets up an expectation for those who like making connections between the plot of the film and the Frankenstein story. For those who take the plot as it comes, it may well be a quite different experience.

Viktor (played by Kornel Mandruczo, the film's director) is a successful theatre director but is now casting for a film in a dilapidated Budapest building which is to be knocked down. He conducts auditions (thus making new creatures of his cast and giving them new lives). An impassive young man does not audition well but the director gives him a chance with a young aspiring actress, with disastrous consequences. Is he a monster?

The young man is sheltered in the building by his mother whom he had been seeking. He is attracted to another girl who lives there and wants to marry here. The director returns to help him escape and they drive to the Tirol and into the snow.

This variation on the Frankenstein theme (who is a monster and what makes a monster) has some brutal action but is also a contemplative piece with some strangely beautiful photography with snow falling and in the mountain sequences.

TAMARA DREWE (Screening out of Competition)

(UK, 2010, d. Stephen Frears)

For over 40 years, director Stephen Frears has been surprising audiences with the range of his films, from Gumshoe to My Beautiful Laundrette, from Dangerous Liaisons to The Queen. According to his comments, this time he surprised himself. While the credits say the film is based on a graphic novel by Posy Simmonds (which itself took its cue from Thomas Hardy's also Dorset-set Far From the Madding Crowd), Frears keeps saying that he was making a film from a comic strip.

And so it is and despite this background, some of the characters are much more rounded out and developed than is possible in a comic strip.

Roger Allam and Tamsin Grieg (two noted British stage actors) are Nicholas and Beth who run a haven for writers, he writing his own novels and getting the money, she working the farm and being a kind hostess. The trouble is that Nicholas has a wandering eye and she always forgives him. When she asks him publicly about why he is unfaithful, he replies that she lets him.

Then Tamara Drewe (Gemma Arteton) returns home – with a nose job that has transformed her adolescent looks. She is insecure and begins a liaison with Ben, a group drummer (Dominic Cooper), and is not against other affairs until it all comes to a head. In the foreground is Andy (Luke Evans) who is redecorating her house (which was his family's old house) and works the farm for Beth. In the background is American Glenn (Bill Camp) who is writing an academic book on Hardy but who is encouraged to write for a more down to earth audience by Beth.

And always there are two bored 15 year olds who cause mischief, talk sex as they read their magazines and have a thing for Ben, which leads to some stalking, house invasion and inappropriate emails and – tongue-in-cheek – the resolution comes about when Ben's dog chases the cows in a Dorset stampede and a key character is trampled to death. But, as you might guess from what has gone on, he deserved it.

Rather slight but frequently funny and always quite amusing.

TOURNEE (ON TOUR) (Competition)

(France, 2010, d. Matthieu Amalric)

The tour starts in Le Havre and continues south along the French coast. Those on tour are five American women who have created a New Burlesque Show, stating that they want to target women and do without men. Actually, the excerpts from their show which we see on screen look very much like the old burlesque despite the hearty applause of the women in the audiences. Their names go way beyond Gypsy Rose Lee: Mimi Le Meaux, Kitten on the Keys, Dirty Martini...

But, they are dependent on one man, their producer, Joachim Zand – who is played by the versatile actor Matthieu Amalric (many, many French films and even Bond villain in *Quantum of Solace*) and who also directs the film. The uncertainties of the tour are manifest in the meanderings of the plot. There are also a lot of emotional meanderings but, especially, for Joachim who has been in the US, has used the act to get back to France where, it seems, he is not welcome to many old associates. He also makes contact with his two sons.

This means two focuses of attention, on the women and their acts (which may be more invigorating on stage than they are screen) and Joachim's many troubles. But, all in all, there is an optimism about human nature here, right up to Joachim's final shout – and the show must go on.

THE TREE (Closing film)

(Australia, France, 2010, d. Julie Bertucelli)

From the director of the fine SIGNIS award winning film, *Since Otter Left*. And the tree that they found for the film looks quite magnificent.

This is a story of an ordinary family in Queensland, the father a truck driver (Aden Young) and the mother at home with four children (Charlotte Gainsbourg). The father dies at the opening of the film and the rest of the plot concerns how well, or not, they cope with the death, especially as the months pass. They all grieve in their own way. The most dramatic is 8 year old Simone (Morgana Davies) who finds the presence of her father in the Moreton Bay Fig tree outside the house and communes with him. She persuades her mother to do the same but becomes unhappy, thinking the others have forgotten their father, and she becomes resentful when her mother takes a job at a store in town and the owner comes out to do jobs at their house and lends them his trailer for a Christmas holiday at the beach (Marton Csokas).

While the Queensland scenery looks wonderful, the film is more ordinary, likeable (though Simone can be rather irritating as she makes emotional demands on her mother 'this instant') than highly dramatic.

Nature turns against them rather spectacularly at the end, but they go forward with some greater happiness to begin again.

Adapted from a novel by Judy Pascoe, *Our Father who art in the Tree*.

WALL STREET: MONEY NEVER SLEEPS (Screening out of Competition)

(US, 2010, d. Oliver Stone)

A welcome sequel.

23 years earlier, Michael Douglas' Oscar-winning role as insider trader, Gordon Gecko, with his now immortalised motto, Greed is good, became one of the screen's most famous icons. However, as the 1980s were drawing to a close, Stone's film was in some ways prophetic and was released at the time of the Wall Street collapse of October 1987. It was strong stuff and a timely critique. This time, Stone does not have to be prophetic. The world shared in the financial collapse of 2008 and the American government had to bail out the banks, and banks were being bailed out – much to the public's dismay and their being scandalised by the extravagant bonus culture that rewarded bosses who failed (let alone acted illegally).

This film, with its behind the scenes look at American banking, the go-getting personalities and their ruthlessness adapted for consumption by a wide cinema-going public is certainly not going to endear the bankers to anyone. And

since the film was in production, Lehman Brothers bank collapsed and even Goldman Sachs is being investigated. Greed wasn't good, but, as the newly released from jail and promoting his new book, a newly smoothly ageing Gordon Gecko reminds us, everybody indulged in that greed where they could. In the final credits, on an American banknote is the wry joking motto, 'In greed we trust'.

So, Oliver Stone and his writers are socking it to them and to us – but, because the times are bad, there are many notes of warm humanity and more humble values which may strike some viewers as a bit sentimental for this kind of film.

Michael Douglas (looking ever more like his father as he ages) relishes the chance to be Gordon Gecko again, and the screenplay does not fail him. His Fordham lecture is well worth listening to, as is his advice (both straightforward and devious) to his intended son-in-law, Jake (Shia LaBeouf, who has moved from juvenile star (Holes) to teenage drama (Disturbia) to action hero (The Transformers) to good adult fare. But, despite the charm and the alleged repentance, can a Gecko change whatever it is that is natural to it? Yes, then no, then maybe!

Frank Langella gives credibility to the first part of the film, a banker of the old school who is dismayed by the upstarts and the machine controlled global finances. He is Jake's mentor. Then, enter the principal villain for this sequel, a younger, unscrupulous speculator, Bretton James (Josh Brolin who was Oliver Stone's George W). He is under the wing of a veteran who remembers the crash of 1929, a welcome role for 93 year old Eli Wallach. Things financial go from bad to worse as the Federal Reserve is brought in and even the Bush administration had to bail out the banks which seemed to justify that antichrist of American opinion, 'socialism' – which some did accuse George W Bush of in fact.

There is also a human story in Wall Street 2. Carey Mulligan (An Education) plays Gecko's alienated daughter, Winnie, engaged to Jake who tries to reconcile her with her father. She is a director of a non-profit website, Frozen Truth, (Bretton James says he doesn't understand 'non-profit') which reminds us of how influential sites are and how they can be a power for good (investigative expose articles) or source for unfounded rumours which become a reality that demand to be investigated and argued against.

There are some interesting sub-plots involving Susan Sarandon as Jake's real estate agent mother, a glimpse of Sylvia Miles as another agent and Austin Pendleton as a physicist working on green-friendly research.

Make allowances for the human and nicer aspects of the film and enjoy the Wall Street side of it. It will make you rather self-satisfiedly indignant at those unscrupulous speculators – but the question remains what can be done, what is being done – and where are we headed?

YOU WILL SEE A TALL DARK STRANGER (Screening out of Competition)

(UK, 2010, d. Woody Allen)

The title is what fortune tellers often tell future-hungry clients who are prepared to believe anything. Most of the characters in this Woody Allen confection, filmed in London (a Woody Allen world of writers, artists, publishers and galleries), have created their own fantasies. One does go to a fortune teller. The others tend to poo-poo superstition but are so locked in their hopes and ambitions that they often refuse to see the truth before them. And for anyone wanting an open ending, for most of the characters, here it is. A number of interesting consequences will come home to roost after the final credits!

Many will complain that this is Woody Allen re-cycling stories and issues. Don't we all!! But, this one is more interesting insofar as it has no real Allen substitute character talking like him (though many will observe Anthony Hopkins as the ageing man who takes up with a younger woman). It is amusing rather than funny, but that has been characteristic of Allen films in recent years.

There is a very strong international cast with performances worth watching. At the beginning and end is the unexpected character of the ageing Helena, who is really the central character. She is played cannily by British actress Gemma Jones, a mixture of angry rejected wife and eagerly superstitious devotee who is in the hands of Cristal (Shirley Valentine's own Pauline Collins). Naomi Watts plays her generally level-headed daughter whose marriage is collapsing and who misreads the attentions of her boss (Antonio Banderas). Josh Brolin (after W, Milk and Wall Street 2) is her would-be successful novelist husband. But he has his eye on music student (Freida Pinto, Slumdog Millionaire) in a window across the street.

Anthony Hopkins plays the husband of 40 years who refuses to face age and his wife's ageing and takes up with an escort (Lucy Punch who makes her an unselfconsciously dopey gold-digger).

There are plenty of secrets and lies, Woody Allen style.

Dear Gerald,

Please excuse the delay in replying since I have been away from home.

As with previous festivals, I contributed daily reviews for the site of The Ecumenical Jury. With no one full time at Cannes, there will be no English Corner on the site this year. I am attaching the collection of reviews I did for SIGNIS and its associates for Cannes 2010.

I remember with appreciation your letting me use your phone a couple of years ago for doing an interview with Australian radio.

With every best wish and thanks,

Peter

Peter Malone
SIGNIS

From: Presse <Presse@festival-cannes.fr>
To: Peter Malone <petermalonemsc@yahoo.co.uk>
Sent: Mon, 21 February, 2011 21:43:32
Subject: RE: Press Accreditation 2011

Dear Sir,

Thank you for your email and for your coverage throughout the years. If you have the possibility to send us your coverage one last time for our archives, that would be great.

We hope that you are having a good time back home.

All the best,

Gérald Duchaussoy

De : Peter Malone [mailto:petermalonemsc@yahoo.co.uk]
Envoyé : vendredi 18 février 2011 18:30
À : Presse
Objet : Re: Press Accreditation 2011

To the Press Accreditation, Festival de Cannes.

Many thanks for this email. Sadly, I have returned home to Australia, so I think my Cannes days are over.

Thank you for all your assistance over the last 12 years,

Peter

Peter Malone

SIGNIS

4.3.2.1.

BROOKLYN'S FINEST

COP OUT

DEATH AT A FUNERAL

FIRED

GENTLEMEN BRONCOS

HOT TUB TIME MACHINE

KITES

LOSERS, The

PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE SANDS OF TIME

REC 2

ROAD TRAIN

SEX AND THE CITY 2

STREETDANCE

TOOTH FAIRY

TRIOMF

4.3.2.1.

(UK, 2010, d. Noel Clarke and Mark Davis)

Noel Clarke made two sharp films about teen people and adult people in the London suburbs: *Kidulthood* and *Adulthood*. This film is more ambitious but makes less impact.

It starts with a misleading incident, which is later seen to be the opposite of what we thought and, then, before you can say 4.3.2.1., we are whirling around in time (with whirling camera and lots of flash flourishes) as we follow four young women and what they did over a two day period. When you realise that we are going back in time for each of the four, then it makes sense and we see the interconnections and the repeats and make sense of what is happening.

Meanwhile there is a subplot of a diamond robbery in Antwerp and the misadventures of the London connection which sees one of the girls in unwitting possession of the diamonds. She is also having a bad emotional time as her mother is leaving her father who is bogged down in sadness and self-pity. The rich girl of the four flies off to New York to secure a study place as well as to see the charming man on the other end of the computer link-up. Some disasters there as well (despite cameo appearances from Mandy Patinkin and Kevin Smith). A third girl, of mixed race, has a hard time with her family and teams up with her girlfriend. The fourth is an American (Emma Roberts) who works in a supermarket.

Quite a number of coincidences drive the plot forward, but it will depend on whether you like the girls and believe in them whether you are persuaded that this is an effective drama or not.

BROOKLYN'S FINEST

(US, 2009, d. Antoine Fuqua.)

Brooklyn's Finest is a very interesting police story set in New York, specifically in Brooklyn. While much of this material has been seen in many films, it is particularly well done in this instance, from the writing by Michael C. Martin, whose first script it was and who worked on it after observing police. The film was directed by Antoine Fuqua, who traced some of the difficulties in policing in his effective film, *Training Day*.

The structure of the film is to focus on three different policemen and their crises and gradually to bring them together at the finale – with some tragic results. The film opens with a confrontation between one of the police, played by Ethan Hawke, with a dealer and criminal and his killing him and taking his money to help his family.

The film focuses on the ordinary policeman, the possibilities of corruption and violence, yet his love for his family and his Catholic faith. Richard Gere portrays a burnt-out policeman, trying to be a man of integrity but finding it very difficult, especially with his fellow policemen. He is also involved with a friend who is a prostitute. Don Cheadle

portrays an investigator, trying to come to terms with the whole range of policing in Brooklyn. He also has been working undercover, deep undercover, and this has an effect on him and his family. It also affects his relationship with the gangster to whom he had come close. He is played by Wesley Snipes. Ellen Barkin has a strong role as a tougher-than-tough district attorney and the supporting cast includes Will Patton as a policeman, Vincent D'Onofrio and Brian F. O'Byrne as gangsters.

The film explores the pressures on police life, on individuals, on the structures and the hierarchy, on the relentless pressures from the criminal world.

While the Richard Gere story is familiar, Gere, such a durable presence on screen, makes it convincing. Don Cheadle's story is a desperate one, making one question why anybody would volunteer to work undercover. The Ethan Hawke story offers the pathos of an ordinary man, genuinely wanting to help his family but overwhelmed by pressures and financial difficulties.

COP OUT

(US, 2010, d. Kevin Smith)

Kevin Smith has been having bad luck lately with film titles. People objected to Zack and Miri make a Porno. And he had to use Cop Out instead of A Couple of Dicks, his working title – there are ruder jokes in the film (though not quite as many in some of Kevin Smith's other films). In fact, if you did not know Smith directed it, it would just be an average time-passer of an odd couple pair of cops solving some crimes while sparring with each other. Smith didn't write the screenplay but one presumes he liked all the movie references and Tracy Morgan's homage to these movies (when Bruce Willis knows he should have used the French, 'hommage'.) Having glanced at so many negative comments, I found it not nearly as bad as some apoplectic reviewers (who became more apoplectic when Smith wrote an article suggesting critics were superfluous) and some die hard Smith fans (who don't agree with him doing genre movies).

Bruce Willis does his laid-back cop thing, not exerting any extra energy. Tracy Morgan (also seen in Death at a Funeral) does his schtick – though how he every became a policeman, got through training, managed action on the beat, did not get attacked by his irritated and frustrated colleagues is the main mystery of the film.

Otherwise, it is Jim and Paul get suspended but keep pursuing the drug criminals, Jim (Willis) preoccupied about paying for his daughter's wedding reception and Paul (Morgan) prone to jealousy concerning his wife (as well as being on the phone or looking in the wrong direction when some important action was 'going down', as they say.

One of many similar cop shows.

DEATH AT A FUNERAL

(US, 2010, d. Neil LaBute)

No, that is not a mistake. It is only three years since many of us enjoyed the British farce, Death at a Funeral, directed by Frank Oz and starring Matthew McFadyen and Rupert Graves organising the funeral of their father and the revelation that his private life was not what they thought it was. There are various guests, problems and misunderstandings as well as some blackmail, a death with two in a coffin and an old uncle with toilet problems.

The script was sold to the US and it was decided, under the auspices of Chris Rock, to re-make it as an American comedy, specifically an African American comedy. Chris Rock and Martin Lawrence are both more subdued than could be believed but giving humorous performances with many black one-liners which weren't in the original. Danny Glover is there as the uncle with the bowel trouble, Tracy Morgan as his hypochondriac nephew. There is also a place for Zoe Saldana (the heroine of Avatar) and Columbus Short. There are two white characters, a rather ineffectual Luke Wilson who pines for Zoe Saldana who is not interested in him because she is concerned about her fiancé who has been given a hallucinogenic drug instead of an aspirin and causes embarrassment and several kerfuffles. James Marsden gives an enthusiastically funny performance.

After the right coffin is delivered to the house after a driving error, the preacher starts but there are many interruptions. The main one is the arrival of short-statured Peter Dinklage (who played the same role in the British original) who brings the proceedings into crisis, a fight, a collapse and a what do with the body and how can we avoid anybody seeing what has happened.

It is the same as the original but different (as are most interpretations of a common text). The same characters and situations but a different tone with the American humour. Both are enjoyable comedies – funny, but not exactly refined.

FIRED

(India/UK, 2010, d. Sajit Warrier)

Most horror films these days, going for the scares, frights, blood and gore and special effects can seem rather silly, even ludicrous. But, often that doesn't really matter for the fans because they accept the non-sequiturs and even the absurdities as long as it's a good show.

Fired starts eerily enough but soon becomes as manic as its protagonist and, before too long (it is an 87 minute film), it heads towards the top and tries to go over.

While it is set in London and used some location photography, it is very much an Indian film. It concerns an Indian company with many Indian employees. And the sensibility is very much colourful Indian and emotions up there on the screen.

Rahul Bose portrays the new CEO who has manipulated his way to the top – and then sacked 121 of the staff. As he complacently moves into his new office, strange things begin to happen, especially when he goes down the corridor and finds the masked staff sewing up their victim's eyelids – and we know we are in the realm of dreams and hallucinations. Has he taken too many anti-depressant pills. Is his conscience taking over and playing havoc with his psyche – all the devices for a haunted house story are included for a haunted office story. And then there is the spectre of former lover and sacked employee, Ruby – and the security guard who seems to bring some sanity and realism into the torments of the CEO. And so on, with some gory face destroying touches to keep us alarmed.

Actually, it is very much like a Japanese ghost story in plot and in the dreams and the appearance of the Ruby spectre. They have probably made it already.

GENTLEMEN BRNCOS

(US, 2009, d. Jared Hess)

With his third film (with his writing partner and wife, Jerusah), Jared Hess has definitely developed a signature kind of film – which can be greeted as cult entertainment or dismissed as oddball. Napoleon Dynamite, his first, got a lot of the cult treatment. His second, Nacho Libre... well, hmm, um... His third, with the tantalising name of Gentlemen Brncos (whatever that actually does mean in the film itself), can either be irritatingly oddball or entertainingly oddball. Despite the sour faces around me, I opted for the latter.

Of course it is silly. So was Napoleon Dynamite – but Nacho Libre was more stupid than silly. Here we are in between!

The film gives the impression of having almost no budget and being made up as they went along. A young comic book nerd writes and draws his own comics. He goes to a conference and attends a workshop by a writer he idolizes who actually steals his plot, adapts it for his own book and has a great commercial success. In the meantime, a more than eccentric group make an appalling no budget film with our young writer trying to be an actor as well.

What is left is to expose the writer and achieve some success on one's own.

Actually, that sounds quite lame and, I suppose, it is. The amusement is in the antics, with Michael Angarano as the young writer (a bit similar to his role in The Man in the Chair), in disbelieving the dreadful home movie of the comic but relishing the wonderfully satiric performance of Jermaine Clement as the self-absorbed celebrity author. And a bonus is that Jennifer Coolidge plays the boy's mother.

HOT TUB TIME MACHINE

(US, 2010, d. Steve Pink)

No, this back to the future for middle-aged men who are louts or wish they had the chance to be louts, is not as funny as the title might suggest. 2009 saw a film in this vein, The Hangover, which (despite ourselves and the characters' shenanigans) we could find quite a laugh-aloud comedy.

We are introduced to three forty-something men whose lives have been lived in regret, especially since a holiday they had in 1986 at a ski resort where a good life seemed possible. One of them has taken an overdose, maybe deliberately

but he does not seem to have any grasp on life which might have led to his making any decision one way or the other. His friends, who have drifted away from each other, get in touch and decide to help him by taking him back to the resort. The nerdish nephew of one of them goes along too.

The resort has gone downhill and Back to the Future's Crispin Glover, is a one-armed bell-hop with attitude. The only consolation seems to be a hot tub, presided over by Chevy Chase. When they spill an energy drink (what a way to initiate time travel in a hot tub!), they are back in 1986, ready to re-live that important day and then get back to the future.

But, unless you enjoy the broadest humour, with accompanying body function, language and crass jokes, you will be straight-faced most of the time. They do re-live the past. Something better than what they did is possible as is a wish-fulfilment happy ending.

John Cusack seems out of place in this kind of film (letting the lout out of him but with restraint). Craig Robinson is quite genial. And Rob Corddry is the epitome of gross crassness (or crass grossness), but, it must be said, he does it with full steam ahead and persuasively.

Every review will probably mention the funny sequence when Craig Robinson telephones his 9 year old future wife and upbraids her for what she will do. If only the rest were as inventive and funny.

KITES

(India, 2009, d. Anurag Basu)

Quite a deal of ballyhoo promoting this Indian thriller romance. The international version, at 2 hours, was released with some popular success in India and in the US. Then, a week later, Kites: the Remix was released, a cut version, supervised by Brett Ratner. This review is of the 2 hour version.

Not quite sure what the ballyhoo was all about and what it was for – it is a mixed bag as entertainment. The Indian film-makers have gone to the US and filmed in Las Vegas and in New Mexico. That is more than a bit exotic for the home audience and, maybe, a draw for an international audience. However, it is highly (highly) melodramatic with a Bollywood visual style, bright colours, intense close-ups and some of the new found freedom in showing relationships.

J has moved from India to the US and, while working as a dance instructor, serves as a repeat husband for women wanting to become US citizens or get green cards. When he is pursued by the daughter of a crooked casino owner (also from India) and wins a dance competition with her, her father is so pleased, he invites J to become part of his organisation and to the engagement party of his son. But, he is to marry the last of J's illegal spouses and he persuades her to run away with him.

So, after the Nevada glamour, there are several chases (in one, the cars burst into flame almost before they crash; in another, there are no fires), shootouts as angry jilted gangster pursues J and his woman. When you think the film is going to end, there is more, especially in terms of happy marriage, revenge and an ending of amour fou that will raise an eyebrow or two.

For emotional temperaments who like melodrama. Otherwise, a bit too much.

THE LOSERS

(US, 2010, d. Sylvain White)

Unfortunately, somebody else got in before me with The Dirty Five or The B Team. But that kind of indicates what to expect from this movie version of a comic strip. It is certainly written like one, filmed like one and acted like one – even to the most impossible high diving catch in movie history.

We are introduced to the five, with their action skills, before they go on an ill-fated mission to destroy a drug house. The villain behind the scenes then emerges as an oddball sounding and fashionably tailored megalomaniac who is not burdened by scruples about taking human life – and Jason Patric plays him just like that, a real comic strip, smooth baddie.

Just when we thought it was going to be a really macho show, in comes Aissa (Zoe Saldana from Avatar and Star Trek) and shows that where punch ups are needed (or, as here, not needed, but fought nonetheless) she is not to be beaten.

It starts in Bolivia, proceeds to Miami, while the villain seems to be able to turn up anywhere in the world from Mumbai to Los Angeles, and does.

There is revenge, betrayal, tricks and explosions going off big time. Jeffrey Dean Morgan is the leader with Idris Elba clashing with him and Chris Evans doing some amusing turns as a computer nerd who is also big with action.

For those who enjoy the same old, same old...

PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE SANDS OF TIME

(US, 2010, d. Mike Newell)

In terms of colourful action, Prince of Persia elicits a number of 'Wows'! If you want action, you've got it, in exotic settings with plenty of special effects.

It has been produced by veteran Jerry Bruckheimer, well-known for many a slam-bang show from Top Gun, Con Air to the Pirates of the Caribbean franchise. This one looks as if somebody made him a bet that he couldn't produce a movie that was almost all action (with a few conversations here and there which do not really halt the momentum at all). He has won the bet.

We are back in the Persian Empire with the rule of a powerful king (Ronald Pickup) who relies on his younger brother for support and loyalty (Ben Kingsley). He has two sons but is impressed by the derring do and challenge of a young orphan in the marketplace and adopts him as his son. Right from the start we see Dastan, the boy (who grows up to be Jake Gyllenhaal) running, jumping, leaping, bouncing, somersaulting, swinging. Director Mike Newell said that Gyllenhaal spent weeks rehearsing all these moves and stunts doing a number of them himself but still letting the stunt doubles get plenty of action. (One distraction, however, Gyllenhaal's accent seems as if it has been dubbed in a Jude Law vein with a touch of Michael Caine.)

The King wants to confront a sacred city to investigate their loyalty or whether they were making and shipping arms to enemies of the kingdom. The armies invade, prepare for a siege, but Dustan uses his wits and his athleticism and in no time has entered the city, opened the gates, poured boiling oil on the defenders. It is all breathtaking stuff – and we are probably more out of puff than Dustan is.

In the city there is a princess (Gemma Arterton), guardian of a dagger that has mystical/magical powers and can reverse time – which comes in handy at a number of times of danger, and is most useful for the ending.

When the king dies burned, by a poisoned cloak, Dustan is blamed, so that leads to lots of trekking through the desert, lots of chases, encounters with a Sheikh who calls himself an entrepreneur (and has all the funny lines, delivered humorously and lightly ironically by Alfred Molina). He has a servant from the Sudan who is the quickest with knife throwing, and he comes in handy many a time and for the climax.

By this stage, we might think that action might let up and the conversations get a bit longer and more frequent, but they don't. There is really only one kiss between Dustan and the Princess, so very little time wasted on romance.

Treachery, deceit, plots, more chases and, with echoes of Indiana Jones and the National Treasure films, caves with traps, fire, erupting sand and even more heroics.

Yes, it is a lavishly produced adventure (even with some literal cliffhangers, especially at the end) of the Boys' Own kind (which may be a bit too junior macho for a female audience) but it is exciting and entertaining matinee material for any time of the day or night. Older audiences might be reminiscing about those b-budget adventures from the 1950s with Tony Curtis, Victor Mature and Piper Laurie. The Prince of Persia is much the same only larger, longer, pacier.

REC 2

(Spain, 2009, d. Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza)

Takes up at the moment that the original Rec finished, the journalist who was covering the drama in the quarantined building being dragged off to somewhere infernal.

This sequel plays much the same plot again but in different guises. While there was a deadly aggressive virus taking over its victims in the sealed off apartments, this time we have a different reason for the origin of the virus. When in

doubt, bring in something 'supernatural'. Apparently, the little girl who was the source of the infection, was actually diabolically possessed and a priest is now sent in to collect her blood sample to be the basis for an antidote. (This would mean that a remake of The Exorcist would be quite short, the priests coming in and inserting an injection and the girl being instantly exorcised!)

The same kind of tension is created. Angry infected people start attacking. The lighting is a bit clearer because the equipment is of a higher standard but, eventually, the lights go out and the night camera goes into play. Half way through, the plot starts again as three reckless teenagers defy the ban to enter the building and finish up filming, being chased and becoming targets.

No major surprises, just the scary enjoyment of doing it all over again with something demonic in the background. If you feel apprehensive, you could become a nervous Rec 2!

ROAD TRAIN

(Australia, 2009, d. Dean Francis)

Probably a good idea for an outback Australian horror thriller with 'supernatural' touches, but this is something of a derivative show (Duel, Wolf Creek, Highway to Hell...) for straight to DVD and group home watching, the audience egging each other on as it progresses (or regresses) and the ludicrous aspects loom larger. Of course, for this type of film, in the recent slasher thrillers vein, it doesn't really matter if it is ridiculous.

Two couples are out camping (and the explicit sex scene is in the first five minutes) in beautiful, isolated South Australia. The cast is strong enough to make them a bit more than the cyphers and victims they really are. A Duel-like road train, with a three heads of Cerberus on the front, crashes into them and one by one, they become the victims of the mysterious road train. This can sometimes be bloody and gory. And that's about it.

SEX AND THE CITY 2

(US, 2010, d. Michael Patrick King)

The main image that came to mind for reviewing Sex and the City 2 was that seeing it was like eating a couple of large slices of sponge cake, over-filled with cream and laden with lots of icing – maybe a treat at the start but, full of sugar, and ultimately not healthy for you. The moral unhealthiness for many could be gross envy of these four women from New York City who have no real experience of real life and have the money or the connections for them to be able to avoid it and stay fashionably dressed (with multi changes) while doing it.

But, for those who followed the lives of Carrie and her friends Miranda, Charlotte and the provocative Samantha, on TV over the years and enjoyed the first movie, no warning about how dangerous sponge cake can be for your blood sugar levels, is going to stop them rushing to see this sequel.

The four women, despite two of them having children, live an American dream, a designer lifestyle of capitalist consumerism. The first part of this film is also a fairy tale, a half an hour at a gay wedding, with such an overdose of camp in colour, clothes and music (a male choir singing songs from shows), arguments about being PC in talking about this topic, Sarah Jessica Parker arriving in tails to be 'best man' and then (yes, that can be capped, the officiating person turning up in the form of Liza Minnelli who, of course, does a song and dance routine that could become part of the drag queen repertoire).

Where to go after that? To some problems, Miranda being pushed around professionally and silenced by a chauvinistic boss; Charlotte concerned about the busty young Irish nanny looking after her girls; Carrie and Big sorting out marriage issues; and Samantha, just the same, mouthing all the vulgar lines with relish, concerned about sex and menopause.

Fortunately, for them, they have time out with a trip, all expenses paid, to Abu Dabi (filmed in Morocco) where they get to be insensitive American tourists, especially concerning dress and sex issues, although some burkha-clad Arab women show that they are just as Fifth Avenue conscious underneath the black (which means that the film is going to flop in Saudi Arabia, Iran etc, though thrive on women there pirating and downloading copies). Our heroines also do a karaoke Abu Dabi version of I Am Woman. (The rooms, meals, drinks, limousines and so on that they are treated to could probably save the borrowing debts of an impoverished country, say, Spain or Greece!)

Real life almost impinges but they get home, first class flight, and live happily ever after until the next sequel.

STREET DANCE

(UK, 2010, d. Max Giwa and Dania Pasquini)

Anything you can do, I can do better (sang Annie Oakley in Annie Get Your Gun). These aren't the lyrics for Street Dance but they could well be the sentiments of the makers as they have looked at the many street dancing competition films from the US in recent years (Step Up, How She Move...) and decided that with all the Britain's Got Talent types and all the TV competition programs, the UK could do Street Dance better than the Americans – and in 3D!

It's all exactly predictable, but that is the formula the audience will enjoy.

Two crews are rivals. Leader walks out of a crew and joins the other, leaving his girlfriend and letting her pick up the pieces to prepare in a short time for the finals – which would lead to a trip to the US. He does. She does. They do.

However, there is one big difference (apart from all the aerial postcard scenes of London) and that is Charlotte Rampling. She might be one of the last serious actresses who would agree to appear in this kind of film. But, she does and she really looks as if she is enjoying it. She is a ballet instructor and feels that her students lack oomph and passion. When the street dancer delivers her lunch and sees the rehearsal space, the two come to an agreement that the two groups should work together – but, at first there is snobbery and reverse snobbery.

In these films, there is always a clash with times, the ballet auditions and the finals of the street dancing competition programmed at the same time. I wonder what they do and who wins!!

TOOTH FAIRY

(US, 2010, d. Michael Lembeck)

In a competition for co-stars that you would not be likely to see on screen, Dwayne (The Rock) Johnson and Julie Andrews might be considered a way out juxtaposition of opposites! But here they are!!

Actually, this is quite a pleasing family film which is not too demanding, has some funny lines for the adults, and has a niceness about it which is aimed at getting rid of the not-niceness in life.

Dwayne Johnson plays Derek Thompson, an ice hockey star who is over the hill but still playing because of his capacity to knock opponents over and knock out their teeth, 'the whole tooth and nothing but the tooth'. But he is in love with a mother of two (Ashley Judd) and is trying to get on with her children. When he tells the six year old daughter, who has put a tooth under her pillow, that the tooth fairy does not exist, he is ousted by the mother and finds a summons to fairyland under his pillow to answer the charge of promoting disbelief. And who is in charge? A senior Mary Poppinsish type herself who brooks no interruption and makes Derek spend two weeks on tooth fairy duty, on call at any moment.

The assistant, Tracey, a taller than lanky Brit, is played by Ricky Gervais' co-writer of The Office, Stephen Merchant, and Billy Crystal is on hand for a few amusing scenes.

Of course, what you expect will happen does happen – would you want to watch it if it didn't!

Dwayne Johnson has shown a very genial spirit in many films and does not hesitate to send himself up – sprouting large fairy wings here and appearing in a pink tutu until fairyland wardrobe fixes him up in a pale blue fairy suit. He does all the right things by his hockey team, by his girlfriend and, especially by the children. And it is a pleasure to see Julie Andrews doing her thing and then letting off steam in a final credits hockey match sequence.

TRIOMF

(South Africa, 2008, d. Michael Raeburn)

Triomf is a very ironic title for a film which makes for very (very) uneasy watching.

Triomf, which is based on a novel by, is the name the apartheid government gave to a black township, Sophiatown, which was razed to the ground in the 1950s and the black inhabitants relocated (somewhat akin to the 2009 science-fiction story, District 9). Poor white families were settled in Triomf (no triumph here) where they lived on the outskirts of Johannesburg, poor, ignorant and inbred.

However, the setting for this film is 1994 just prior to the first elections which brought Nelson Mandela and the ANC to government. We are introduced to a middle-aged mechanic at work who observes (with some disdain) the singing, dancing and cheerful shouts of the local black population anticipating victory in the elections. He trudges home, enabling us to see Triomf, which does not look so bad on the outside, but is depressingly ugly inside. The family looks like those isolated hillbilly folks in the southern US who are often the characters in horror slasher films.

As the film proceeds and we get to know Pop, Mol, Treppie (the worker we first see) and the younger Lambert. They live a gross kind of life, slob style and some shock scenes, especially with incest. We later learn that the family secrets are even more gross. The acting, with dialogue in Afrikaans and English, seems odd, to say the least, and sometimes with a touch of caricature.

In fact, you feel in need of a wash after viewing the film.

By the violent end (within the family, not with the black neighbours), we realise that this is offered as an allegory of the decline of the presumptions, racial, religious and political, of the oppressive whites, their decay and their passing as a new South Africa emerges.

SIGNIS FILM REVIEWS JULY 2010

Some solid dramas this month, including the spy story, L'Affaire Farewell, and also in Russia and France, Le Concert (directed by Radu Milheanu who was president of the Ecumenical Jury in Cannes, 2009).

Animal Kingdom is of Australia's best films in recent times.

Quite a number of family films: Toy Story 3, The Karate Kid are good. Shrek Forever After not as good as before. Marmaduke for the undemanding/

A-TEAM, The

ACCIDENTS HAPPEN

AFFAIRE FAREWELL, L'

ANIMAL KINGDOM

CITY ISLAND

CONCERT, Le

ECLIPSE (THE TWILIGHT SAGA, ECLIPSE)

GET HIM TO THE GREEK

GROWN UPS

I LOVE YOU TOO

KARATE KID, The

KINGS OF MYKONOS

LETTERS TO JULIET

MADemoiselle CHAMBON

MARMADUKE

MOTHER AND CHILD

NEW YORK, I LOVE YOU

SHREK FOREVER AFTER

TOY STORY 3
VALHALLA RISING

THE A TEAM

(US, 2010, d. Joe Carnahan)



Blast, boom, bang. Then bang, bang, blast, boom. Not the most subtle of actioners.

Based on the 1980s television series, this is an update in terms of time (war in Iraq) and in weaponry and technology. Hence, the bigger blasts, booms and bangs.

This time we have, of all people, Liam Neeson as the ageing expert and leader of the special squad who seem to be able to achieve any secret mission (unless they are betrayed) and one wonders why they haven't found Osama Bin Laden or were not called in to cap the Gulf of Mexico oil spill and effect it instantly. Here we see their prowess during the opening sequences in escaping capture and death from several dastardly situations. This is meant as a bit of background to the origins of the team and their working undercover. They later receive a mission to retrieve some plates for minting US notes (which Saddam Hussein had purloined) but it goes awry and they are arrested and imprisoned. But, out they get and go to remedy the situation and unmask the traitor (whom they and we were not expecting). The other members are 'Faceman' Peck (Bradley Cooper), B.A. Baracus (Quinton 'Rampage' Jackson) and the seemingly insane daredevil, Murdock (Sharlto Copley who was the put-upon official in District 9).

Complications in their lives and mission include Peck's former girlfriend and now suspicious military officer (Jessica Biehl, who actually is given a lot more to do than might be expected in this macho macho outing) and CIA smoothie, Lynch (Patrick Wilson). Veteran Gerald McRaney is a commanding officer.

Somebody remarked with the two films' simultaneous releases that what *Sex and the City* is to female audiences, *The A-Team* is to male audiences. So, there we are – or not!

ACCIDENTS HAPPEN

(Australia/US, 2009, d. Andrew Lancaster)

A strange mixture of the amusing, the serious and the puzzling.

While set in the US, this film is an Australian venture, filmed in Australia, with a local cast except for the star, Geena Davis.

For those who have experienced car accidents and the loss of loved ones in such accidents, this film might be a bit hard to take. It does not shirk showing accidents and the effect on families because of the loss of children by death or by brain damage.

Geena Davis plays the mother of the family, closely knit, although the children squabble amongst themselves – which leads to a fatal crash. The mother is devastated though self-composed but cannot bring herself to visit her son in an institution. His twin has problems with drinking and communicating. The father walks out and begins another family. It is the youngest, Billy (who was the cause of the distraction that led to the accident) who is the main focus of the film, some years after the accident.

He is something of a home angel, street devil, and gets into pranks (he and his brother's friend shoplifting wearing only ski masks) and stealing a bowling ball that leads to more 'accidents happen' which bring some of the issues and moral consequences into consideration.

This is also a picture of unhappy families, ability and inability to cope with life and being forced to consider taking responsibility for one's actions.

Geena Davis plays the mother as tough and not mealy-mouthed in her comments. Harrison Gilbertson has a strong screen presence as Billy – an indication that he could go on to a successful career.

On the whole, as the title might indicate, this is a film about life and troubles that makes for uncomfortable watching as much of it is close to the bone.

L'AFFAIRE FAREWELL

(France, 2009, d. Christian Clarion)

Christian Clarion made the moving film about World War I in the trenches and the brief respite of a ceasefire for

Christmas in his Joyeux Noel (Merry Christmas). He now comes forward in time to take up another interesting period that is due for consideration and clearer hindsight interpretations: the last years of Leonid Brezhnev's Russia, its decline and paving the way for Gorbachev and Pestroika and the collapse of the Soviet empire.

And one of the characters involved in this screenplay is Ronald Reagan as president, some interesting insights which means that Oliver Stone who has made movies about Kennedy, Nixon and the two Bushes could turn his gaze on Reagan the politician. (Here he is played by Fred Ward.)

However, the film's attention goes to a high-placed member of the KGB (played by Serb director, Emir Kusturica) who becomes dissatisfied with the administration and the stagnation in Russia and passes on documents to the French via an employee of a company at its office in Moscow (Guillaume Canet). The material then goes to French president, Francois Mitterand, and is communicated to President Reagan and his administration. Since this all happened under thirty years ago, it makes for interesting viewing and assessment of what was happening between the two power giants at the time.

The film shows the detail of the KGB officer and his meetings with his contact and how the material was transferred to France (the technology was photocopier and camera).

There is also some background of counter-espionage in the KGB as well as the response of the CIA (with Willem Dafoe as director). There are betrayals and counter-betrayals and the sacrificing of individuals for the 'greater good'.

This is not an exciting spy drama although the escape of the Frenchman and his family in split second timing across the Russian-Finnish border has its moments. Rather, this is a study of the times, the personalities, the role of ideology and pragmatism. The latter has always been the determinant of what happens in the world.

The film provides some eye-openers for what goes on behind the diplomatic scenes.

ANIMAL KINGDOM

(Australia, 2009, d. David Michod)

Towards the end of this fine drama about Melbourne crooks (they are too local and low-key to really be called gangsters), the sympathetic detective played by Guy Pearce gives the 17 year old J (for Joshua) Cody a lecture about the animal kingdom, about who is strong and who is weak, who protects the weak, and whether they are as strong as they think they are. At the beginning, J's voiceover tells us that his criminal family are always afraid whether they realise it or not and that their collapse seems inevitable.

So, that is what the film is about – although it is more complex than that, especially in the family relationships rather than in the crimes committed.

This is a particularly well-written drama and very well acted, a satisfying look at the underside of human nature.

We are introduced to J (newcomer James Frecheville who invests his character with an overt passivity that covers a teenager forced to face dire realities before his time trying to work out where he stands in life in relationship to his family and in relationship to moral evil and good). When his mother dies of an overdose he contacts his grandmother (Jacki Weaver in one of her best roles, the matriarch of a suburban crime family who can sound like sweetness and light and motherly love but who is as ruthless as they come). Three of his uncles are bank robbers, one a drug dealer. They take it for granted that they have to initiate him into their world and its codes. When one of their associates (Joel

Edgerton) is set up by police and shot, the brothers retaliate against the police. Their leader, Pope (Ben Mendelsohn showing a deadly control over the family and, off his medication, ruthless and merciless) controls his youngest brother, Darren (Luke Ford) while the drug dealer, Craig (Sullivan Stapleton embodying a believably crazed but dim dealer) goes out on his own.

J observes all this, learns what power can be as Craig forces him to threaten some too-smart drivers at gunpoint, tries to relate to, then protect, his high school girlfriend, and deal with the interrogations and continued advice from the detectives and the pressure from his uncles.

David Michod has said that this is fiction, though many Melburnians will recognise plot elements from cases of criminals and police from the past. However, these goings on, evil as they are shown to be, are small compared with many of the gangster stories from Melbourne's recent past and the police corruption and murders in the criminal families.

The film is not exploitative at all in its brief scenes of violence but, with the help of its excellent cast whose performances indicate characters with small detailed nuances, opts for dramatic interaction over conventional gangster conventions.

CITY ISLAND

(US, 2009, d. Raymond de Felitta)

More interesting and enjoyable than might have been anticipated.

City Island is a neighbourhood of the Bronx, New York, that is quite different from the familiar Manhattan of the movies (whose skyline is seen only in the distance in this film). There are long traditions for the families of City Island, especially the fishing families that migrated from Italy. This is a story of one of those families.

Vince Rizzo is played very well by Andy Garcia. He is a correctional officer (which people then say is a prison guard). But, he has a secret from his wife of 20 years, Joyce (Juliana Margulies). It is not another woman. He longs to be an actor and is taking a course. There he meets Molly (Emily Mortimer) who encourages him and urges him to go to an audition for a Scorsese movie. There is a bonus in Alan Arkin playing the drama teacher – who is later seen in the long line for the audition. Vince has two children, Vivian at college and the younger Vince at school. All of them have secrets from one another.

This comes to a head when Vince decides to supervise one of his prisoners, Tony (Steven Strait), in building a bathhouse at his home. In the event, it is Tony and Molly who do know the actual secrets and become catalysts for the revelations and the possible reuniting of the family.

There is plenty of drama of the loud variety because these Italo-Americans are not shy in revealing their feelings and shouting at each other and trying to shout down each other.

Well-acted, with some unpredictable secrets, except for Joyce who has been feeling neglected and is suspicious of Vince's going out to poker games (really his acting classes), there is, nevertheless, a welcome humanity underlying these characters and their interactions which makes the film a small but acceptable, even likeable, New York drama.

LE CONCERT

(France, 2009, d. Radu Milheanu)

A very entertaining film, especially with audiences who have a love for classical music. Radu Milheanu is a Jewish Romanian director who has lived in Paris since his student days. He has made a number of socially conscious films like *Va, Viens, Deviens* about the Ethiopian Jews and their migrating to Israel. Here he combines some familiar themes of the experience of Communism, especially for Russian Jews. His story enables him to tell part of it in Moscow and the other part in Paris (and filming in Bucharest).

There is an amusing sleight of vision in the opening where we see a conductor passionately working with an orchestra and then finding that this is not quite the case. We then learn about a Bolshoi orchestra that was shut down in mid-performance of Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto in D Major in 1980 and the Jewish musicians have not been able to play since and have menial jobs. An opportunity arises for them (or is surreptitiously set up for them) to play at Le Chatelet in Paris. The conductor chooses to play the Tchaikovsky concerto and wants a young French violinist (Inglourious Basterds' Melanie Laurent compelling in this role) to be the soloist. So far, so lucky.

What follows is comedy, comedy of errors, comedy of apprehension, comedy of exploitation, the kind of scenario that the Ealing Studios comedies of the 1950s might have loved. Can the conductor (Aleksei Guskov) and his best friend (a celloist, now an ambulance driver, the genial Dmitri Nazarov) find enough musicians to play? Can they be trusted (not entirely!)? What about passports and visas?

There are also plenty of absurd moments when they get to Paris and we wonder whether the concert will ever go ahead – and even whether the musicians will turn up.

There is a sub-plot about the conductor and his collaboration with a young Russian violinist who was playing when the 1980 concert was interrupted. The screenplay seems to be leading us in one direction about the young violinist in the present time for us only to find that we had allowed ourselves to be misled (and to have made rash judgments).

We know that the concert will go ahead. Audiences will not be disappointed with the performance. It is very moving with the Tchaikovsky music and the violin artistry.

So, we have plenty of comedy and plenty of serious moments, plenty of pathos and the delight of the music.

ECLIPSE (THE TWILIGHT SAGA: ECLIPSE)

(US, 2010, d. David Slade)

The third in the series of films based on the popular series of novels by Stephenie Meyer. The books and films have a niche audience of females, younger and some older, and they play to their audiences. (There are regular incitements to swoon, sigh, weep, gasp...)

Somebody mentioned the 'huge disconnect' between the generally less than enthusiastic response from movie critics and the instant box-office success from fans. In a way, the reviews are critical opinions measuring the film against higher standards of cinema art rather than acknowledging the phenomenon of the popularity of the films and seeing the films as popular, pop art. They do what they set out to do, tell a tale of vampires acceptable to a wide audience, without the blood and gore (except here for some initial 'hunting' scenes where Victoria (Bryce Dallas Howard) 'turns' a young man, Riley (Australian Xavier Samuels in a substantial role) who then transforms innocent bystanders into an army of 'newborns' who will be out to attack the Cullens and Bella for Victoria's vengeance – which they do in some vivid battle sequences.

In the background and foreground is the now familiar romance between Bella (Kristen Stewart), a little less pouty this time, rather more determined to be transformed or 'turned', explaining that she feels an outsider and not normal, but faced with the marriage proposal from Edward (Robert Pattinson, more pouty than Bella, and just as pallid and languid as before until he has to come more alive to protect Bella and do battle with Riley. Taylor Lautner as Jake has had his role beefed up (and beefcaked up - as Edward asks, 'Doesn't he own a shirt?!') and he and his werewolves have a lot more to do here, especially in the battle with the newborns. The effects for these huge wolves are very well done.

So, it is the unusual life in its usual way in the blue-grey mountains and forests of Washington state, a blend of teen

angst (with reason), high school studies and graduation, life at the police station for Bella's father, sage meetings of the native Americans as well as some elaborate flashbacks to fill out the stories of some of the characters.

As always, Edward is a gentleman vampire of the old school, of gentlemen that is (not old school of vampires) and his behaviour towards Bella is courteous and proper (despite her trying to persuade him otherwise). Naturally, we leave them in a field of flowers and embrace, now having to wait for the forthcoming two-part finale to the series, *Breaking Dawn*.

GET HIM TO THE GREEK

(US, 2010, d. Nicholas Stoller)

Refinement is not the first, second or even hundredth word that springs to mind in reviewing *Get Him to the Greek*.

Rather, this is one of those raucous American comedies where there is potential to offend sensitive audiences as well as potential to offer some laughs to different sensitivities about how silly human beings can be.

The silly human being in this case is a British rock star named Aldous Snow. He appeared as a supporting character in writer-director Nicholas Stoller's previous film, *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (and she has a moment or two in this film). He was played by comedian Russell Brand who is not known for being a quiet or subtle performer. He tends to be in your face with few holds barred in his topics for laughs or in his language and references for jokes. He comes across as a sometimes raving extrovert and the success of the film mainly depends on whether you enjoy this type of character and Russell Brand's interpretation. Like him or not, he does have his moments.

Aldous Snow is the 'him' of the title. For those who don't know LA, the Greek is short for the Greek Theatre where rock concerts are held. The command 'get' refers to Aaron Green, a publicist and producer for a record company. He is played with a mixture of affability, exasperation and some silliness too by Jonah Hill who has shown a flair for offbeat comedy in many roles in recent years, including *Superbad* and *Funny People*. It is Aaron who has the bright (?) idea to resurrect Snow's career by getting him to sing at a concert in Los Angeles. Snow is in London, has a reputation for erratic behaviour and the rock star propensity for drugs, drink and sex. Will Aaron persuade him, get him out of London, get him to LA (after a detour to see his musician father, played by Colm Meaney, in Las Vegas). And what effect will this have on Aaron who thinks he has broken up with his medical student girlfriend (Ellisabeth Moss) who wants to move to Seattle for hospital opportunities?

A surprise is Sean Combs (P.Diddy) in the role of the demanding, manipulative and wheedling record company director.

The tone is set in the opening credits which are quite an amusing parody of music videos, especially one called *African Child* which is claimed to have done more damage to Africa than apartheid (and pokes at Madonna and other western adopting parents). It is also a summary of Snow's success and then the collapse of his career and separation from his wife and music partner, Jackie Q (a surprising and different performance from Rose Byrne).

There is quite an amount of mayhem along the way to the Greek. But, underneath the bravado and living up to the reputation, there is a redeemable character inside Snow who, while he often does his best to undermine Aaron's life and values, allows Aaron to be a catalyst for some change for the better. All is not lost. (There is a remark that British rock stars, unlike so many Americans, don't burn out and kill themselves; after all, look at the Rolling Stones and their age and popularity.)

One of the producers of the film is Judd Apatow. Most of his films have the dramatic curve of beginning with obnoxious characters and/or obnoxious behaviour, centring on immersing the audience in the obnoxious and then ending with an optimistic and morally reforming finale: the Judd Apatow Syndrome. The same here.

GROWN UPS

(US, 2010, d. Dennis Dugan)

Here is Adam Sandler, fellow actors and friends, and a director who has worked with him quite often. What does it add

up to? Something like a big-budget home movie of Adam Sandler and friends. Perhaps the jokes are too much in-house (and repeated and repeated), perhaps they are particularly American, perhaps they relate too strongly to a United States summer vacation by the water... but they do not travel as well as might be anticipated.

Five basketball playing kids win a tournament and are the pride of their coach. Thirty years later he dies and they reunite for the funeral and stay on for a weekend together with their families. They goof around a lot, quite a lot, very much a lot... They trade sling-offs to each other all the time (and are more than a bit unkind to older and plainer characters). They pick at what is wrong with the others until they are forced into some heart-to-heart talking, confessing their failures – with some firm purpose of at least a little amendment of life.

Some of it is quite amusing, but a lot of it doesn't quite make it with those who are not in the circle of friends on screen. Sandler has become an LA agent, wealthy, with a glamorous fashion-designing wife, Salma Hayak, and some brattish kids who are spoilt. (Part of the family values emphasis of the screenplay – which is remarkably free of swearing – is getting kids away from their play-stations and getting outside and learning some of the simpler joys of play and life.) Kevin James is out of a job but pretending he is in work, while Maria Bello is his wife who is still breast-feeding their 48 month old son. David Spade is the least amusing as a single man with the eye of a wolf. Chris Rock is rather subdued, but has some typical one-liners, as the hen-pecked husband of May Rudolph with a large, flatulent mother-in-law. Rob Schneider is very much Rob Schneider who is into New Age practice with an older wife (Joyce Van Patten) and two unbelievably glamorous daughters.

Mix it all up and you get a mid-life home movie.

I LOVE YOU TOO

(Australia, 2010, d. Daina Reid)

This is a film that might grow on you as it goes along. 'Grow' is a key word because the film, an Ocker romantic comedy, is about growth and the possibilities for maturing for thirty-something Australian men. In the opening scenes we realise that, offputtingly, they have a fair way to go.

However, Jim (a quite effective Brendan Cowell who can do both the lout and the would-be romantic) is attracted to Alice from London (Yvonne Strahovski) and they live together for over three years. She would like to marry him, but he can't find the courage to say 'I love you'. Jim has relied for too long on his older sister looking after him, lives in a granny flat at his deceased parents' home (he always says, 'bungalow', and has had a job for ten years driving a model train at a playground (run by Steve Bisley). And he has relied far too long on his wannabe womanising mate, Blake (Peter Hallier who portrays Blake believably and who also wrote the screenplay). What to do – especially when Alice gets a job offer in London?

By accident (literally, because he crashes his stolen car), he meets Charlie, a diminutive man (played very interestingly by Peter Dinklage (The Station Agent, both versions of Death at a Funeral)) who is mourning the death of his love and writes charming letters (not sent) to a glamorous Italian model. Charlie reluctantly begins to help Jim, especially with letters. There is quite some pathos in Charlie's story, especially when the model arrives in Australia to promote her book. And there are some Australian versions of screwball comedy as Jim tries to woo back Alice.

In many ways, it is a hit and miss comedy, with some amusing moments, some corny moments and some moving moments. Ultimately, it is pleasantly thoughtful.

THE KARATE KID

(US, 2010, d. Harald Zwart)

It is 26 years since the original Karate Kid was released starring Ralph Macchio as the young lad trained in the arts of defence by Mr Miyagi, played by Pat Morita. It was followed by two sequels and another starring a young Hilary Swank as 'The Next Karate Kid'. This time, our hero is not so much the karate kid as The Kung Fu Kid, because that is what he is trained in and what he demonstrates in the climactic tournament. The 12 year olds of 1984 are now asked to make up their minds as to whether their now 12 year old kids should see this one or not.

There has been some debate about the classification of the film, some vocal protests that it was too violent for a PG rating. It was given a PG rating in the US and the US Catholic Bishops Conference reviewer judged it suitable for adults and adolescents, noting the fights and the violence associated with them and suggesting, rightly, that parents and guardians should decide suitability according to their knowledge of the children's sensibilities – though they do warn that there is 'an unnecessary kiss between pre-teens'! (but it is presented in the gentlest of ways and in context) as well as 'the use of a crass term for the human posterior'!

This re-make, or re-working, relies on the basic plot outline of the original: a mother and son move to a new location where the son does not fit in and is bullied; befriends a young girl; is trained by a martial arts expert who works as a handyman and fights against students of a brutally-minded instructor. This time the location is much more exotic than a move from New Jersey to California. It is from the US to China – and location production takes great advantage of Beijing and its sights, the mountainous countryside and the Great Wall of China. (It should serve as a great PR film for Americans who don't know what modern China looks like or how it is both changing and the same, and become aware of some of its customs with respect and realise that there are other languages in the world.)

When Ralph Macchio played the karate kid, he was, in fact, 23 years old. Here we have Jaden Smith, aged 11 when he made the film, acting 12. The film is strong enough to attract a teen audience and boys and girls around the age of Smith and the young violinist who befriends him. Jaden Smith made an engaging impression when he appeared with his father, Will Smith, in *The Pursuit of Happyness*. He does not let us down here. The camera loves him and, even though he is of a very slight build, he convinces that he is athletic and could do all the training and bouts that we see on screen. He is a bit surly about going to China with his mother (Taraji P. Henson) and the initial bullying gets him down. But, when he is saved from the aggressive boys by the quiet handyman, he submits to the discipline of the training and learns what it is to focus and to act with respect. (Of, course, in this the film is offering a decent role model and has its 'inspirational' moments.)

Jackie Chan might seem an obvious choice to play Mr Han, given his long career and his martial arts skills, dexterity and creativity. But, he does not bring on his genial and comic persona at all. This Jackie Chan performance is low-key, quietly wise, a mentor and a father-figure. He does it very well and sympathetically, indeed.

It is hard not to be really annoyed at the bullying and hard not to want to see some vengeance wreaked on the boys. But, Mr Han explains that Kung Fu is for making peace and trains the boy accordingly. Which means that the tournament bouts are stirring and we want the kid to win despite all the odds, being underdog, being foreign, being the target of the unscrupulous rival coach. John G. Avildsen directed the original and its sequels and also *Rocky*, creating an image of the battler who overcomes obstacles and gets up again. The Rocky spirit still lives in this Karate Kid.

THE KINGS OF MYKONOS

(Australia, 2010, d. Peter Andrikidis)

Australia, since the end of World War II, has been a very Greek country, Melbourne allegedly having the third largest Greek population after Athens and Thessaloniki. Quite an audience for this film, plus other Australians who have enjoyed the comic and satirical theatre, television and film work of Nick Giannopoulos and his team of Wogs. They

made Wogboy some years ago, capitalising on what used to be a derogatory term for migrants, especially from Greece and Italy, into an endearing term.

A warning is needed for those contemplating meeting the Wogboys again. This is not highbrow artistic comedy and those who look at it as if it were highbrow make the equivalent mistake of reading a newspaper's comic strip as if it were the editorial. That said, *Kings of Mykonos* is undemandingly amusing farce with fun being poked at Greek stereotypes, Australian stereotypes and Italian would-be Casanova stereotypes.

It also borrows heavily from those stories of secret property deals by smug double dealers and the goodies, the ordinary blokes (and whatever the Greek translation of that is), finally winning out.

While there are some scenes in Melbourne, in Yarraville, most of the film takes place on sunny Mykonos, on the beaches and in the village, and could serve as tourist propaganda (as long as you avoided the internal squabbles amongst the population).

Nick Giannopoulos is a genial screen presence, an Aussie battler whose forte is not subtlety but who believes in fair deals (most of the time). His mate, Vince Colosimo, is more of a one note character, sex-preoccupied (and that is an understatement), who falls for an Italian tourist – and it could be the real thing for a change. Alex Dimitriades is the smooth-looking and smooth-talking baddy.

There are many corny lines and corny moments (as well as some very, very corny lines and moments and some silly malapropisms – or whatever the Greek equivalent is). But, it is meant to be light good fun and about trying to do the right thing.

LETTERS TO JULIET

(US, 2010, d. Gary Winick)

A romantic tale – both for the young and for the old.

For the young: Sophie (Amanda Seyfried, seen frequently these years, *Mamma Mia*, *Dear John*, *Chloe*, *Boogie Woogie*, *Jennifer's Body*) is a fact-checker with the *New Yorker*, engaged to an exuberant enthusiast, Victor, who is about to open his own restaurant (Gael Garcia Bernal). They have decided to go on a honeymoon to Verona before the wedding because, after it, all will be busy at the restaurant. For Victor, the alleged honeymoon is visiting vineyards, olive groves, cheese factories, wine auctions, to get the best produce for his restaurant. Sophie loyally tags along but wants to be with Victor and do the touristic thing, especially in the city of Romeo and Juliet. When she visits Juliet's house and sees quite a number of sniffing and weeping women writing letters to Juliet and putting them on a notice board and a group of women, Juliet's secretaries, answering them, she offers to help. She accidentally discovers a letter from Claire about Lorenzo written fifty years earlier and answers it.

For the old: Claire's rather priggish grandson, Charlie (Australian Christopher Egan) arrives and takes an instant dislike to Sophie. He has unwillingly brought Claire to Verona to try to find Lorenzo. Since Claire is played by Vanessa Redgrave at her simplest and sweetest, a most engaging performance, we are drawn into the quest to find the romantic Lorenzo. After quite a number of encounters with all types of Italian men, Claire, Charlie, Sophie and we actually find him. A most happy reunion and joy all round – except for Charlie who has (not particularly credibly) fallen for Sophie and Sophie who realises she must break with Victor and go back to Italy. Sophie and Charlie also have a mock balcony scene to remind us that there is no real battle between modern Capulets and Montagues.

And who should play Lorenzo but Franco Nero? With art imitating life (or was this the source for the plot of the film?), Franco Nero and Vanessa Redgrave were in a relationship in the mid and late 1960s – and, indeed, married in 2006.

Looks as though the film's wedding scenes were not acted – the love was real!

MADemoisELLE CHAMBON

(France, 2009, d. Stephane Brize)

Very French – but most cultures would identify with the characters and the situations. Somebody remarked that they were reminded of *Brief Encounter* (even with an ending at a railway station), but this film develops its characters with a great attention to detail, quite ordinary characters, living quite ordinary lives in a French provincial town.

Jean (Vincent Lindon, seen more recently as the swimming coach in *Welcome*) is married to Anne-Marie (Aure Autika) and they have a young son, Jeremie. They seem to be a close-knit family and are initially seen talking homework with Jeremie, especially about verbs and the objective case (not a usual start for a drama). Jean is a serious builder and spends time as well caring for his about to be 80 father. Anne-Marie works at a printer. Jeremie is an average student and is being taught by a new teacher for the year, Mademoiselle Veronique Chambon (Sandrine Kiberlain, married to Vincent Lindon for ten years and they work very well together).

As mentioned, the film pays great attention to detail, some of the sequences being quite long: Jean washing his father's feet, Jean invited to talk to the class about his job and answer questions. The audience is immersed in this provincial world.

But, what can happen? What will happen? With a title like *Mademoiselle Chambon*, we might expect the teacher to be at the centre of a love affair, a tragedy, unrequited love and disappointment (the kind of emotional crisis that Zola or Flaubert wrote about in 19th century France). There is something of this, but the film's main concern is with Jean in the 21st century. He is particularly introverted and it takes a while for us to appreciate that what we think might be going on in his mind is actually going on. The film moves us in this direction by the use of *Mademoiselle Chambon* playing the violin and then listening to CDs with Jean.

As the relationship becomes more complex, Jean invites the teacher to play the violin at his father's 80th birthday party. There is a wonderful sequence of music, sound, nuanced expressions from the cast and, until the end of the piece, no words, played to Elgar's. This sequence indicates emotionally but very clearly what is happening.

In many ways the characters are quite reserved and generally behave in a reserved manner. So, it is quite a shock when Jean reacts angrily and completely unreasonably to his wife's suggestion of a buffet for his father's party. He is then aggressively angry at the building site. But, almost completely, this is a film of interiors, of feelings, of infatuation, of love, of infidelity and, ultimately, of decisions. Bittersweet.

MARMADUKE

(US, 2010, d. Tom Dey)

Moviemakers have a passion for telling dog stories. And, of course, so do their owners. So, there seems to be a ready market out there for more dogs on screen. *Marmaduke* is one that fulfils the definition of a family film. Large great dane who rarely stops talking and making goofs and gaffes which should please the younger audiences. Dogs talking and aping human behaviour will entertain humans in a non-demanding mood.

In *Marley and Me*, Owen Wilson owned a dog and lived through years of affection and disruption. This time, he is the voice of the chattering *Marmaduke*. There are some other interesting voices for the range of dogs, especially those who hang out in an LA dog park. Emma Stone is the nice but ignored Maisie while Fergie is the attractive Collie, girlfriend of the bully around town, Bosco, who is voiced by Kiefer Sutherland. Two Wayans brothers have comic dog roles and there is the unmistakable drawl of Sam Elliott for the old veteran. Lee Pace has a lot to do as Dad, put through all kinds of paces, so to speak, by *Marmaduke*, transferring his family from Kansas to LA and trying to ingratiate himself

with the boss of the pet food company, William H. Macy. Judy Greer has much less to do as Mum and looks on benignly at the goings on, with Marmaduke's mayhem and her pouty young teenage daughter who is at that age... and the young son who skateboards, does not want to play soccer but does not want to disappoint his father.

Marmaduke is sometimes a bit slow on the uptake despite his comments about how the family is going and how he thinks they take his advice. But, making friends early with a group of mutts, including Maisie and a Brit-voiced dog voiced by Steve Coogan, he is attracted by the alluring collie, sets up his fellow pet, the cat (George Lopez) to play scared so that he can be the hero. Trapped into entering a dog surfing contest, he does very well – and it all goes to his head, with dire results. How can Marmaduke be redeemed? You will have to go and see it (or watch it over the kids' shoulders when it comes on DVD).

MOTHER AND CHILD

(US, 2009, d. Rodrigo Garcia)

A simple title for a complex, always interesting and always moving portrait, mainly of women, but also of some men and loving and family relationships, mingled with a lot of pain and sorrow.

Rodrigo Garcia previously directed two films which explore female characters and relationships: *Things You Can Tell by Just Looking at Her* (1999) and *Nine Lives* (2005). He has written and directed for television, especially several episodes of *Six Feet Under* and *In Treatment*. He has great skill in writing credible characters, telling stories with feeling and directing them for unobtrusive maximum effect.

There are at least seven mothers and children here but there are three at the centre of the film. Annette Bening gives one of her best performances as a fifty year old woman who had to give up her baby for adoption when she gave birth at age 14. A demanding perfectionist with a curt manner, she looks after her aged and infirm mother and resents her mother's friendship with their house cleaner and her daughter. A co-worker at the hydrotherapy centre, a sympathetic Jimmy Smits, alienates her at first but a series of events leads to her softening and the possibilities of happiness in her life.

An excellent Naomi Watts plays an ambitious, steely-controlled (even in seduction) lawyer who was adopted and whose adoptive parents are dead. Independent, she goes to work in an LA firm for Samuel L. Jackson in a very humane role.

Meanwhile, Kerry Washington finds that she and her husband cannot have children and want to adopt. They meet Cherry Jones as the kind nun who supervises the adoption program. The pregnant mother who is to give the couple her child bonds with the adoptive mother but things don't work out for either the marriage or the adoption, although there is a satisfyingly happy ending despite a great deal of grief. The mothers of the husband and wife are important in this story as offering other angles on the mother and child theme, supportive mothers and dominating mothers.

Somebody remarked that this is the material of television soap opera. Yes, this is often the contents of episodes, but Garcia's treatment of material and characters goes well below the surface of the stories and explores the feelings for mothers for their children. The men are at the edge of the portraits of the women and several of them don't come off very well at all.

The film runs for just over two hours which enables us to spend quite an amount of time with the three principal women, to share their lives, their emotions and their decisions, even when we don't agree with them or find them sometimes alienating. It is a tribute to the three actresses that they are convincing and take us into the interior lives of the women they are portraying.

NEW YORK, I LOVE YOU

(US, 2009, d. Fateh Akin, Yvan Attal, Brett Ratner, Shekhar Kapur, Randall Balsmeyer, Joshua Marston, Shunji Iwai, Allen Hughes, Natalie Portman, Wen Jiang, Mira Nair.

The compendium film, *Paris, Je T'aime* gathered together short stories from the 18 arrondissements of Paris. A group of fine international directors created their own style of tale to pay tribute to the city and their love for it. The producers hope to make a series. New York is the second which plans for Shanghai to follow.

Each of the stories in Paris was quite distinctive. Here they tend to run into each other with some cross-cutting of events and characters – which makes it harder to identify, if one can, the particular styles of the directors. They are quite an international group, five of the eleven coming from Asia and one from Germany. There are two women directors, Mira Nair and Natalie Portman (who also appears as an actress in Mira Nair's story).

Action is mainly confined to Manhattan, though there is a wonderful story towards the end set in Brooklyn and Coney Island, with Eli Wallach and Cloris Leachman, 63 years married and out on a walk, bickering in the way that some old couples do, which is a sign of their affection.

Most of the stories are basically realistic, although there is an interestingly enigmatic tale of an ageing singer returning to a hotel where she once stayed and experiencing something of *déjà vu* when she encounters a hunched bellhop who insists on carrying her cases and who provides violets for her moments after she asks for them. A great number of the shots are of reflections in an elliptical mirror. It is a segment directed by Shekhar Kapur (both Elizabeth films) and acted very well by Julie Christies as the singer, Shia LaBeouf surprisingly good as the bellhop and John Hurt as the concierge.

Two stories have an Asian flavour, Mira Nair's picture of an Indian shopkeeper and his friendship (and imaginary (?) marriage to a young Hasidic woman, and Fateh Akin's story of a Chinese pharmacist whom a Turkish artist wants to paint.

Cuban dancer, Carlos Acosta, is mistaken for a nanny as he looks after a little girl in Central Park, but he is her father. This is the Natalie Portman story. Brett Ratner's story is a tongue in cheek tale of a gawky young man (Anton Yelchin) persuaded by a shopkeeper friend (James Caan) to take his wheelchair-bound daughter (Olivia Thirlby) to the prom – it has a surprising and amusing NY ending. Hayden Christensen is a pickpocket only to be bested by Andy Garcia. Orlando Bloom is a composer trying to complete his work for a film on time.

There are some amusing moments when, in the film's opening, Justin Bartha and Bradley Cooper both get into a taxi and proceed to offer advice to the driver who ousts them. Both men reappear in subsequent stories with their girlfriends. In terms of girlfriends, Ethan Hawke does a spiel outside a restaurant about his sexual prowess only to find that he has been boasting to a prostitute. Robin Wright seems to be a prostitute but may only be playing a game with her husband, Chris Cooper.

The stories and tone indicate the flavour but, all in all, despite some emotion and some effective acting, it is a rather slight tribute of love to New York City.

SHREK FOREVER AFTER

(US, 2010, d. Mike Mitchell)

After three Shrek features, it is easy to forget how unlikely a popular animation character Shrek might have been on paper and how he won over any doubters, including hardboiled critics at the Cannes film festival where the first film was in competition. But, we all liked him, and Donkey and the cartoon characters like the Gingerbread man, and Fiona the King and Queen of Far, Far Away. It helped that these characters were voiced by Mike Myers, Cameron Diaz, Eddie Murphy, Julie Andrews and John Cleese. And, then came Puss in Boots with those mesmerising, piteous eyes, with Antonio Banderas' voice.

They are back again for this fourth episode, seemingly the last. And it may well be the last since a lot of the surprise has inevitably long gone and the films rely on affectionate familiarity. But, the plot this time is quite dark (as is the photography of a dingy Far, Far Away). It seems to be a variation on the classic, *It's A Wonderful Life*. There, George Bailey, in despair, is taken by Clarence the Angel to see what his home town of Bedford Falls would have been like had he not lived. It is a squalid place.

Here we do not have an angel but rather the ambitious Rumpelstiltskin who is power-hungry and does a shady deal with the King and Queen to rescue Fiona and for them to sign away their kingdom. When he hears that Shrek and Fiona have broken the spell through their true-love kiss, he entraps the happy family ogre, Shrek, to do a deal to have one free day. This is where, for Shrek, he sees what a wonderful life he had and how far, far from wonderful is a life where Fiona does not know him and is antagonised by him, where Donkey does not know him. He has to rescue Fiona all over again – and even the kiss does not resolve the problem at first. Donkey is sceptical. Puss does his wide-eyed turn again (which did bring some hearty laughter from the audience). Pinocchio tells lies and Ginger is a petty villain. The ogres, however, are on side, but trapped by Rumpelstiltskin.

This darker sequel is reminiscent of *Babe, Pig in the City*, which left the happy rural countryside and audiences found it rather harder to enjoy.

The other trouble is Rumpelstiltskin himself. He looks like a very short twerp and behaves like it, with an objectionably strident voice, hardly a worthy villain for the film or an opponent for Fiona and Shrek. He is voiced by Walt Dohrn from the story department.

One of the most amusing aspects is that many popular songs from the decades are incorporated into the story as commentary on the action and characters.

oodbye, Shrek.

TOY STORY 3

(US, 2010, d. Lee Unkrich)

Once upon a time (well, way back in 1995!), Pixar Studios created a contemporary fairy tale about a boy and his toys and the rest is not history because it is still going on in this third sequel to *Toy Story*.

Actually, this one has a lot to commend it because, while it relies on familiarity with characters and some repeats of plot about lost toys, it has some interesting new plot developments. Andy is now 17 and on his way to college, more than a little off-hand with his mother and sisters and referring to his toys as 'junk'. Needless to say, he has the opportunity to repent and redeem himself before the end!

This is the adventure of the toys who are nearly collected by mistake as trash (instead of being stored in the family attic, except for Woody who has been put in a college carton) but who escape and find that they are donated to a child care centre (child care being one of the least things going on there as the rampaging tots wreak havoc on toys). The toys are presided over by a large pink bear, Lots-O'Huggin (voiced by Ned Beatty) who is not what he seems and has a back story which puts a more sinister light on his benign welcome (and his comeuppance). The toys feel imprisoned and stage something of a coup but their adventures are further complicated by extreme peril, not only in a garbage truck and crusher but in a blazing furnace to deal with land-fill. The adventures are quite exciting for adults and for children.

Most of the old toys are back again, led by Tom Hanks's Woody (who does get a little tiresome in his persistent

declarations of loyalty and urging the toys to go home to Andy). Recently this reviewer took the opportunity to watch the original on a plane and found that Woody was fairly one-dimensional then compared with Buzz Lightyear and his ingenuous pomposity. Tim Allen's Buzz is the same here only more so and more endearingly so as the leader of the toys who don't want to go home and as the hostage in the coup. The scene where they try to restore his buttons and they turn on his Spanish version which leads to Buzz's dialogue in Spanish along with songs and tango and romancing Jessie is good fun.

Also good fun is the introduction of Barbie and Ken (one of Lots-O'Huggins henchmen, voiced by Michael Keaton) and poking fun at the Ken image, especially, in some sly dialogue.

The film opens with the toys involved in a re-enactment of the old west and the runaway train, the cliffs... and that is good fun as well.

Probably worth repeating, this second sequel is good fun.

VALHALLA RISING

(UK/Denmark, 2010, d. Nicolas Winding Refn)

Nicolas Winding Refn has never been afraid of the legacy of Viking violence in the Scandinavian culture. Some of his Danish films have been tough looks at the drug culture (The Pusher series, Bleeder). His visit to the UK produced a portrait of the brutal criminal yet artist who liked to be known as Bronson, the title of the film. Very few punches withheld in that one.

Now he has gone back to the Viking days and the confrontation between pagans and the new Christians. On the one hand, this is much more a contemplative film than his others. On the other hand, he has interspersed the gaze at the early medieval world (or Dark Ages world) with physical battles, some war combat and some hackingly graphic deaths and blood spurts. The contemplation can put off the action fans and the blood and killings can put off the contemplatives.

'Gaze' could be the key word to appreciating this beautifully shot introduction into a past and alien world. So many of the camera takes are quite long, giving the audience enough time to gaze at and reflect on the ruggedly majestic landscapes, the men (no women), the iconic poses and the static compositions of character and background. Full marks for this aspect of the film. Audiences might be mesmerised by this gazing and so be able to withstand the sudden shocks of violence.

But, for many, the difficulty will be with the plot or lack of it and the enigmatic characters we are gazing at and, sometimes, listening to although speech is at a minimum. There are three headed sections, Wrath, The Silent Warrior and the Holy Men.

Basically, we are introduced to a mute warrior with one good eye. He is played by Mads Mikkelsen (Pusher, Le Chiffre in Casino Royale, Clash of the Titans). Mikkelsen can look sinister even in sympathetic roles so he dominates the screen here whether wrestling with an opponent, suddenly slitting a throat, or standing icon-like looking for worlds to conquer. There are some pagan characters who have shackled him. After his escape, there are several Christians who are obsessed with crusades to the Holy Land and converting pagans. There is a final confrontation with Indians – the would-be crusaders are lost but they seem to have gone in the opposite direction and found the Americas.

There is also a child who observes, acting like a chorus to the proceedings.

Starkly beautiful, frighteningly barbaric and puzzlingly enigmatic, the film seems more like an installation to be contemplated panel by panel than a cinema movie.

BOY
HEDGEHOG (L'HERISSON)
INCEPTION
KILLERS
KNIGHT AND DAY
LEAVING (PARTIR)
PREDATORS
RUNAWAYS
SOUTH SOLITARY
SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP, The
TINKERBELL AND THE GREAT FAIRY RESCUE
WAITING CITY, The

BOY

(New Zealand, 2010, d. Taika Waititi)

At once, Boy (a lively and attractive James Rolleston) looks into the camera and recites his life story for us – and for the class where this is part of a lesson. He lives in a community of Maori people, disadvantaged but with a lively spirit that sustains them or, sometimes, leads them into trouble. It is 1984 and pop culture has more than made inroads in this part of New Zealand. Boy has a devotion to Michael Jackson, and this theme is humorously woven through the whole film. Some of the kids are called Dynasty and Falcon Crest (or Chardonnay). Boy's ne'er-do-well, often dim, but exuberantly optimistic father is called Alamein, where his father fought (though he opts for Boy to call him Shogun because he likes Samurai and has James Clavell's novel). This indicates that there are quite a few laughs, and laughs out loud, to be enjoyed throughout the film.

It all takes place over a week when Boy's gran goes away to a funeral and Boy is in charge. He sometimes indulges in a fantasy world, where Michael Jackson figures, and also imagines all kind of heroic and romantic adventures for himself. Which don't happen. He also has a six year old brother, Rocky, who thinks he has magic powers (confirmed when Rocky aims at people and sometimes they fall over – and he apologises for his powers). While James Rolleston is excellent in his performance, the presence, often silent, but very expressive, of Te Aho Aho Eketone-Whitu as Rocky has something special about it. There are several kids around the town, at school, eating ice blocks at the local store or 'employed' (throwing mud at the cows) or just bored and hanging around.

We feel we have lived in Waihou Bay and got to know the people there.

Then Boy's father turns up from prison, with two friends, who have formed a gang (vastly inferior to the real gang who later bash them up while they try to do a marijuana deal). Taika Waititi, who wrote and directed, plays Alamein, would-be Shogun, with great zest. Waititi is a comedian, a stand-up comic, writer and director, especially of the 2007 comedy, Eagle Vs Shark, who doesn't mind appearing as foolish or as sentimental. Boy does not know Shogun but is ready to see and imagine him as a hero, wanting to be like his Dad. And that is part of his crisis, and of his growing up. He has to discover his father's limitations and faults (to do with the gang digging up a paddock for a packet of money and Boy finding it...).

There are plenty of poignant moments as well, especially since the boys' mother died in giving birth to Rocky and this has become part of his consciousness, sorry for what he did to his mother. Boy himself is by no means a perfect character. While he is bullied, he is hard on his brother and on a mentally limited beachcomber who becomes crucial to Boy's self awareness.

The thought came that if someone were to organise a day of film on indigenous people facing the 21st century, two films that would be worth considering would be Samson & Delilah for Australia and Boy for New Zealand.

L'HERISSON (HEDGEHOG)

(France, 2009, d. Mona Achache)

Hedgehogs are prickly on the outside but more tender on the inside. This is the metaphor for understanding Renee, a 54 year old widow, overweight, sometimes curmudgeonly who thinks herself ugly, a concierge at an apartment building in Paris. This is how she describes herself to 11 year old Paloma from upstairs who is busy making her film, videoing everybody whether they consent or not. This is the setting for this quietly small but pleasing French portrait of eccentric people. This is what the French seem to do best: focus on characters, visual, emotional and psychological close-ups, moments of isolation and loneliness, moments of intimacy. There is a particular French sensibility.

Paloma is the character we are asked to identify with at first. She seems to have overdosed on some existential angst and is determined to kill herself on her next birthday as long as she is doing something she wants: to be making her film. Her parents are, as one would expect, quite odd, her mother in psychoanalysis for ten years, her father too busy at work, her sister writing a thesis. Every family unhappy in their own way, as Tolstoy noted.

Renee reads Tolstoy and is given a gift of books by a new tenant, a kindly and genial Japanese gentleman, a widower, who is attracted to Renee and she, despite her misgivings, attracted to him. The scenes between the two, watching an Ozu film on video, enjoying noodles and, later, sushi, are pleasing and emotionally satisfying.

Writer-director-actress Josiane Balasko embodies Renee. Bespectacled and introspective except with her camera, Garance Le Guillermic is Paloma. Togo Igawa is charming as Kakuro Ozu.

There is a shock towards the end, where several people, including the happily relaxed reviewer, jumped in their seat. Which means that the ending is not anticipated and there is a pervasive sadness.

However, audiences who want something lower key and humane rather than CG explosions will find that this is a satisfying look at being human.

INCEPTION

(US, 2010, d. Christopher Nolan)

Conception? Deception? Exception? Perception? Reception?

All of the above, plus Inception.

With a surprisingly high initial box-office income in the US (given its demands in making its audience pay attention and think), Inception has become something of an event. Even audiences who might not like this kind of science-fiction exploration of the psyche or who don't go for fast-paced action sequences and explosions – and Inception has a great deal of both in its two and half hours' running time – probably need to see it for its place in movie history and development, just as we needed to see The Matrix at the end of the 1990s and even Avatar at the end of the last decade.

That would probably do for a review for anyone thinking about going to see Inception or not.

What seems more important is to have a review for reading after viewing the film and reflecting on it. Mention of The Matrix reminds us that audiences these days, older and younger, like a creative puzzle movie, especially when it tantalises the mind as well as the imagination, so The Matrix has probably facilitated the making and acceptance of Inception. It doesn't matter if audiences can't quite follow everything immediately or if they cannot give a clear and logical synopsis. The film keeps working on its audience long after the final credits come up.

This is a film about 'reality', asking the question, 'what is reality?' or 'how many realities can exist at the same time?'. We usually say that we can't bilocate even though there are plenty of stories of parallel worlds, of time travel and doppelgangers. With Inception and its exploration of dreams and the variety of dream worlds, we can actually bilocate (or, as here, trilocate and, even, quatrolocate) because we can be lying asleep while active in our dreams. And, as posited here, in dreams within dreams.

Because we all dream and are fascinated by our dream selves and behaviours, the audience generally goes willingly into the world of Inception. When we speak about our imagination and drives in both waking and dreaming states, we start to use the language of the sub-conscious which emerges and the unconscious which is driving us unawares. Characters in dreams are facets of ourselves and projections from our sub-conscious, revealing deeper aspects of our psyches and personalities than we might be willing to share when awake. There is plenty of verbal exposition of these themes in the

screenplay but, more importantly, we see these themes illustrated in complex stories, especially in dreams within dreams.

Whether all that we see is possible in reality is debatable. It seems scientifically implausible if not impossible – but who knows whether in years, decades or centuries, medical, scientific and psychological techniques will combine to make some of this actual! Then we think of the development of brainwashing techniques, truth drugs and cult leaders' mind control of followers.

And, all the time, there is the unpredictable human factor, something which *Inception* explores in its dreams.

The opening is puzzling as Leonardo di Caprio's Cobb is washed ashore and brought before an elderly Japanese businessman in his exotic house. We arrive back here at the end, discovering what state of consciousness it is, but the flashbacks begin explaining Cobb and his team and their capacity to enter the dreams of others, their being awake in the dreams, and able to extract information that can be used for good or for ill. Cobb has become an ideas thief. We see dreams within dreams at once but our puzzle is working out who is dreaming – and who is in who's dream. Since Cobb has gone beyond ethical bounds which has cost him his wife (Marion Cotillard) and his children, he is consumed by memories of her and her unanticipated presence in his dreams. He wants to redeem himself and move from thieving extraction of information from dreams to inception, the inserting of ideas in dreams so that the dreamer might think that the inception (the correct word?) idea (which is compared to a virus) is self-generated rather than implanted. A young businessman (Cillian Murphy) is chosen for economic and power reasons to be the subject. Cobb's team, encouraged by his father (Michael Caine) and introducing a protégé, Ariadne (Ellen Page), study the subject and the candidate's background, the illness and death of his tycoon father (Pete Postlethwaite) and prepare a complete architectural drama to perform the inception. Cobb's right-hand man, Arthur (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) and other contacts (Tom Hardy and Dileep Rao) and the Japanese businessman (Ken Watanabe) all enter the dreams. One of the team can also assume the appearance of someone else, in this case the businessman's adviser (Tom Berenger)

Inside the dreams, we get plenty of action where audiences might think they are in an adaptation of a graphic novel (including a vast snow episode that outdoes James Bond and films like *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*). In fact, there is a great deal of action amidst the speculations. The locations are also filmed quite spectacularly, with action set in Japan, Paris, Kenya and Los Angeles. And the effects are sometimes amazing, especially the city of Paris folding on itself and, while a van containing the sleeping team falls in slowest motion from a bridge into a river with Arthur being rocked by the fall and having to perform deadline feats of saving the team who are also asleep in a hotel in another dream by defying gravity.

Cobb has also to solve his own personal and family problems. And, of course, the final question: is how the film ends reality? After all, we are participating in a waking dream as well as we watch the reality and unreality on screen.

Christopher Nolan has shown himself no slouch in making films that demand attention: *Memento* a decade earlier with its action moving backwards in time, the Arctic thriller, *Insomnia*, his two Batman films, *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight*, and his intriguing tale of rival magicians, *The Prestige*. He is obviously enjoying the opportunity to write a screenplay that is quite outside the box while directing a fine cast doing their best and playing with special effects to his heart's – and our – content.

KILLERS

(US, 2010, d. Robert Luketic)

Killers! Mr and Mrs Smith, *Knight and Day*. There are several precedents for *Killers* – which is less spectacular than *Knight and Day* but just as far-fetched and even more absurd, but at suburban level.

Ashton Kutcher looking buffed and burley is Spencer, a spy who wants out, especially when he encounters holidaying Jen (Katherine Heigl) in Nice (where he is about to blow up a helicopter). Romance ensues. Unfortunately, she was soundly asleep when he confesses his profession, so it is more than a surprise to her when, after three years of marriage, his boss contacts him again, is found dead in a hotel, and, suddenly, all the neighbours are out to kill Spencer. The last part of the film is a whopping neighbourhood watch assassination attempt that does defy belief.

With Tom Selleck as Jen's rather buttoned up, former pilot, father trying to protect her and Catherine O'Hara as her critical mother, nice but in her cups most of the time, there are some amusing moments. Katherine Heigl does a variation on the screen persona that has stood her well recently (*Knocked Up*, *27 Dresses*, *The Ugly Truth*) and Ashton Kutcher is radiating charm that may or may not attract its targets.

Robert Luketic directs comedies with vigour (Legally Blonde, Monster-in-Law) but all he has to do here is to keep the romantic fluff moving and film the action with pace that might make it momentarily believable.

KNIGHT AND DAY

(US, 2010, d. James Mangold)

Audiences thought it more than a little eccentric or, even, mad, when Tom Cruise leapt over sofas on The Oprah Winfrey Show. Wait till they see his ultra gymnastics here, in planes, in and on cars, on Seville rooftops... with even more agility than he showed in the Mission Impossible movies.

Really, this one looks back to those movies, even having some episodes that remind us of them, Cruise hanging just above ground, derring-do on a train with mistaken identities.

So, Knight and Day is both mission impossible and implausible. Not that that necessarily matters because the film-makers are operating with tongues firmly in cheeks and are defying anyone to take it seriously. On that premiss, we let go of disbelief and whizz along with it.

So, Tom is Roy, a secret agent on the run who bumps into a woman who is a vintage car restorer on her way to her sister's wedding. They bump into each other several times, then have a turbulently bumpy time on a plane which lands in a field – and that is just the beginning. The plot involves Roy continually saving June from danger, sometimes drugging her or knocking her out with muscular control so that she wakes up in her own room or on an island hideaway in the Azores or in a train speeding through the Austrian Alps. Since June is played by Cameron Diaz, there are some difficulties. She is about 10cms taller than Cruise (not that the photography angles would let us know this) and, as evidenced by how she takes control of things towards the end of the film, to find her such a squeamish, wilting, screaming and terrified victim in the main part of the film, it is hard to believe she is so helpless.

There are villains (Peter Sarsgaard), darkish inventor heroes (Paul Dano), a serious agency boss (Viola Davis) who can turn up everywhere from Austria to Spain with very little notice (and very little time allotted for actually travelling there). Stunts, fights, double-crossing, some romantic touches – making it a film silly beyond words. Not that this necessarily matters either, since it is designed for light entertainment and escapism (and there are plenty of far-fetched escapes to enjoy).

LEAVING (PARTIR)

(France, 2009, d. Catherine Corsini)

We know right from the beginning of Leaving what the climax will be. We are then taken back six months to understand why it is the climax and what the consequences will be.

Films about spouses leaving their partners after years of marriage are commonplace. And there is nothing particularly new here. But, that is the point. The same story is worth telling over and over again because it is such a basic, however regrettable and sad, story of marriage breakdown. What makes any telling different is the insight into characters and motivations that the story provides. And, when it is performed in a film like this, it is also the quality of the central performances that makes its impact.

This is simply the story of a 20 year marriage that has turned loveless, whether there was ever passion or not is a question the film implies. The wife walks out on her husband and children for an unlikely man who has turned her emotional life around.

As played by Kristin Scott Thomas (at home in French films as well as English language films), Suzanne is a woman who wants to break out of her staid life by returning to her profession as a physiotherapist. She has not been encouraged by her doctor husband, Samuel (Yvan Attal), and her children take everything for granted. When she suddenly falls for the labourer who has come to build her office, she becomes romantic, flighty, passionate with a new love that is all-consuming. Yvan (Sergi Lopez), the Catalan worker who has spent time in jail, is able to return her love.

For those who have followed Kristin Scott Thomas' almost quarter of a century career, this performance may be something of a surprise. We are used to seeing her as a woman in control, not prone to display emotions, especially 'amour fou' feelings. A Handful of Dust, Bitter Moon and even in comedy like Four Weddings and a Funeral, she gives

expert variations on her controlled persona. She has even performed with Robert Redford, Harrison Ford and Sean Penn. But, here, she shows more vulnerability than before and a loss of control that does not matter. She is prepared to begin a new life on this risky foundation.

In so many pop dramas and soaps, this would be a simple matter of separating and divorcing men and women allowed to be themselves and be free. Not so easy here. There are all kinds of consequences which the screenplay does not shirk and makes us take sides with Suzanne whether we approve of what she is doing or not.

Samuel is a humourless controller, prone to physical and psychological violence, vindictive in a meanly superior way. He does all that he can to make Suzanne's life impossible, cutting off credit without any compassion, despising Suzanne for loving a man he looks down on, determined that she shall not benefit in any way from a divorce. He blocks employment opportunities for both of them which has the couple trying to survive on the edge with little or no money and taking on labouring jobs. Suzanne had not anticipated this at all but wears the consequences.

Since we know how it comes to a head, we become involved as we see what has led up to the climax. While the film goes on for some minutes more (maybe unnecessary as we know what Suzanne has sacrificed), there is a sound in the background of the final image that indicates what will happen. Which means that the stills during the final credits are not bittersweet. They are sweetly bitter.

PREDATORS

(US, 2010, d. Nimrod Antal)

What if you came to consciousness and found that you were freefalling through the air and finding it hard to pull your parachute cord? That's one way to start a movie. And that is what *Predators* does. Then there are another seven people who find themselves in a similar situation. They are more than wary because in real life they have all been, in one way or another, killers – which means that their initial interactions are suspicious and menacing. It looks as if they have been abducted mysteriously and have landed in a Latin American jungle (actually filmed in Hawaii). But, this is not Latin America as they soon discover when looking at the colour of the sky and the different moons. They are on an alien planet, and it happens that it is the planet of the predators who, almost a quarter of a century earlier, made life tense and dangerous for Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Predator*. A sequel with Danny Glover followed and then some gory concoctions of *Alien vs Predator*. This time we are on predator territory.

Of all actors, Adrien Brody has been beefed up to be the hard-hitting, determined leader of the group which, as we know, will be picked off one after the other (it takes too long, unfortunately, to get rid of the most macho, sexist, obnoxious former death row prisoner who has a gross mouth). However, one of the abductees is a bespectacled and rather inept in jungle survival doctor (Topher Grace) who needs keeping an eye on. The rest of the group come from different countries and cultures (Latin American death squads, African torture groups, Japanese Yakuza) and, to mellow the testosterone a little, Alice Braga. Since the leader is not the romantic type, it is not a love story.

Then the predators materialise, armour-clad and helmeted monsters who have inbuilt heat detection sensors, so what chance does our group have. Not much, but they do their damndest (as they are damned) to stay alive.

So, growing paranoia and group clashes. So, mean predators who are hunting the humans for brutal sport. So, plenty of fighting with more than a touch of gore (though the predators have pale green luminescent blood equivalent, which is prettier to look at than blood).

It is all pretty familiar on the one hand and preposterous on the other. The dialogue is full of repetitively tiresome language. But, director Nimrod Antal (*Kontrol*, *Vacancy*) keeps it all moving suspensefully.

THE RUNAWAYS

(US, 2010, d. Floria Sigismundi)

Another rock and roll biography – they don't usually make for happy stories despite the seeming glamour, acclaim and money potential. This has been a staple for several decades now with films like *The Doors*, *Eddie and the Cruisers*, and *Sex, Drugs and Rock and Roll*.

What makes this film different? Well, it is the story of the breakthrough of the all girl band, The Runaways, in the mid 1970s. Whether the audience remembers, knows about or is able to take an interest in these girls, box office success or not will indicate. The theme has potential because of the girls and their performances and their fans in a generally male world. Some may remember Joan Jett from those times (and she appeared with Michael J. Fox in the 80s movie, *Light of Day*). She was the driving force behind The Runaways and has continued to perform for decades after they disbanded.

In fact, Joan Jett is one of the producers of the film. The screenplay is based on a memoir by the lead singer of The Runaways, Cherie Currie. Interestingly because of this, the film is more warts and all rather than a glamorous picture of the girls.

The two female stars of *New Moon* and *Eclipse* here show their abilities in quite different roles. However, Kristen Stewart as Joan Jett still tends to the more pensive (sometimes blank) expressions with a melancholy air that she brings to Bella and her twilight love for Edward Cullen. Dakota Fanning, on the other hand, really puts lots of energy into Cherie Currie, songs, costumes, some off-the-wall behaviour, making her dramatically far more interesting and challenging than Joan Jett. As a child actor, Dakota Fanning often seemed far too precocious for her age and quite a dominating screen presence. It is the same here. Her character is aged 15-16, as was the actress while making the film, and she is asked to be a provocative, sexual young woman with attraction to both sexes and a drug addict.

The Runaways' story is simplified. Joan writes and composes but is not a good singer. They come across Cherie who has done some David Bowie synchs at a concert and been hooted for her troubles. Family life is dysfunctional. She gets on well with her sister but does not allow her to tour with her. Father is alcoholic. Mother (played by Tatum O'Neill who had been an Oscar-winning child star at this same period) leaves with a new husband for Indonesia. While momentarily hesitant, Cherie heads into this music world, boots and all, and finds success, adulation, recording contracts and a tour of Japan and hounding by rabid fans. Cherie poses for magazines which annoys the others. But, it can't last and doesn't. Cherie is out of control and egotistic and has to go into rehab. Meanwhile, Joan and the members of the band, after some confrontations start afresh.

But, behind the scenes and in front of the scenes, is the eccentric, egocentric promoter, Kim Fowley who masterminds much of The Runaways' success but wants to control them – until Cherie says no. He is played in alarmingly arresting fashion by Michael Shannon. Shannon is one of the most alarmingly interesting screen presences: his madman in *Bug*, his frightening volunteer in World Trade Center, his Oscar-nominated turn as a disturbed man in *Reservation Road*, his dominance of *My Son, My Son, What Have Ye Done*. He certainly brings Fowley alive, his madness, his menace and his touches of entrepreneurial genius.

Then, the film suddenly ends and we are informed that Fowley is still eccentric but that Joan Jett has had more than 30 years of singing and touring and Cherie Currie overcame her addictions and works as a youth counsellor. A more hopeful outcome than in so many rock and roll stories.

SOUTH SOLITARY

(Australia, 2010, d. Shirley Barrett)

This is the kind of drama an audience needs to be ready for. As the title indicates, it is a story of isolation, so not a fast-paced action film. In tone and style, it is akin to restrained European film-making.

South Solitary is a fictitious lighthouse island off the mainland coast of Australia. The time is 1927. As the film opens, there has been a tragedy on *South Solitary*, the lighthouse keeper killing himself. An inspector arrives to make a report. He brings his niece with him to assist in preparing the report. There is a family on the island, living something of a rough and ready existence. There is also another keeper, Fleet, a bomb disposals expert during World War I who is still suffering mentally from the experience. It is noted that the keeper who killed himself also served in World War I. This theme of war, death and illness underlies the film.

The first half of the film establishes the situation and the characters. The rugged island, the surrounding waters, the cliffs, the windswept top with its horse and straggling sheep help the audience feel immersed in this physically isolated and difficult world. The inspector (Barry Otto) is a stickler for detail and regulations, something of a bureaucratic snob. His niece, Meredith (Miranda Otto, who is the central focus of the film), has lost her fiancé in the war and is at a loose end emotionally and with jobs. The mother of the family is a tough type (Essie Davis), her husband (Rohan Nichol), a friendly type, too friendly with Meredith for his own good. There are three children, one little girl whom Meredith befriends, especially in their fondness and care for a lamb, Lucille.

Perhaps a difficulty for some audiences is that the pace of this part of the film is somewhat similar to living on South Solitary, meandering, governed by the roster in care for the light, and limited in the scope for where people can actually go.

When the family and the inspector leave, Meredith and the taciturn Fleet, have to co-exist. He keeps politely to himself. She needs company and some affection. They begin to bond very slowly. He embroiders and reads to occupy the time. She does the same but tries for conversation. The main action is a fierce storm which wreaks some damage and puts a strain on both of them.

This two-hander half of the film is more persuasive than the first half, an opportunity to be with these two characters and understand them better, feel her need for companionship and observe and feel for his coming out of himself very gradually.

While Miranda Otto brings her character to life, it is Marton Czokas, speaking laconically and courteously with a Welsh lilt, who captures the interest. A very gentle finale, open-ended.

THE SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP

(UK/US, 2010, d. Richard Loncraine)

The Special Relationship is that political love affair between the United States and the United Kingdom – despite the Revolutionary Wars. The credits sequences of this film give us a pictorial historical overview of the presidents and the prime ministers and the partnerships from Winston Churchill during World War II and Franklin Roosevelt to John Major and Bill Clinton in the 1990s. However, the film opens with a visit from the Labour Leader, Tony Blair, in 1996 to the White House, which was expecting Blair to become the next British Prime Minister. He was elected in a landslide in 1997. In the meantime, Bill Clinton was elected for his second term as President.

This screenplay has been written by Peter Morgan who has show quite a remarkable skill in reconstructing political and social situations as well as credible imagining of conversations between the politicians, royalty and significant American figures: The Deal (the television movie about Tony Blair's agreement with Gordon Brown concerning the succession in the prime ministership and which introduced Michael Sheen as Blair), The Queen (Sheen reprising his role as Blair and introducing Helen McCrory as Cherie Blair), The Last King of Scotland and Frost/Nixon (with Sheen this time as David Frost).

Michael Sheen and Helen McCrory are back as the Blairs with Dennis Quaid, doing a fine impersonation of Bill Clinton and Hope Davis who could be easily mistaken in looks and voice for the real Hilary Clinton. Once again Peter Morgan has incorporated speeches and information in the public arena with creative sequences of conversations which were private but which are more than plausible here.

Tony Blair was rather amazed to be so welcomed to Washington and to meet Bill Clinton before he became prime minister. The two hit it off and seemed to have something of a united vision, Blair bringing up the tradition of the special relationship. Clinton is the senior politician and the screenplay indicates how shrewd a politician and statesman he could be. While the Monica Lewinsky situation looms quite large at this time, with the president's denials, change of attitude and his further testimony in the context of impeachment, Tony Blair (who did not approve and who is taken aback at first with the media's rather uncensored presentation and language about the affair) stood by Clinton and is quoted as saying that these personal matters did not affect his capacity to govern.

The immediate issue here for the special relationship is that of Northern Ireland, with footage of the violence and glimpses of Gerry Addams. The next critical issue is that of the Balkans and how Europe, NATO and the Americans dealt with the attacks of President Milosovich on Kosovo. It is here that the idealism of Tony Blair, with some messianic touches, begins to emerge, along with the politics of being liked. He and Clinton disagree, with Clinton clearly stating his hesitations and his reasons. Blair went on the offensive in the US and the American media lapped him up, forcing Clinton's hand. The personal aspect of the special relationship cooled, even as we see the Clintons visiting the Blairs at the time of the 2000 American election.

With George W. Bush in office, we see Blair becoming more of an opportunist using the special relationship and becoming friends with the new president (much to Clinton's dismay). He wonders whether Blair was the visionary that he initially thought he was.

This means that the screenplay tends to make Bill Clinton the moral arbiter of Tony Blair's behaviour with his final disapproving judgment.

Michael Sheen again brings Tony Blair to life, the eagerness, the political nous, the idealism, being forced into more pragmatic stances. (Sheen makes Blair smile a lot – but in the final sequence with actual footage of the prime minister with George Bush, the real Tony Blair seems to smile more in happy acquiescence of the Bush friendship than Sheen does).

Helen McCrory is given good lines and speeches as Cherie, the Blair household at a seemingly more modest 10 Downing Street, contrasting with the Clintons. She provides an ‘earthing’ for her husband many a time.

Dennis Quaid is very good as Clinton – which must make Oliver Stone disappointed as he has made JFK, Nixon films and a film with both Bushes but has not tackled Clinton. Hope Davis, perhaps in the light of Hilary Clinton’s life and work as Senator and Secretary of State, makes her a credible first lady with some dignity and wit (and tolerance for her husband).

In the wings, Adam Godley as chief adviser, Jonathan Powell, and Mark Bazeley as a strong lookalike spin doctor, Alistair Campbell (reprising his role from *The Queen*), remind us of the role of these powers behind the throne.

The film was screened on American television and in cinemas in other areas. The film and the cast were nominated for Emmy awards.

One hopes there will be *The Special Relationship II* with Peter Morgan enlightening us by reconstructing phone calls and meetings between Tony Blair and George W. Bush and, of course, the invasion of Iraq and its aftermath.

TINKER BELL AND THE GREAT FAIRY RESCUE

(US, 2010, D. Bradley Raymond)

A follow-up to *Tinker Bell and the Lost Treasure*. Fans of that one should look forward to this one. But, the question (especially for adult male reviewers) is: who are the fans? It would seem that the niche audience is tots, little girls, aged from three to six (maybe two to seven), who would enjoy this kind of fairy story, a visual equivalent of playing with dolls. There is not much testosterone in evidence (although the screenplay was written by four men), although, to be fair to *Tinker Bell*, she is a mechanic at heart and spends some time in amazement at the new horseless carriage and determining how it works. She likes fixing things.

For the parents who watch the film with their daughters (the sons being in an adjacent cinema), there is the playful atmosphere and a story about a scientist and his daughter who discovers the fairies. There is a puzzle too. When the film is set in England and where the father and daughter (Michael Sheen and Lauren Mote) have very British accents, how come it is inhabited by fairies with very, very American accents?

There is a final tribute to Peter Pan author, J.M. Barrie, who created *Tinker Bell*, acknowledging his support for the Great Ormond Street Children’s Hospital. Oh, and the plot? The fairies try to keep away from humans and remain secret but *Tinker Bell* gets caught in a fairy house and the rest get lost and have to find their way home.

THE WAITING CITY

(Australia, 2009, d. Claire McCarthy)

There are many things to commend *The Waiting City* to an Australian audience and to audiences beyond Australia.

Written and directed by Claire McCarthy, it was filmed completely on location in India, especially in Kolkata, with a train trip through the countryside to a town some hours from the city. Promoting of tourism is not an intention of the film-makers, but they so appreciate the distinctive atmosphere, the blend of beauty and squalor, the rich traditions (with their vivid and vibrant colours) and the religious and transcendent spirit that pervades India despite its growing affluence and materialism in some significant areas, that we feel that we ourselves are visiting India with the central couple.

Adoption is the key theme for *The Waiting City*, the city where an Australian couple are full of expectations to meet the child they have been planning to adopt for two years and to take her to a new life back home.

While the couple have been approved by the Indian authorities (who remind them that priority must be given to Indian adopting families), they have to wait for the untangling of Indian administrative bureaucratic knots. The transition to a completely different culture (highlighted by the wife's impatience at the airport and the loss of her luggage) begins to affect husband and wife in different ways and highlights the precarious aspects of their marriage and love.

Fiona is played by Radha Mitchell and Ben by Joel Edgerton. She is a successful lawyer, a workaholic and ambitious. She has her laptop with her and keeps working on a case despite the difficulties in communication. He is a rather laidback former rock musician who has a history of drug problems. Their marriage is tested as he looks out on to India and is caught up in its musical and religious spells. She looks inwards until Ben challenges her, throwing her documentation into the swimming pool in a desperate attempt to get her attention. Can the couple keep face when dealing with the authorities? Can they mend their emotional ruptures? Will the baby unite them?

One way of coping is for them to visit the orphanage where their baby is and see the town where she was born. For a record, both parents speak to a camera and take shots of the baby's home, background and culture to give to her when she grows older. One of the advantages the couple has is their friendly (but very blunt in asking questions about barren women and other personal issues) guide, Krishna, who accompanies them to the town and a visit to his family, his mother (also quite blunt), his wife and children.

A key event is Krishna's urging Fiona to step into the river which is said to bless barren women. Fiona confesses to not believing in God but eventually steps into the water, walking right in and submerging herself, experiencing something transcendent, if not a presence of God. The religious theme is to the fore as the baby lives at an orphanage run by sisters whose habit resembles that of the Missionaries of Charity and who manifest that charity in their care for the children. Underlying the plot are themes of pregnancy, abortion, inability to conceive as well as issues of adoption.

Most audiences may think to themselves that they can predict where the story is leading them. It doesn't. Fiona and Ben have to face far more questions than they anticipated, as does the audience.

The film is beautiful to look at and listen to. Audiences from developed countries are taken right into India and challenged about their own expectations of affluence, poverty, hunger, comfort, hygiene, health, opportunities, what they take for granted. A sense of superiority is also challenged as the core of the story is human dignity – no matter who, no matter what.

Ronin Films.

Released in 1994 re-released July 2010.

MARY. Docudrama.

Starring Lucy Bell.

Directed by Kay Pavlou.

1994. Rated G. 75 minutes.

Spanning sixty years, the breadth of Australia and the grandeur of Rome in the late 19th Century, Mary tells the story of one of Australia's greatest battlers.

Born to Scottish migrant parents in 1842, Mary experienced a calling to religious life at the age of 5. By the time she reached her early 20s, Mary was deeply troubled by the plight facing the impoverished lower classes in colonial

Australia.

Her love of humanity, a belief that everybody deserved a fair go and an early calling to religious life saw her, with guidance from Father Julian Woods, establish the order of the Sisters of St Joseph.

Dedicated to the education of all people regardless of race, social status or religious belief, Mary's unfailing dedication to her work and disregard for social barriers brought her into conflict with the Catholic hierarchy and resulted in her excommunication from the Church she loved.

Facing the might of a powerful congregation of bishops, she stood alone, rock solid, in her quest for equality for all and the right for her order to answer only to Rome.

After the excommunication was lifted by the dying bishop who originally invoked it, Mary travelled to Rome to put a case for an independent order to the Holy Father.

One hundred years later, the Sisters of St Joseph, the order founded by Mary, continue to bring enlightenment and knowledge to hundreds of thousands of people around the world.

Fr Peter Malone MSC says of this film, "Mary is a small-budget docudrama on Mary McKillop, released just before Pope John Paul II's visit to Sydney for the Beatification ceremony, January 1995. A number of documentaries for television (including a Four Corners report) were produced at the time. At the time of the Bicentenary, Michael Willessee produced a series of 45 minute telemovies which included Mary McKillop with a vigorous Lorna Lesley in the role.

Mary has an interesting selection of talking heads (Sisters of St Joseph, Fr Gumpel, the German Jesuit looking after the case for the Vatican, and interviewer, Claire Dunne). However, a number of sequences of Mary's life were re-enacted with a vivacious Lucy Bell as Mary. She was not a holy card Mary (except for a sequence with Pope Pius IX) and she gives us some insight into the pioneer nun and her struggles and achievement. The miracle sequence at the end is an odd combination of the earthy and the haloed holy. The director was Kay Pavlou (who admired Mary but whose background was Greek Orthodox)."

Richard Leonard sj

end

SIGNIS FILM REVIEWS BERLINALE 2010

ARBRE ET LA FORET, L' (FAMILY TREE)
AUTRE DUMAS, L' (THE OTHER DUMAS)
BAL (HONEY)
DAVID WANTS TO FLY
EXIT THROUGH THE GIFT SHOP
FAMILIE, EN
FATHER OF INVENTION
FREMDE, DIE (WHEN YOU LEAVE)
GREENBERG
JUD SUSS - RISE AND FALL
KIDS ARE ALL RIGHT, The
KILLER INSIDE ME, The
MINE VAGANTI (LOOSE CANNONS)
MY NAME IS KHAN
NA PUTU (ON THE PATH)
OTOUTO (MY MOTHER'S BROTHER)
PLEASE GIVE

RED HILL
SHAHADA (FAITH)
SON OF BABYLON
SUBMARINO
WHEN I WANT TO WHISTLE, I WHISTLE
WOMAN, A GUN AND A NOODLE SHOP, A

Letters to Father Jakob won the SIGNIS award in Hong Kong this year. Worth seeing as a spirituality film, finely done. Some local films also, Australia's Matching Jack and New Zealand's Second Hand Wedding. For fans of the Millennium trilogy, there is The Girl Who Played with Fire.

SIGNIS FILM REVIEWS SEPTEMBER 2010

CAIRO TIME
EXPENDABLES, The
EXTRA MAN, The
GIRL CLOCK
GIRL WHO PLAYED WITH FIRE, The
GOING THE DISTANCE
LETTERS TO PASTOR JACOB
MATCHING JACK
PIRANHA 3D
SALT
SCOTT PILGRIM VS THE WORLD
SECONDHAND WEDDING
SORCERER'S APPRENTICE, The
SPICE
STEP UP 3D
VAMPIRES SUCK

CAIRO TIME

(Canada, 2010, d. Ruba Nadda)

It's an obvious thing to say (and quite a number of reviewers have said it) that if you haven't the money or time to visit Cairo, then Cairo Time is a pleasing 90 minute substitute.

This is a film for audiences over 35, especially a women's audience who could identify with the middle-aged central character. There is no concession to younger sensibilities which may be action-oriented, expecting everything to be fast-paced. In fact, one word that Canadian director, Ruba Nadda, has used is that she wanted the atmosphere of Cairo and its heat (even in November) as 'languid'. The film is agreeably languid. It has a PG rating and all older audiences will be comfortable watching it.

Yes, the city of Cairo is one of the stars of the film and features in a great deal of attractive detail, dusty markets and bazaars with their crowds, buildings old and new, traffic often jammed. There are also luxury hotels with fine views of the Nile as well as a visit to the desert, to a wedding in Alexandria and, finally, to the pyramids which hover in the background of the city from many angles. We look at the city from the perspective of an American woman as well as a local who migrated years earlier from Syria.

The fine actress, Patricia Clarkson, is Juliette, an editor on a women's magazine, who visits Cairo for the first time, to meet up with her husband who works for the United Nations in Gaza. He is busy with difficulties in a camp there and Juliette is left to her own devices. As with so many Americans, she is not very familiar with the countries of the eastern Mediterranean and Islamic customs for men, for women, for modesty and behaviour. Gradually, she learns and

succumbs to the atmosphere of Egypt.

The person who helps her is Tareq (Alexander Siddig) who had worked for her husband and now runs a coffee shop (for men) left to him by his family. He is a man of courtesy and charm, shows Juliette the city, explains situations to her (including picking her up from a bus trip to Gaza where the bus and travellers are prevented by Israelis from entering).

Almost imperceptibly, given the subtleties of the performances and the delicacy of the screenplay, the two are attracted to each other, he meeting a past love whose daughter is now marrying, she feeling alone with the absence of her husband. It should be said that the tone of the film is the opposite of those stories of lonely people becoming overwhelmingly involved with each other.

As the film slowly unfolds, as the characters reveal more of themselves, we experience a small film but one which is attractive and humane.

THE EXPENDABLES

(US, 2010, d, Sylvester Stallone)

Testosterone. No. TESTOSTERONE. No. T-E-S-T-O-S-T-E-R-O-N-E. Yes, and with a huge plus...

Having established a screen presence with Rocky and Rambo (with sequels to both in recent years), Sylvester Stallone is branching out into a new character, Barney Ross, the leader of a squad of mercenaries who, had they been employed by the US military might have stopped the war in Afghanistan in the first couple of days. We see them at once in operation against Somali pirates (a new and topical enemy for movies), total enemy body count, releasing their amazed hostages and getting unobtusively back to the US to await further bookings.

One comes almost instantly. A mysterious Mr Church (cameo by Bruce Willis) urges them to destroy, with extreme prejudice, the corrupt government of a Latin American island (when they are interrupted by a comic cameo, aureole shining behind him, from Arnold Schwarzenegger in some amusingly hostile banter with Stallone and the comment, as he leaves, about his wanting to be president).

Stallone's mainstay is Lee Christmas, played by movies' current tough guy, Jason Statham. He is expert with knives, Stallone with bullets which sets up some competitive rivalry in mid-mission. Jet Li is there too (with wry comments about his being small) and some wrestlers, Randy Couture and Steve Austin (and some jokes about the former seeing a psychotherapist).

And, Eric Roberts is there, too, smiling and snarling simultaneously, in a performance that has stood him in good stead in many a B or straight to DVD movie: the master villain.

If you want action, more action and then more action, plus impossible stunts and punishing body fights (Stallone keeps getting up again and again after more physical pounding than was inflicted in *The Passion of the Christ*), then here you are.

There are plenty of nasty touches, vicious deaths with an immediate aftermath of nonchalant wisecracks. There is also a grim torture sequence when the woman who tries to help the expendables is waterboarded.

The whole thing is more than a bit much for all except the macho, hawkish niche audience.

THE EXTRA MAN

(US, 2010, d. Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini)

Idiosyncratically droll.

That is a reviewer's word choice to indicate the tone and style of this film about a group of eccentrics who aspire to and live the high life of New York society (and holidaying in Florida). The film is more amusing than funny (though there are some good laugh sequences and one-liners), a comedy of manners, both good and bad manners, and relies on its off-kilter characters and the strong performances to communicate this oddball world.

As the film opens with a Gatsby-like mansion, we find our anti-hero, Louis Ives, imagining himself as Jay Gatsby only

to find that he is Daisy as well. This leads to a theme where he thinks he is a woman and is into cross-dressing with the help of some S and M mistresses, though avoiding any sadism or masochism. He is played by the young, ganglingly awkward actor, Paul Dano, so impressive and different in *Little Miss Sunshine* and the villain in *There Will be Blood*. A would-be writer who works for a Green magazine, we follow his *Candide*-like adventures in New York.

While he is the main character, the spotlight falls on Henry Harrison, played by Kevin Kline as a waspish dandy, a 'walker' for elderly grandes dames who need an escort for social functions or, simply, for an elegant afternoon tea outing. He accepts Louis as a boarder and, after getting accustomed to his odd behavior and comments, Louis begins to ape his mentor. Kevin Kline is given many witty lines, rather misanthropic and conservative-sounding, and he delivers them with relish and panache.

One neighbour is a hirsute John C. Reilly who, when he finally speaks, is trapped in a falsetto register (except when he sings *Somewhere My Love*). In the cast are Katy Holmes as Louis's co-worker at an environmental magazine, Celia Weston as a society follower who imposes herself on functions and Marian Seldes as the grande dame of all grandes dames.

The film may not appeal right across the board with its characters trying to live an F. Scott Fitzgerald life in the 21st century and their wry humour. But, for those who appreciate something a little different and touches of wit and irony, this will be quite a pleasure.

GIRL CLOCK

(Australia, 2010, d. Jennifer Ussi)

Many audiences are going to enjoy this film. It is a modestly budgeted film from Queensland with a fine cast who are probably not so well-known outside Brisbane (and that is a pity). It is a film from suburbia with people you might know but not know so well.

Not that the plot is without its problems for audiences to think about, some complex issues of relationships, sexuality and fertility. Not all audiences are going to necessarily agree with some of the attitudes and behaviour. But that is what drama is all about. (An American archbishop once said that he could not write a pastoral letter to the people of his diocese on a bioethical issue without consulting widely and listening to the experiences of people with a range of viewpoints. I watched this film – on principally women's issues – in this vein.)

Girl Clock (probably more accurately, *Middle Aged Woman's Clock* because the clock for pregnancy seems to be ticking faster and louder for the central character, Christine (Veronica Neave)). She is a career woman, a photographer, conscious of the approach of menopause but who feels an overwhelming compulsion to conceive a child. She has no partner. Much of her dilemma throughout the film is how to find one when she does not want and can't commit to a permanent, let alone temporary, relationship. (Whether it is the writing or the skill of Veronica Neave or both, Christine does give the impression that, despite what she says, deep down she does want some lasting relationship.)

There are some funny episodes in her search for a partner which leads her to an ex-lover (who does not want to be used), a dating site with the expected group of eccentrics, to IVF. The finale is not what the audience is expecting and there is a scene which may/will have us thinking twice – to which another reviewer reminded us of deceased people's wish to be organ donors and the question of where the limits are.

But, the film is not just about Christine and her ticking biological clock. She has two best friends, much her own age, and we share something of their stories. Mikki (Caterina Hebbard) is a researcher, aged an unwilling 42, whose obsession is her appearance and the feeling that people look through her. There is fine scene where her partner, wordlessly and sensitively, makes a gesture that affirms her as a person, a woman, and enables her to break through the obsession. (The partner, Tom, is played by Adam Couper who co-wrote the screenplay.)

And then there are Margot and Keith who have two adult children. They are the rock of the film, the reassurance to those who cannot commit that years of a happy, contented, marriage are more than possible. Queenie van de Zandt is a wonderful earth mother with a wry sense of humour. Jamie Dunn's Keith is balding and certainly not thin, a wonderful, common-sensed father with a wryer sense of humour.

While the film is one of female sensibilities (co-written with a man to ensure no male-bashing, produced and directed by a woman who has drawn on her own life experiences), most of the male characters in the film are quite sympathetic.

There are lots of funny moments, lots of sad moments (and a wonderful cameo by Carol Burns as a lonely old woman whose dog Christine has accidentally run over).

The issues are real, especially for women, and an alert for male viewers. As has been said, not everyone will agree with the women's decisions and the consequences but, because the film is human and humane, their actions ask for humane consideration.

THE GIRL WHO PLAYED WITH FIRE

(Sweden, 2009, d. Daniel Alfredson)

Over a year in the life of Lisbeth Salander (Noomi Rapace) has gone by when we take up her story in this sequel to *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*. She is now back from her travels and trying to get her life in order. That is not to be. However, by the end of the film – and this should please and interest those who have not read the novels (and there are probably a few, including this reviewer – we learn the full story and background to Lisbeth's tormented life.

Her lawyer-parole officer assaulted her sexually, and quite graphically, in the first film. This sequence is repeated in part and becomes a key issue for the narrative now.

There are two strands of plot which are interwoven. On the one hand, Michael Nykvist (Michael Blomqvist) is working again for his magazine, *Millennium*, and two researchers are preparing an expose of trafficking in women in Sweden, names of criminals as well as the women's clients/exploiters. As might be expected, this is a risky undertaking and murders follow. It would appear, on some evidence, that Lisbeth Salander is responsible. The police believe this and investigate accordingly. Michael does not and pursues his own search for Lisbeth who has disappeared (in disguise – and giving us the opportunity to see what she looks like without the punk nose rings...)

The other strand is Lisbeth's own search for documents about her past, especially about her father. We have seen her setting him alight in the first film and this one opens with that scene. However, the denouement is not what she expected.

Along the way, her friend, Miriam, with whom she has a sexual relationship and Paolo, a boxer friend, are set upon by a giant bruiser who works violently for the unseen criminals.

In many ways, this is tough stuff, as was the first film, filmed with a Scandinavian serious and sometimes-intensity that makes it different from the many American versions of crime and police investigations (and American versions are under way). While this film comes to a conclusion, it is clear that it must also be continued (and according to the cast list of *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*, at least seven of the characters here will be seen again).

GOING THE DISTANCE

(US, 2010, d. Nanette Burstein)

If you go the distance, you may appreciate this 2010 romantic comedy. On the other hand, you may not.

It's a story of two people in love who are separated (one in New York, the other in Los Angeles) who miss each other, try to keep connected but who fall foul of what happens to so many couples, job opportunities which favour one and disadvantage the other.

So far, so ordinary enough.

The couple is played by Drew Barrymore and Justin Long (who have been together in real life so the relationship is not as realistically far-fetched as might at first appear – as well as testing credibility during the film). One trouble is that Drew Barrymore is such a strong personality, even when acting as hesitant and indecisive, and Justin Long is rather laid-back. When she says she can't make a decision by herself, we are inclined not to believe her.

The other trouble is the screenplay which has taken a very lazy way out of trying to write characters who have some distinctive personalities by inserting crass language and expressions wearily often. It's not the bodily function jokes

(of which there are many), but the constant incidental swearing for no good or realistic reason. Yes, people do talk like this, but that does not make it any less wearying either. The language tends to sabotage the action and the comedy.

Maybe Drew Barrymore's next romantic comedy will be better.

LETTERS TO FATHER JAKOB (POSTIA PAPPI JAAKOBILLE)

(Finland, 2009, Klaus Haro)

If you would like to see a finely sensitive film that explores the mercy and love of God, then Letters to Father Jacob, a SIGNIS award winning film at the Hong Kong International Film Festival, 2010, can be recommended.

The plot of this short film (75 minutes) is quite simple. We are introduced to a morose and taciturn prisoner, Leila, who is offered a placement, working with Pastor Jacob. She is resentful. We do not know what her crime has been. But, we do know that she is unable to accept human or divine mercy.

Pastor Jacob is an old blind priest living in retirement in a ramshackle house in the countryside. He has requested Leila as he has a ministry of answering letters from the large number of people who write to him. Leila reads impassively and gets about ordinary duties in the house with a silent sullenness.

It is we the audience rather than Leila (though we know that ultimately her reading the letters and listening to Pastor Jacob will touch her but in ways we don't quite anticipate) who listen attentively to Jacob's answers. It is the language of a God of love and mercy, a God of grace, spoken directly and with warmth and feeling – with time and space for some meditative reflection. We hear of several cases (which Jacob immediately recognises when he hears the letters), a man oppressed by teachers, a woman to whom he had given his money so that she could move away from her violently abusive husband.

Audiences will be moved by Leila's final response to Pastor Jacob and appreciate the human need for deep communication and truth.

It is still possible to make a fine film on explicitly religious themes.

MATCHING JACK

(Australia, 2010, d. Nadia Tass)

Because of its theme, one wishes that one could be kinder and more recommending of Matching Jack than is possible.

The core of the film, reminiscent of Lorenzo's Oil and many telemovies that focus on children and serious illnesses, is that young Jack (a vigorous Tom Russell who appeared as one of the children in The Tree) is found to have leukemia which is making destructive progress. His devoted mother (Jacinda Barrett) does her best for her son, especially when it appears that a bone marrow transplant from a compatible relative or sibling offers some hope. Her philandering husband (Richard Roxburgh, both concerned as a father and callous as a husband) gets some comeuppance as his wife tries to interview the many women with whom he had affairs in the hope that one of their children is his.

While that is the core of the film, it is often waylaid by the sub-plots, that of the search for a compatible child, but more emphatically by the story of the boy in the adjacent bed in the children's hospital ward and his Irish father. In many ways, this becomes a more involving story than the main one. This is due to James Nesbitt's charm and his eccentric concern for his son (filling him with Irish folk tales and building him the framework of a sailing boat for his bed). The son is played very well by Kodi Smit-McPhee, who has shown his acting talent in Romulus, My Father, The Road and as the young vampire in Let Me In. More emotional response from the audience is drawn for this story.

Nadia Tass knows how to make comedies (Malcolm, Rikki and Pete, Pure Luck, Mr Reliable) as well as emotional dramas (Amy, The Shirley Temple Story). Many audiences will be involved and moved by Matching Jack, but, perhaps because of the lopsidedness of the different plot emphases – and there is another one with the relationship between the anxious mother and the Irishman as well as the story of the result of the search for the compatible sibling – it does not quite have the effect that was intended.

PEEPLI [LIVE]

(India, 2010, d. Anusha Rizvi and Mahmood Farooqui)

Indian films are being released increasingly widely. Peepli [Live] screened at the 2010 Sundance festival and is being released in the US and other western countries.

It is not in the Bollywood style, though there are some songs in the background, rather than the foreground, and there are some eccentric characters and quite some emotional shouting at times.

The film does focus on Indian social problems, with some dire statistics at the end indicating how so many farmers in the sub-continent are moving away from their farms and holdings and many of them are committing suicide.

This is one of the themes taken up here. Two brothers are trying to raise a loan to stop the foreclosure of their land. They have been refused by the banks (much to the yelling consternation of the wife of Nartha, the central character). They try the local politicians who are well off and tend to wallow in their prosperity. These politicians have their eye on forthcoming elections and embarrassing the higher powers. It is they who bring up the fact that the government is prepared to pay farmers compensation if they commit suicide.

What are the brothers to do to save their land? Nartha is persuaded to sacrifice his life for his wife and children.

However, the locals have something else in mind and Nartha disappears. Has he killed himself or not? The media get hold of the story and off they go in chase. Delhi becomes aware of the situation and proposes issuing a Nartha card offering recompense, 'offering', as the wily politician suggests, not 'paying'.

It all comes to a head with everybody scrambling to find Nartha. Meantime, he is bewildered by the whole circus around him.

The film offers rather heavy but nonetheless valid satirical points against the politicians and against the swarming and exploitative media. It ends with a somewhat pessimistic tone before the final statistics come up. So, a more serious Indian film than might have been anticipated. It offers an opportunity for western audiences to attend to and appreciate the particularly Indian sensibilities and styles of storytelling and performance as well as be alert to pressing social problems.

PIRANHA 3D

(US, 2010, d. Alexandre Aja)

If ever there was real schlock horror, then this is it.

It can probably be best described as a 'hoot'. It is one of those movies that can (not necessarily should) be watched at home by a young adult audience (not being required to act in any adult way), better with a group who will laugh out loud, jump and scream now and again, and ogle the sexy content (even an aquatic nude ballet, performed underwater – after all the director is French!), which brings to mind the title of one of the main songs from A Chorus Line.

This is a film of depth. Well, not that kind of cinematic depth, just literal depth.

Piranha 3D at its deepest: it opens with a seismic shift under Lake Victoria, Arizona, just at the time that Richard Dreyfuss, in his Jaws character, is out fishing – with a destructive result from special effects that the shark from Jaws would be jealous of. The tone is set: knowing laugh about Jaws and disaster movies, anticipation of plenty of beyond-Jaws devastation, peril and rescue (with a large body – and body parts – count). All fulfilled. That's the depth at the bottom of the lake which some scientists explore with the same skin and bone-shredding results.

Just up from that is another depth level, that below the water surface – lots of repeats of limbs splashing, blood spurts and piranhas moving almost at the speed of light to do their thing. It is also at this level that the aforementioned aquatic ballet takes place, lasting more than might be expected but, also tailored for disbelieving laughs as Kelly Brook and her partner swim to the accompaniment of the well-known aria from Lakme! And, it is at this level that, one the one hand, a woman's hair gets entangled with a boat's motor (grizzly!) and, on the other, the teenage dorky hero rescues his sometimes petulant girlfriend (split-second heroics!).

Coming up to the surface, we have both the serious and the silly. Serious is the work of the local sheriff (Elizabeth Shue, always welcome), her trying to keep her three children safe but obedience to their mother is not the order of the day and she finishes up having to rescue them all (peril and stunts) when she thought they were safe at home. She also has to assist the scientists in their quest for what happened under the lake. Oh, and Christopher Lloyd turns up as the local scientist, a specialist on prehistoric piranhas – who has almost the last word, which is swiftly taken from him in a jolt ending which shocks and makes us all laugh as the credits roll and, because of the box-office success in its opening weekend in the US, we realise there is going to be a bigger, if not better, sequel. (What did Joe Dante set off with his original Piranha back in 1978 and continued by, of all people, James Cameron, in the 80s sequel!)

Also on the surface are thousands of those college students, hounded by hormones and compulsive extraversion, which has them descend in hordes to holiday resorts for spring breaks and lose all inhibitions and most of their clothes, so that they can shout, drink, gyrate on the spot to loud music, and indulge in wet-shirting and leering. Also on the surface is a porn-film-maker, played with crass relish by Jerry O'Connell (the underwater ballet is his idea), apparently a send up of the web master of Girls Gone Wild (who wanted to sue for defamation). The moral satisfaction for the righteous audience is that so many of those who have been the titillators are the first on the piranha menu.

There's lots of grisly special effects, some realistic and some so gorily gross and unrealistic-looking that they have the audience gasping and laughing at the same time.

So, it's the same Jaws scenario of holidays, menace, the authorities trying to handle the situation (which some commentators have noted has already been made classic in Ibsen's 19th century play *An Enemy of the People*, but who on the crew of Piranha 3D might have known that!).

The running time is fairly short – which means that that group watching the DVD might click 'play' again for a re-hoot.

SALT

(US, 2010, d. Phillip Noyce)

Of course, *The Salt Identity*, *The Salt Supremacy* and *The Salt Ultimatum*.

We had thought that all the sleepers trained in Russia and infiltrated into ordinary and suburban US society in Cold War decades were more than middle-aged by now. But, it looks as though some of the Russian dissidents, not pleased with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and relying on their training talents of the past, have been keeping up-to-date with the program. But, the question is who is the spy and who is not and who has infiltrated the CIA.

There used to be a short British Film with Peter Sellers and Spike Milligan called *The Running, Jumping & Standing Still Film*. This is really the *Salt Running, Jumping* film (not much standing still) and Angelina Jolie spends most of the time doing just this with an agility that defies belief and a timing that keeps her alive more often than it really could or should.

When a Russian defector turns up in Washington and Evelyn Salt interviews him, he warns that there is to be an assassination attempt on the visit Russian president and the sleeper agent to be activated is called... Evelyn Salt. Is she or isn't she? Agent Chiwetel Ejiofor believes she is, fellow department agent Liev Schreiber (who had overseen her release from a North Korean prison as the film opens) believes she isn't. For quite a while, as Salt (running and jumping) evades and eludes her pursuers, it doesn't seem to matter which side she is on as long as she keeps alive.

Then there is to be an attempt on the life of the US President (nothing done by halves in this movie). Will she do it? Will she unmask someone else? If that tantalises you, and you like Angelina Jolie being more energetic than Lara Croft, then you will suspend disbelief (and that is a mighty ask even when the pace is so fast) and just go with the flow, wherever it leads.

Directed by Australian Phillip Noyce who has directed some fine films like *Newsfront*, *Rabbit Proof Fence* and *The Quiet American* but who also showed Hollywood action flair with his Jack Ryan adventure films and *The Bone Collector* (also with Angelina Jolie). Popcorn action for adults – with a neo-Cold War subtext.

SCOTT PILGRIM VS THE WORLD

(US, 2010, d. Edgar Wright)

Well, not quite the world. Rather, vs the exes of the girl Scott Pilgrim has a thing for – so maybe the title should be Scott Pilgrim vs His World.

Based on a six year series of comics/graphic novels, with the author, Bryan Lee O'Malley collaborating with director, Edgar Wright, on the film, it is an entertainment for the 20 plus or minus age group who can identify with the characters and the situations, for whom Scott Pilgrim (and actor Michael Cera) could be surrogate figures.

This is a role that suits Michael Cera perfectly. He is more Michael Cera-like than usual, and that is saying something. He does always seem the same, though in taking an alternate role in *Youth In Revolt*, he showed that he really could do something different when required.

Edgar Wright, British director who enjoyed playing with zombie conventions in *Shaun of the Dead*, and police mysteries in *Hot Fuzz* (as well as a humorous trailer spoof in the middle of *Grindhouse*), tackles the graphic novel with exuberance and visual flair that has comic-style words all over the screen, has the characters performing as if they are in comic strip panels, not worrying about realism at all but creating Bryan Lee O'Malley's world visually and letting rip.

Needless to say, any audience in an older age bracket needs to be warned that they are going to feel much older than they thought they did and some frustration tolerance might have to be exercised. But, this is a film of its time, of our time, of the culture of comic books, graphic novels, of computer games, of the instantly instant. (Wright is 31.)

And, that older audience that watches Scott Pilgrim, may be reminded of other comic book heroes. Back in the early 1930s, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster created Superman and his mortal incarnation, Clark Kent. In real life they were Clark Kents who were able to imagine Superman and experience some vicarious adventures. Scott Pilgrim is somewhat Clark Kentish, with Michael Cera look, hesitancy and rising diffident intonations.

Superman was truly a hero, a super-hero, vs the evil world. Scott Pilgrim is much more modest. He has tentatively begun a relationship with a 17 year old Chinese schoolgirl who becomes the biggest groupie of Scott's band (Clark Kent was a journalist, nowadays everyone young wants to be in a band). His band members are really variations on this theme, except for Kim (Allison Pill) who used to be Scott's girlfriend in school. There is also his gay room-mate, Wallace (an effective Kieran Culkin) reminding us that we live in a franker era on relationships and orientations. When Scott sees Ramona Flowers (Mary Elizabeth Winstead), a refugee from New York to Toronto, where the film is set (and Michael Cera comes from), he discovers a fickleness in himself and sets his heart on Ramona.

His quest is not the elimination of evil, so he is not quite vs the world. Rather, he has to confront Ramona's exes in comic fights or musical competitions that allow him to be a hero and for the screen to highlight his kapow battles. (Superman, Brandon Routh, and Fantastic Four's Human Torch, Chris Evans, are two of his foes.) And, besides, the superheroes usually give up their love interest in life to dedicate themselves to their quests. Scott Pilgrim really wants Ramona Flowers.

So, many younger audiences and young adults will resonate with all of this and the film may become something of a cult movie. On the other hand, in thirty years time, movie watchers and social commentators may be wondering about 2010 sensibilities.

SECOND HAND WEDDING

(New Zealand, 2008, d. Paul Murphy)

Films with wedding in the title are not necessarily sure-fire box office successes. But, more often than not they are, whether they are big fat Greek, monsoon, my best friend's or Muriel's. *Second Hand Wedding*, coming from New Zealand and with a cast of locals, may not be destined for the same kind of celebrity but, if it were well known, it could.

This is a very entertaining slice of very ordinary New Zealand, Wellington life.

[At this point of the review, adding a personal note: I saw it one Tuesday morning at 10.30 am at an independent cinema in the Melbourne suburb of Waverley. And drizzling. However, there were forty patrons to see the film, 25 from a social group for the aged, who had sandwiches afterwards as part of the outing, and a minibus full of handicapped and Downs people. And they laughed at all the right spots, really enjoying themselves. Quite infectious. It is that kind of film.]

A prologue introduces us to second hand and bargain shops with buyers employed by the owner to scout garage sales

for specials. Then we are into it. Jill and her friend Muffy spend Saturdays racing from one garage sale to another. Jill is able to spot real bargains but she has a compulsion to buy... and buy.

Then we find that she is an assistant school principal and that her daughter is about to get married, though she cannot bring herself to tell her mother for fear that Jill will take over the wedding reception. She does tell her benign father. When Jill does find out, through a spiteful move from the teacher who had applied for Jill's job, Jill is upset with everyone, especially her husband, for keeping her in the dark. Then things go wrong with the plans for the reception, especially in terms of prices. But, you know it is going to work out well and much of the delight in the characters is seeing how everything eventuates.

Geraldine Brophy is very engaging as Jill even when she can be exasperating. Patrick Wilson as her husband, Brian, is a nice retired man. Jill and Brian, as well as some of the other characters, are not paper thin, a welcome acknowledgement that diets, fasting and exercise regimes need not rule one's life (though there is a heart attack at one stage).

There are the family tensions, the banter in the car servicing firm where the fiancé is employed (and the takeover of plans by the scrawny owner's plumpish wife who is called Sugarpuff!), the crises concerning bookings, catering, decorations, ... and more garage sales, the culmination being a sale to cap all sales. Everybody (except the mean owner of the shop) is nice, even the jealous teacher comes round and does the right thing.

A pleasant local feel, characters that you could meet anywhere in the suburbs, and a genial entertainment all round with some good laughs.

THE SORCEROR'S APPRENTICE

(US, 2010, d. Jom Turteltaub)

Older audiences (for whom this fantasy adventure from Arthurian times to the New York present is not intended) may well remember Fantasia and Mickey Mouse and the mops, brooms and buckets dancing relentlessly to Dukas' music. In fact, the final credits acknowledge that this screenplay was inspired by that short film. And, entertainingly, there is a brief live-action, special effects re-creation of/homage to that Fantasia scene.

Magic in New York? Sorcerors in Manhattan? In these Harry Potter years, why not?

Actually, the film is a bit reminiscent of Harry Potter (and not just in the fact that Jay Baruchel as Dave, the apprentice in question looks like and describes himself as a 'physics dork'). But, so busy has he been with his physics experiments that he has probably never heard of Harry Potter, let alone read any of the books or seen any of the films. He may not have seen *Night at the Museum* which this film reminds us of in passing.

It all begins with Merlin and his three apprentices, Balthasar (Nicolas Cage), Veronica (Monica Bellucci) and Maxim (Alfred Molina) and the confrontation with Morgana le Fay (Alice Krige). One is a rogue apprentice (no prize for guessing which one). When the spirit of Morgana (ingested by Veronica to save Balthasar) is trapped in one of those dolls with layers of dolls, Balthasar begins his trek through the centuries to find 'The Prime Merlinian'! Why are they always in the US and, specifically, now and in New York City? What was Merlin thinking in setting a line of prime merlians ending with Dave!

The reluctant Dave does go through his apprenticeship with Balthasar (though often with one or more eyes on the lookout for dream girl, Becki Barnes (Australian Teresa Palmer looking like Naomi Watts' younger sister). Maxim turns up looking like a catalogue sketch (coat, tie and hat) in a turn of the century advertisement, but a sneering villain none the less.

Lots of action, car chases, flying on gargoyle eagles, clashes with magic powers and, of course, Morgana being released to face her judgment day at Dave's hands (literally filled with magic).

So, some good holiday fun for younger audiences. (And, for those who wait until the end of the credits, a suggestion for a sequel).

SPLICE

(US, 2010, d. Vincenzo Natale)

The Frankenstein myth.

It must be a deeply archetypal story for it to have been expressed in so many different forms, from the Golem to the Frankenstein monster of Mary Shelley, let alone all the film versions and variations, of which *Splice* is a 21st century example. Once again, we have scientists who may be motivated by benefiting the human race with their experiments but are not initially aware of their hubris, of their 'playing God' in wanting to create life. And, then, when they have pronounced those mythical words, 'It's alive', and delighted in the wonder of creation, the limitations of their creature and their own personal limitations wreak destruction and the creation has to be terminated. Doubtless, there will be many more dramatisations of the story.

Clive and Elsa (Adrien Brody and Sarah Polley) are a couple employed by a pharmaceutical company who seem to have a great deal of independence and lack of supervision or accountability. While trying to find genes for curing diseases, they do splicing tests, with animal tissues and bring into existence Fred and Ginger, artificial creatures, who seem to be compatible and can mate – but, ultimately, they provide more than a surprise in their development which leads to twists in the plot.

What if there were splicing of animal and human DNA? Step by step, Elsa takes command and has her way with the splicing and the cultivations of the creature. Clive hesitates but does not stop the process. The creature that emerges has animal characteristics but has more presentable attributes of feminine beauty. If you think you can see where this is going, you are more alert than Clive and Elsa, but you would be right.

Giving the creature the name, Dren, Elsa finds a substitute child figure and when Dren observes Clive and Elsa together, she makes a huge leap forward in psychosexual development which we know will turn out badly.

With pressures from the company and the threat of the closing down of their labs, Clive and Elsa decide to present Fred and Ginger (not Dren) to the investors and board members. Here the film moves from science-fiction conventions to some horror conventions and to a conclusion that won't be alien to science-fiction fans – as well as to a mysterious future which could easily lead to *Splice 2*.

Filmed in chill colours, the film has a coldly pervasive atmosphere. It is old-fashioned B movie material given A production and cast. And, as with all the Frankenstein variations, it is sceptical of this kind of scientific progress and even more sceptical of the values and behaviour of the scientists.

STEP UP 3D

(US, 2010, d. Jon Chu)

Dance movies have been popular over recent years, especially with competitions from ballroom to the streets. The British 3D film, *Street Dance*, made a connection between popular stomping styles and ballet. Actually, here there are two interludes from/interruptions to the Step Up group style confrontational acrobatic dancing (apart from some scenes of familiar drama that interrupt the dancing from time to time): a ballroom tango performance with the two leads and a Gene Kelly routine that reminds us of *Singin' in the Rain* by the two secondary leads. But, all in all, if you've seen the other two films, you've seen most of this one too.

The difference? 3D.

When 3D works well, the audience is immersed in the action. This is the advantage here. Much of the dancing is highly energised and choreographed to make the 3D have maximum effect. If you enjoy this kind of dancing, then sit, not back, but forward, with the 3D glasses, and be involved.

The story line is Step Up 101 in its familiarity. Competition, rivalries, betrayals, friendships, breaking of friendships, falling in love, competition from studies (and finals always seem to be programmed during exams that can't be missed), a champion to the rescue at the end – and victory, as if we didn't know.

The performances of the leads are serviceable. Rick Malabri looks good enough but it would seem his double did a lot of dancing. Australian Sharni Vinson has some presence and did her dancing. Adam G. Sevani from Step Up 2 shows great versatility even though his character is made to look and act like a geek. And the villain behaves in a dastardly fashion.

Colour, music, noise, movement, dance – and 3D.

VAMPIRES SUCK

(US, 2101, d. Jason Friedberg and Aaron Seltzer)

A lot of people in this decade have taken vampires in movies and television series (from Twilight to True Blood) very seriously and take this title seriously and factually. Of course, vampires do suck. However, many others take the whole matter far less seriously, so the title is a corny but funny title for this parody.

The writer-directors of Vampires Suck have been making spoofs of American movie trends for some years now. They don't get very good reviews but they feel that they fill a need for someone to send up the trends. Audiences often get a giggle or two from these spoofs, like Meet the Spartans which took on Leonidas and the campy treatment of 300. In fact they have written The Scary Movies and then directed Epic, Date and Disaster Movies. It was only to be expected that they should come up with this one.

The earlier films had some laugh out loud sequences but sometimes strained for these or took refuge in bad taste. Vampires Suck, following Twilight and New Moon rather closely, is not a laugh movie. Rather, it is one that can offer smiles as we watch the spoof tone of the film, the send-ups of the characters (Edward, 'the pale guy with the constipated look' who powders his face and puts his hair in curlers and Jake taking his shirt off for no reason except that his contact requires him to take it off every ten minutes of screen time). Bella becomes Becca. The way her character behaves quietly parodies Kristen Stewart's rather morose heroine.

There are some incidental jokes if you are quick enough, a stab at Tiger Woods' affairs, the movie Dear John..., no werewolves to be seen, only a Chihuahua.

Those who like the Twilight films and solemnly watch them (and the number is legion) will probably not be pleased or impressed. Those who have seen the films and not liked them might get some satisfaction at the poking fun. For those who have not seen them, they may wonder what it is all about. So, a mild but more accurate contribution to the spoof series.

SIGNIS FILM REVIEWS OCTOBER 2010

Two films from Australia, Summer Coda, a European style drama, and Tomorrow When the War Began, made for a teenage audience who have studied the books at school (and broke Australian box-office records).

There is also James Ivory's last film which has been delayed in release, The City of Your Final Destination.

I have also included The Least of These, not released much to cinemas, but a film which reflects the current crisis in clerical sexual abuse.

CATS AND DOGS: THE REVENGE OF KITTY GALORE

CHARLIE ST CLOUD

CITY OF YOUR FINAL DESTINATION, The

DESPICABLE ME

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LEAST OF THESE, The

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SAGAN

SUMMER CODA

TOMORROW WHEN THE WAR BEGAN

CATS AND DOGS: THE REVENGE OF KITTY GALORE

(US, 2010, d. Brad Peyton)

The first Cats and Dogs (2001) was an amusing variation on the talking animals' movies – but this time they have used familiar espionage and action conventions and have provided some entertaining spoofs. With Mr Tinkles, voiced by Sean Hayes, the original was something of a sharp parody.

This one intends much the same. Not that the kiddies for whom the film is intended are going to get the wordplay on Pussy Galore (after all, the movie of Goldfinger was 47 years ago!) nor recognise the amusing style of these credits aping Maurice Binder's credits for all those James Bond films. And, it would have to be a precocious infant movie buff who would enjoy the joke of Roger Moore playing a cat whose name is Lazenby.

Actually, the conspiracy theory behind the plot here is not particularly startling. The scorned Kitty Galore (voiced by an over-the-top Bette Midler) wants to control the world by making dogs go so berserk that they upset their owners who get rid of them and the cats take over and Kitty becomes a feline Blofeld.

Meantime, Diggs (voiced by James Marsden) is a police dog, heroic but lacking in judgment, prone to on the job disasters. Despite the pleas of his owner (Chris O'Donnell), Diggs is pensioned off but recruited by the international dog squad where dogs combat evil instead of being taken to the pound. This time, the boss, Butch (now voiced by a humorously gruff Nick Nolte), recruits Diggs to bring down Kitty Galore. There are dogs (Neil Patrick Harris), an ally cat (Christina Applegate) and a garrulous homing pigeon (Katt Williams) amongst the agents.

What follows is investigation, canine mayhem, feline malice, and ultimate success.

Diggs is reunited with his master, but is called again by Butch because Mr Tinkles, imitating Blofeld and laughing like Dr Evil, is offering a potential sequel.

CHARLIE ST CLOUD

(US, 2010, d. Burr Steers)

Based on a novel, The Death and Life of Charlie St Cloud, the film takes its themes from the book's title. It is about death and life after death – that is, life after death here on earth. It is a pleasing film, especially if one is open to some of the more transcendent aspects of life and the purpose of life and individual calling. (I don't think Charlie St Cloud will be high on the list of films to be screened at a Sceptics Convention.)

Zac Efron is Charlie. After proving an irresistible heartthrob to teenage girls in the High School Musical series, he has proven that he is also a capable actor in Hairspray, 18 Again and Me and Orson Welles.

Charlie and his little brother, Sam (Charlie Tahan), are very close, sharing skills at sailing and Charlie coaching his brother in baseball. They live with their mother (Kim Basinger) after their father has walked out on them. Then tragedy strikes. A car smash. A medic (who prays to St Jude) is able to resuscitate Charlie but not Sam. Five years pass and Charlie has become something of a recluse, caretaker for the local cemetery and quietly working on boat designs. He had made a promise to Sam that they would have an hour's baseball coaching every afternoon. Charlie is still faithful to this.

Charlie is not exactly haunted, but he sees the dead, including a high school friend who has been killed in Iraq. Most people think he has not got over his grief and is a bit touched in the head. In a brief, moving encounter, the paramedic who now has terminal cancer, Florio (a non-threatening Ray Liotta in a sympathetic role), persuades Charlie that he has a mission because he came back to life. His widow makes a special visit to Charlie because her husband wanted him to have his St Jude medal.

When he encounters, Tess (Amanda Crews), another high school acquaintance, at the cemetery, angry at the lack of tending of her father's grave, Charlie is more than attracted. Tess is a sailor and plans to enter an important race. The film develops their relationship and commitment, Tess's sailing into a storm, Charlie believing that she is not dead, and being compelled to find her.

While there is both charm and warmth in the film and its depiction of selflessness, it is one of those films that you feel

is 'not quite' what it set out to be and so somewhat diminished in its impact.

THE CITY OF YOUR FINAL DESTINATION

(US, 2008, d. James Ivory)

At the time of directing this film, James Ivory was nearing eighty. He has a fine body of work, from his films in India in the 1960s and 1970s, to his adaptations of the 1980s and 1990s (especially of novels by Henry James: *The Europeans*, *The Bostonians*, *The Golden Bowl*, and of E.M. Forster: *A Room with a View*, *Maurice*, *Howard's End*), to his wider range of adaptations in later years. However, many critics and audiences have found his style, and sumptuous re-creations of period, too old-fashioned as cinema. The appropriate response is that his film-making follows classical styles. For those who follow the tradition of mocking films as 'Merchant-Ivory heritage films', this adaptation of a novel by Peter Cameron will be just another film. For those who have enjoyed Ivory's talent for telling stories for adult audiences, 22 of them written by Ruth Prawer Jabvala over a period of 45 years, they will be interested in a range of different characters in an Uruguyan setting.

Omar, a young academic wants to write the biography of a one-novel success, a dead writer from Uruguay. Pushed by his girlfriend, Deidre, he finds that the family refuses to give a clearance for his work. He ventures into Uruguay and meets a strange community of family and friends and gets to know them, with the hope of persuading them. The author's older gay brother is in favour of the project. The widow is definitely not. The mistress, with her little daughter, is also not in favour. The screenplay offers a lot of conversations, often delivered with some asperity. There is also a great deal of detail of life in this secluded part of the world. The enjoyment of the film is in responding to the characters and the performances, reflections on celebrity and privacy, as well as the development of the character of the young man.

Filmed in Argentina, there is a strong sense of the Latin American atmosphere, on the pampas, in the local towns, on the estate.

Omar Metwally is an attractive screen presence even when he is dilatory, over cautious and put upon by his girlfriend, (Alexandra Maria Lara is very good in alienating the characters and dominating Omar). The author's brother is played with some insouciance by Anthony Hopkins with Hiroyuki Sanada as Pete his longtime companion. Laura Linney is haughtiness personified as Caroline, the widow. Charlotte Gainsbourg is quite ingeniously charming as Arden, the mistress, who has fitted into this different world and lives for her little daughter.

A lot of surface gentility. A lot of simmering passions and petty distrusts, although the film remains quite calm rather than passionate. Not an Ivory masterpiece, but interesting and entertaining straightforward storytelling.

DESPICABLE ME

(US, 2010, d. Jacques Reynaud and Pierre Coffin)

Not too many films around with 'despicable' in the title. And the film is so entertaining that critics will not be tempted to use 'despicable' to describe it. It is very likeable, even the villain (hero), Gru. Children will enjoy it, as will adults, but it is for older youngster rather than the littlies.

While some of the elements may be familiar enough, two rival villains and their competitiveness, three little orphans with wide-eyed longing to be adopted, the strands come together in ways that are rather unpredictable.

The characters and the drawings are quite different from the American style and much of the animation was done in Paris by a French team. This is most welcome. The characters are all exaggerated, especially the adult faces. We know many of the cast who voice the characters – but the drawings don't look like the stars at all. Steve Carrell (relishing his accent, from Eastern Europe?) is not tall and gangly like Gru (the initials come from an old Soviet intelligence agency). Jason Segal is quite big but here voices the small, nerdy, paunchy villain, Vector. And, just as well Julie Andrews doesn't look like Gru's mum, a witch-nosed, piled-hair harriidan of a mother (with Julie voicing it as gruff and accented as well), And Doctor Nefario does not look like Russell Brand. The voices are most enjoyable.

And the plot? The film opens with a bold kid climbing up the great pyramid in Cairo only to discover that it is a blow-up and the real one has been stolen – as have other emblematic buildings. Then we are introduced to the misanthropic Gru who aspires to be the world's greatest villain and is feeling rather peeved that someone else has stolen the pyramid.

But he has a bright idea – and the screenwriters must have thought, why not go for the moon, and they do. Gru will steal the moon by shrinking it and bring it back to earth for ransom in his Dr Nefario-built rocket. You see, it is unpredictable!

Gru, however, was not counting on the determination of the three orphans who tried to sell him cookies. They want to escape from the institution's cruel Miss Hattie (Kristin Wiig). They are American-cute and start to melt Gru's heart, even with a visit to an entertainment part and a roller coaster ride (in 3D) that is too much for Gru.

There is a lot of slapstick from the Pixar-studio like little minions that Gru relies on for everything, even the final cliffhanger (well, cable hanger between two rocket ships!).

Amusing for all – and adults may like the sub-heading over the door of The Bank of Evil: 'Formerly Lehmann Brothers'.

DIARY OF A WIMPY KID

(US, 2010, d. Thor Freudenthal)

Definitely for young teens (younger if they have had experience of bullies and now have ambitions for being popular), but many parents seem to have enjoyed it, no doubt remembering their childhood or observing parallels with their own children. I was wondering about enjoying it until I saw the PE coach (Coach Malone!) bullying the younger kids who had to be stand-up knock-down targets for his older footballing team – and my memory hurried back to... and the film seemed a little more realistic than I would have thought.

But, then I had difficulty with Greg (Zachary Gordon), the allegedly wimpy kid, who did not seem all that wimpy to me. He looks like what Americans love to call 'cute'. But, he generally didn't act too cutely at all – and this has appealed to reviewers who can't stand goody-goody kids on screen. Rather, he seemed something of a selfish brat, quite self-centred and absorbed, wanting popularity at any cost, pushing himself and downsizing others so that he would appear as a success in the yearbook, a social conformist to all the expectations for being the all-American. So, in moments of anti-Yank hostility, I thought him the 'typical American (for which I now apologise, but you know what I mean).

Greg lies, exploits, betrays, mocks his best friend, letting him take the blame for his wrong-doing. Perhaps I am just being carried away because so many warm to Greg and his 'cuteness'.

My sympathies were really with the plump, the naive and straightforward Rowley (Robert Capron) who is always putting his foot in it, blurting out the truth (to his best friend Greg's dismay). But, Rowley is all the nicer for it. Maybe Greg is not entirely to blame. Look at his family. His father, played by Steve Zahn just like the morons Greg sketches and despises, is dumb. His mother (Rachael Harris), however, is tolerant and does offer good advice. Greg's older brother Rodrick (Devon Bostick) plays tricks on him with superior meanness (but, are we to applaud when Greg mischievously and just as meanly turns the tables on Rodrick and gets him into trouble?). There is also a little brother with some potty difficulties. Come to think of it, Greg is very nasty to Pam, the stuck-up would-be head of the class during a performance of The Wizard of Oz.

Greg and Rowley fall out to Greg's frustration and Rowley's bewilderment. Rowley becomes popular after Greg has broken Rowley's hand, all the girls wanting to sign his cast. Rowley also wins the competition for the school paper cartoonist which Greg presumed he would win.

Not to spoil the ending (and a sequel is in the works, though Rodrick's name is in the title), Greg does have a spectacular conversion experience to do with a progressively moulding piece of cheese in the school yard – the kids believe that anyone who touches it, let alone eats it, has the cheese curse. Greg defends Rowley.

If you really like this film, which in tone and jokes is better than a lot of too-knowing and crude school movies, you may judge that this piece was written as part of the diary of a wimpy reviewer.

EASY A

(US, 2010, d. Will Gluck)

Some years ago, Mean Girls turned out to be a surprisingly entertaining look at how teens interact among themselves at school, the groupings, the gossip, the rivalries, and the meanness. Easy A is in the same vein and an enjoyable look at

high schoolers (while some parents may be wringing their hands). But, it makes some points very well, amusingly and tellingly.

Gossip is the key idea. The premiss of the film is that to fulfil the over-expectations of her best friend about sex and boyfriends, Olive (an anagram of I love, she points out to the boy who wonders what an anagram is) on an impulse makes up a juicy story about how she spent the weekend with an older man, George. In fact, she spent the weekend home alone. Before you can think to say 'gossip', the story is all around the school, and, as they say, increasing exponentially in content and salaciousness. What is Olive to do?

Emma Stone is very good indeed as Olive, making her a strong character, narrating on line, with hand printed chapter credits, the story of her loss of reputation, or her gaining of a reputation as the school slut. This is compounded by the Christian moral group headed by the daughter of a minister, Maryanne (Amanda Bynes) who is really responsible for the rumour-mongering. Olive is supported by ex-hippy like loving parents (Patricia Clarkson and Stanley Tucci are very good) and an adopted brother, black – the parents saying that they had been planning to let him know when the time was right.

Olive then lets herself get entangled, sometimes out of a kind attitude, sometimes out of mischief, to let her reputation get worse by the students thinking she is promiscuous, with a gay student, a fat rejected student, an Indian student – who all pay up with cash or gift vouchers for stores. How can it end, especially when the school counsellor (Lisa Kudrow) who is married to Olive's favourite teacher (Thomas Haden Church) who is explaining Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*? Olive throws caution and reputation to the wind, changes her wardrobe to more provocative and sews a large scarlet A on to her dresses.

It has to come to a head and Olive makes the on-line confession of the truth – but there is one boy who believes in her (because she had saved his reputation when he was 8 and she let everyone think he had kissed her when he was reluctant to) and so a happy ending for Olive is possible.

The message is strong and rather alarming in how people listen instantly to rumours of the worst kind, believe them without reflection, pass them on with vicarious enjoyment, label people and relish looking down on them while still eager to hear more details. Olive sees it as a variation on the plight of Hester Prynne and the original scarlet letter.

Some time ago, Alicia Silverstone starred in *Clueless* which took Jane Austen's *Emma* and explored plot, character and themes in a contemporary setting. Easy A is in this vein.

I'M STILL HERE

(US, 2010. D. Casey Affleck)

The notorious Joaquin Phoenix 'documentary' about his decision to quit acting and become a rap star.

While Phoenix is on screen, and that is 99% of the film, there is time (a lot of time, lots of time) to think other thoughts, or connected thoughts, like 'wrestling'. We know wrestling is set up to look brutal, tough and realistic, pounding an opponent, or leg-choking him or her, while it is all contrived to make the wrestler a hero in the eyes of the fans. They also have 'Celebrity Wrestling'. This is something of what *I'm Still Here* is like.

Of course, there is the basic question that journalists and movie buffs have been asking for two years or more. Is this story of Joaquin Phoenix and his dramatic career change really true? Has it been a hoax (and this question gets a lot of play in the film)? Then there is the key question that a reporter asks, 'Who cares?'. There are many repetitions of aggro sequences and many more lulls when the response surges, 'I don't'.

If Phoenix had not been a member of his famous family and if he had not been a movie star, could this bulky, wildly-bearded, semi-articulate oaf be intrinsically interesting?

Then, one spends time going through the alphabet to see if there are any funny variations on mockumentary or rockumentary. There are some vulgar ones. Perhaps zonkumentary might work but trickumentary, which this is, seems a little tame (and working out that the documentary on Chinese cooking could be a wokumentary, or the teenage acne study, pockumentary...).

Back to the film, what else is there to see and think about? Celebrity, mainly. Instant celebrity in a reality TV age and Warhol's 15 minutes of fame. Why so much interest in Joaquin Phoenix or in his alleged career change – after all, he hadn't given up showbiz to save the world? Why the entertainment industry hyperhype? Why the crowds at his

(execrable) concert in Florida? Why the stalking paparazzi and yaparazzi? The only answer the film offers is a sense of bewilderment – though the whole charade was highly organised and promoted over the years.

And Phoenix is not an especially interesting or likeable person on this evidence. You really wouldn't have wanted to meet him at this phase of his life – though the contrivance moves finally to picturing him as tragic as he ponders it all.

There are some compensations. David Letterman is hilarious with Phoenix as a reluctant, laconic, gum-chewing guest as is Ben Stiller's impersonation of the hirsute, taciturn Phoenix at the Oscars.

And the end. Back to the home movie that opened the film, Panama 1981, and little Leif Phoenix being persuaded to take the plunge from a rock into a waterfall pool. Now big, older Joaquin immerses himself and swims underwater (his new womb for rebirthing), then a long, very long, very long take, camera following his shirtless back until he submerges again – to go back to acting? - (though it looks as though he never left it while making this film).

Casey Affleck (married to Summer Phoenix) obviously has directing talent with lots of camera set-ups so studied that they are for a fiction (even spontaneous vomiting sequences), the fiction of and behind the celebrity scenes.

THE LAST AIRBENDER

(US, 2010, d. M. Night Shyamalan)

Reading the vociferous and negative comments on The Last Airbender by would-be reviewer bloggers on the Internet Movie Database, I was glad that I had never seen an episode of the animation series on which this live-action film is based. It was entitled Avatar, but James Cameron must have been quicker to obtain the movie copyright on that title.

Whether it lives up to the television series or whether it is a desecration of it, I cannot say and am rather glad that I have not seen it so can comment on the film as a film. Actually, that is even a bit hard because the writer-director, M. Night Shyamalan, has been falling further and further out of critical and public favour with each film that he makes. He did hit the jackpot with The Sixth Sense which has become a classic of psychological thrillers. Since then he has directed Unbreakable, Signs, The Village, Lady in the Water, The Happening and The Last Airbender. Generally, I have quite enjoyed his films as I did this one, allowing that this is geared towards a niche audience, say 8-14 year olds. The other thing one has to make allowances for is some of the comically inappropriate contemporary American expressions (with the Waterbenders shouting 'Hey, guys...' and everyone checking out the situation with 'OK?'). Since the Firebenders look and speak like Indians (which the main actors are, as is, originally, the director himself) and they are the villains, then it makes the goodies sound very American. Oh, and there is another allowance to be made. The film was converted to 3D after production so there is minimal 3D effect.

That said, it is a fantasy that relies heavily on eastern religions and traditions rather than Christianity (as does the Narnia series with which there are some comparisons). The young Avatar himself (Noah Ringer) looks very much the head-shaven young Buddhist monk, even looking like Kundun and those stories of the search for the present Dalai Lama. He is also adept, as are some of the other benders, in martial arts. It would be interesting to hear from Buddhists whether the connections are deep or only surface resemblances.

We are in a world of four nations, Air, Earth, Fire and Water. The Fire Nation is conquering Earth and Water, having vanquished the Air Nation, except the young boy who has run away and been hidden for a hundred years and now emerges, the Avatar, the one who has links with the spirit world and is Lord. While he becomes the Lord by the end of the film, the sequel (the Fire Nation strikes back) is clearly heralded.

Not that much of a plot as the nations do battle and the Fire Nation tries to destroy or control the Avatar. A Fire prince (Dev Patel, the Slumdog Millionaire) wants to capture the Avatar to make an impression on his father who has wiped him off as a weakling. The Avatar is rescued and saved by a young man and a girl from Water.

So, chases and fights, special effects, especially fire battling water, some strange creatures and an excursion into a fantasy land which is somewhat different from the better known worlds of recent cinema imagination.

It won't capture a large audience of adults or older teenagers, though they might like it.

THE LEAST OF THESE

(US, 2008, d. Nathan Scoggins)

THE OTHER GUYS

(US, 2010, d. Adam McKay)

I had a smile on my face most of the time watching *The Other Guys*, but it is all rather silly, maybe too silly for some.

The real guys make an initial appearance, Dwayne Johnson and Samuel L. Jackson, ace detectives for whom no feat is too difficult and who are police vanity personified. They depend on those who push pencils (or computer keys anyway) at desks, the other guys. Then they indulge in a derring-do stunt, leaping from a building – miscalculating, leaving two detective openings, a chance for the other guys to go out and confront the criminals.

This is a Will Ferrell film. Most of the time, I find him very funny, especially when he creates characters who are rather vain but become the butt of comedy (Ron Burgundy, *Blades of Glory*, *Talladega Nights*, *Step Brothers*). Sometimes he is not so funny at all and rather hard to take. His Allen Gamble here is, for me, one of his best. He is a buttoned up police accountant who loves his job and is meticulous, that is *Meticulous* with a capital M. He is paired in the office with Mark Wahlberg who has shot a star baseballer (Derek Jeter as himself) and is trigger happy at his desk. Michael Keaton is their boss. The others in the squad take every opportunity to mock.

You've guessed it. Out they go on a case and get into all kinds of scrapes (and get out of them as well) which gives the opportunity to both stage chases and shootouts as well as send them up. While you think Wahlberg is giving a one-note performance, he suddenly does some ballet pirouettes (though he had learnt them at school to mock the gay students). Then Allen Gimble is given a back-story so opposite to what he seems that you can't believe it, but it has its funny moments. Wahlberg also discovers that Ferrell is married to a doctor – who turns out to be ultra-glamorous (Eva Mendes) but acts like a suburban housewife.

There are also lots of funny one-liners, especially in slinging off at the movies.

Steve Coogan appears as a dodgy financier pursued by Anne Heche and her former SAS assistant who tries to abduct him and keeps tangling with the 'other guys'.

It is funny, immediately forgettable, but reminds us that when Will Ferrell is good, he can be very good.

SAGAN

(France, 2008, d. Diane Kurys)

It's best to give a warning first of all. This is an edited version for cinemas of a mini-series produced for French television. Almost an hour has gone from the series for the film – which explains the lack of development of some characters (Sagan's first husband) and surprise events (the burning of her house) which makes some aspects of the film less than satisfactory and creates some puzzles. Better to watch the series if possible.

On the other hand, audiences may not be all that interested in the life and character of French novelist and playwright Françoise Quoirez who took the pen-name of Sagan when her parents didn't want her to be known by their name. With the novel that she wrote during a summer holiday, Sagan became instantly famous with *Bonjour Tristesse* at the age of nineteen, something of a cause de scandale because of the themes and the relationships portrayed. This was the middle of the 1950s. She also wrote *A Certain Smile* and *Au Revoir Brahms* during the 1950s. Though there is no mention of them in this cinema version of Sagan, *Bonjour Tristesse*, *A Certain Smile* (with the popular theme song from Johnny Matthis) became successful Hollywood blockbusters and *Au Revoir, Brahms* was filmed with Ingrid Bergman and Anthony Perkins as *Goodbye, Again* in the early 1960s. So, she was not just a French icon but was well-known in the United States.

Critics referred to her work as minor music. And that is a difficulty for this film. Her life itself is really only minor music, at least as it comes across here. She was an unhappy young woman and an unhappy older woman, involved in all kinds of relationships, the most successful not being her marriages (one to a homosexual) but her relationships with women. She made a great deal of money but let it slip through her fingers extravagantly and at the end of her life had the indignity of a tax evasion case. She did gather a following around her. Some liked her a lot, some were just hangers on.

Sylvie Testud is a wonderful French actress (*La Vie en Rose*, *Lourdes*) and is said to resemble Sagan. She gives a fine performance, with all the nuances of both Sagan's flamboyance and moodiness. Though Françoise Sagan received a tribute from President François Mitterrand, who did refer to her talent but also called her a monster, citing her as a national figure, unless you are French and patriotic or enamoured of her writings, this is minor music.

SUMMER CODA

(Australia, 2010, d. Richard Gray)

The countryside of Victoria has never looked so good. They don't make many films set in Mildura or Red Cliff, but here is the opportunity to see one. This is a beautiful film to look at.

It is often said that Australian films are 'quirky', which usually means that they are slightly off-kilter with amusing situations and sometimes bemusing characters. *Summer Coda* is not quirky in that sense. Rather, it might be described as 'European'. This refers to its look, its unhurried pace (a film not afraid of rather longer silences between characters, letting the audience stay with close-ups without words and do their own reflections without rush), its portrait of characters in landscapes, its serious look at relationships, its expectations that audiences will bring an adult sensibility to the story.

Rather surprisingly, the film begins and ends with brief scenes set in Nevada (shot in California). We are introduced to Heidi (Rachel Taylor), an enigmatic young woman who is playing the violin alone at home. (The soundtrack is frequently violin music with some piano.) She seems to make a decision suddenly and is on a plane, arriving in Melbourne, hitching her way to Mildura.

Heidi wants to get to her father's funeral, burdened by too few memories of him as well as years of disappointment at the distance between them. On the way, she gets a lift from Michael, an orange grower from Red Cliff (Alex Dimitriades fine in a better role than he is usually given). We don't learn much about his back story until later in the film.

The funeral brings its own tensions, especially with Heidi's father's wife (Suzie Porter). Heidi takes refuge with Mike in the days before she returns to America.

Much of the latter part of the film is spent in the orange groves, picking, talking, working and relaxing, as a group of Mike's old friends turn up for harvesting the oranges. (It is all so agreeable in the sun, near the river, camping out, genial company for the work that it could serve as an advertising enticement for casual fruit-picking in the region.) There is a long set piece, much like those meals always to be found in French films, where we spend a lot of time listening to the talk and getting to know the characters.

And that is what we do. The supporting cast make Mike's friends become quite distinct and idiosyncratic as we get to know them. But, with compliments to Richard Gray's writing and direction (his first feature film) and the engaging performances from Rachel Taylor and Alex Dimitriades who create persons we can be interested in and care about, Heidi and Mike are substantial characters with strong emotions to help them develop aims for their lives.

The action takes place over the summer – and there is reference to a coda, music composed by Heidi's father, left in a box of memories for her.

TOMORROW WHEN THE WAR BEGAN

(Australia, 2010, d. Stuart Beattie)

A book that has been read widely through school syllabus listing – but one that has been very popular, a good choice for a movie. John Marsden has written a *Tomorrow* series of books (1993-1999) as well as a series about his central character, Ellie, *The Ellie Chronicles* (2003-2006). And this seems to have paid off as the opening week in Australia saw box-office of over four million dollars. The readers must have wanted to see how the film turned out, and don't seem to have been disappointed.

Writer and director, Stuart Beattie, who started writing screenplays at home in the 1990s but then found success in Hollywood with *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Collateral*, *G.I. Joe* and other action films, inserts a line in his film when one character has been reading (yes, reading) Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* and her friend asks her if she likes it.

Better than the film, she says. And the friend replies that the film is never as good as the book!

It's very much an older teenage movie as it opens. In the country town of Wirrawee (filmed in the Hunter Valley with excursions into the Blue Mountains), some of the high schoolers want to go camping during the school weekend. They spend some time organising seven for the trip. For the boys, there is one of Greek descent, another Asian. The girls are much of a muchness, although one is wealthy and pampered, another is devoutly religious. One is in a relationship with the third boy. The leader is Ellie (Caitlin Stasey, convincing). While on their trip, they chatter and banter, with some touches of the hormones, and the visual style is often that of television commercials for this age audience. No problems in the target audience identifying with the characters. There is the jock (Lincoln Lewis) who proves himself a touch cowardly but redeems himself. There is the Greek clown (in the Australian humorous tradition of Wogboys) who has more in him than smart remarks and pratfalls (Deniz Akdeniz) and there is the intelligent young student who works in his family's Asian restaurant (Chris Pang).

Robyn (Ashleigh Cummings) is dominated by her religious father (some Catholic images in their house) but has to make some moral decisions as the group becomes more involved in the war. Fiona has a dominating, image-driven mother who tends to put her down with the result that she is more sheltered and ignorant than everyone thinks (Phoebe Tonkin is persuasive). British Rachel Hurd-Wood is Ellie's best friend, Corrie.

We know that there is a war as the film opens with Ellie speaking to camera and narrating what has happened. What has happened is an invasion from a neighbouring Asian country, the adults rounded up and patrols moving around the town as well as planes flying overhead and helicopter surveillance.

The bewildered youngsters, and the audience with them, take step by step to find out what has happened. Ultimately, there are some explanations given as to how the invasion was able to be a surprise (to do with ports, container ships and weapons).

The film improves when they discover the war. At least, it moves from a teenage movie popular at the multiplex to a more complex and interesting story of a group of young people, inexperienced but using some savvy, worried by the dilemmas they have to face (including killing the enemy), moving into resistance mode (and joined by a stoner, Chris (Andy Ryan) who has been left behind by his parents). They certainly do some heroic manoeuvres (and there are some entertaining garbage collection truck and huge petrol tanker chases, expert effects and pyrotechnics), but they also make mistakes (especially with a suspenseful episode where their plan is in danger when mobiles have been switched off and Ellie and Fiona become absorbed in girl talk).

Very few adults appear in the film, some parents and, later, the local dentist helping the wounded Lee, played by Colin Friels.

The plot resembles *Red Dawn*, a 1984 movie with Patrick Swayze about youngsters forming resistance in an invasion. It has been re-made this year in the US (with Australians Chris Hemsworth and Isabel Lucas in the cast). But, *Tomorrow* is firmly Australian in locations (and flags), accents and the always topical issue of whether the continent, with its resources, can accommodate a greater population (sustainable or not) within the context of the masses of people in neighbouring Asian countries.

There is also a topical message inserted at one point. Just as we might be thinking that this is what it might have been like had the Japanese landed in 1942 and taken over the land, Ellie notices a fresco on a wall with the British authorities taking over and a glimpse of aboriginal people watching this invasion with puzzlement.

SIGNIS FILM REVIEWS NOVEMBER 2010

There are quite a number of arresting films this month, the Facebook movie, *The Social Network*, *Thrillers* both comic (Red) and serious (*The Town* and the introspective, *The American*). There is the entertaining social message film, *Made in Dagenham* and there is horror, both well done (*Let Me In*, *Buried*) and sensationalist (*Human Centipede*, *Saw 3D*). While *You Don't Know Jack* was made by HBO, it is getting wider television release – it is a portrait of Dr Jack Kevorkian).

AMERICAN, The
BURIED
CLINIC, The
COPACABANA

DANSE, La
DETECTIVE DEE AND THE PHANTOM FLAME
DINNER FOR SCHMUCKS
EAT PRAY LOVE
GAINSBURG
HUMAN CENTIPEDE, The (FIRST SEQUENCE)
LEGEND OF THE GUARDIANS, THE OWLS OF GA'HOOL
LET ME IN
LIFE AS WE KNOW IT
MADE IN DAGENHAM
PARANORMAL ACTIVITY 2
RED
RESIDENT EVIL: AFTERLIFE
SAW VII 3D
SOCIAL NETWORK, The
TOWN, The
WILD TARGET
YOU DON'T KNOW JACK

THE AMERICAN

(US, 2010, d. Anton Corbijn)

Decline of a hitman.

Who are all those hitmen that we see in thrillers? Where do they recruit all those security guards that seem to appear out of nowhere when somebody threatens a gangster or a Mafia boss? What do they do when they are not hitting?

You won't get answers to all these questions in *The American* but you will get a portrait of a hitman who is tiring, beginning to form relationships he never dared to form before, but who is trapped by bosses who want him to do one more job. And then he will get out? The boss says yes, but will he? Or will he outwit any threats? But, ultimately, we never learn anything in detail about the hitman's past. The probing is all in the present.

This is a film with strong continental European sensibilities. While there are some action sequences, there are a lot more inaction sequences. Not that these aren't interesting. Psychologically, they are, and the audience has plenty of time to observe Jack, the American, assess his emotional crises (using prostitutes in the past and in the present for pleasure with no commitment but finding he needs love and attachment), reflect on the possibility of his redemption (becoming friendly with the local parish priest and discussing sin, confession and atonement).

The screenplay has been written by Rowan Joffe who went on to write the screenplay for and direct a new version of Grahame Greene's *Brighton Rock*. This doesn't seem surprising given the Greene-like character of the American (a burnt-out case) and his Greene-like conversations with the priest.

The film has been directed by Dutch photographer, Anton Corbijn, who directed the film about Ian Curtis and the band, Joy Division, *Control*. The film is most attractive and photogenic. With opening settings in snow-clad Swedish forests, some sequences in busy Rome but most of the film's action taking place in the Abruzzi, the audience will feel that they have spent time in the mountain towns and got to know the countryside and the feel of the place. Corbijn must be a fan of Abbas Kiarostami since he has even more shots, long distance, of cars travelling the mountain roads than Kiarostami has of cars on and over the mountains of Iran.

And the star is George Clooney. This is a very serious role and played with seriousness and an interior intensity that Clooney and the director communicate with some dialogue but more with silent, almost inexpressive close-ups which nevertheless invite us to ponder what is going on inside Jack's head. This is especially true of the final sequence in the car where we understand, without a word being spoken, the crisis for Jack.

Fans of Clooney who want fast-paced action from him will be disappointed, despite the expertise Corbijn brings to some violent events, and perhaps neglect the strong performance the star is giving. The supporting cast consists of European actors rather than names. Violante Placido brings a powerful sensuality to the role of the prostitute, Clara. And Paolo Bonicelli shows how an elderly priest can be pastoral despite his own limitations (more than a touch of the Morris West Italian novels here).

The American may be best served by being labelled an Art-house introspective psychological thriller.

BURIED

(Spain, 2010, d. Rodrigo Cortez)

The opening credits take us, visually, into deeper and deeper ground and the film keeps us there. Buried is an exact title.

Probably, a warning should be offered that the setting is solely the interior of the coffin where a US truck driver working in Iraq in 2006 finds himself after the insurgent attack on the convoy in which he was driving. Anyone who has strong claustrophobia or finds the prospect of being buried alive too much to imagine will find the film too harrowing.

Writer, Christ Sparling, must have taken up a dare that he could or could not write a full-length feature film set solely in a coffin. Certainly a risk – and perhaps not too much of a box-office bonanza. But, he has pulled it off and director, editor, Rodrigo Cortez has succeeded in creating effective visuals for the writing. This is a Spanish production, in English.

After the descending credits, the film stays in the dark for some moments, the audience gradually hearing some movement until the driver, Paul Conroy (Ryan Reynolds) comes to and discovers his predicament. This gives the audience some time to accept what the film is showing and whether it wants to watch this story or not.

First of all, Paul has a cigarette lighter which enables him, and us, to discover the confines of the wooden box in which he has been interred. His mobile phone vibrates, so we know he has some lifeline. Perhaps this is a touch unrealistic (not too many survivors to verify whether it is realistic or not) but the lighter and the phone enable the drama to unfold. He also has a pencil and, when the abductors ring and demand that he make a confession video on his phone, he finds a beam light, a torch and the written text for his video.

The film works well on the human level, the predicament of an ordinary man, non-military, who finds himself trapped and the source for ransom money. Audiences who identify with Paul will be asking themselves how they would react in these conditions, the fear, the frustration, the anger, the dread. The device of the phone also enables him to try to contact his wife and son in Michigan, the offices of his trucking company, the State Department, his mother.

Time passes, the deadline gets closer, the oxygen could run out, the lighter fluid could be used up, the batteries on his torch and mobile phone could run down. A snake slithers through a crack in the wooden planks of the coffin.

So, the film works well on the human level.

However, the film works well on a second level, that of the war in Iraq and its consequences. Paul is not military. He works for a company (which shows scant respect for its employees in a sequence which exposes greed and heartlessness at the centre of company bureaucracy for business interests in occupied Iraq). While he is in contact with the authorities in Washington (some sympathy momentarily here), and they are making attempts to locate and rescue him, a lot of the dialogue, we realise, is official double talk, attempts at morale-boosting, words of encouragement to keep hopes alive.

The calls of the abductor, his sending of a video of an execution, the background of his and the Iraqi people's suffering add to the harrowing experience of the film.

The film seems about to end several times. Because it is a Spanish film rather than an American film, we are wondering whether Paul will be rescued and the ending happy. We think it won't, will be, possibly... And we leave the cinema soberly reflecting on such a life and death situation, why this happens, and how we might react in such circumstances.

THE CLINIC

(Australia, 2010, d. James Rabbitts)

The Australian film industry, like those of many other countries, has followed the lead of the United States in providing

production opportunities for young and first-time directors to gain some experience by making small-budget intense dramas or horror dramas with the slasher touch (Road Train, The Loved Ones).

This one opens in south western New South Wales and its vast open country around Deniliquin. Pregnant Beth and her boyfriend, Cameron, are on their way to visit her parents for Christmas. It is all very leisurely and chatty until a speeding ambulance pushes them off the road. That should have been enough of a warning. Then they stay at a seedy motel beloved of this genre of film, with a seedier receptionist to boot.

Then Beth (Tabrett Bethell) disappears.

Cameron is not too pleased and gets tangled with the local police when he threatens the receptionist. But, Beth wakes up naked in a bath of ice cubes.

The film is one of those which builds up slowly even though there are a few shock moments as Beth finds herself in a uniform in a vast abattoir. And she is not alone. Several other women have given birth, are imprisoned and don't know what has happened to their babies. The women don't realise, but the audience does, that they are being watched on monitors as they try to find a way out, bond and then clash, and realise that they are diminishing in rather graphically gory ways.

As the tension mounts and we discover what this macabre clinic is about, we find that there is a very grim climax and then a twist that takes us by surprise.

With its focus on pregnant mothers, babies and the threats to the children and a bizarre adoption theme, this is a thriller for making its female audience tense.

COPACABANA

(France, 2010, d. Marc Fissout)

Year after year after year, since at least 1977, Isabelle Huppert has been making films in which she stars. She is one of cinema's greatest actresses. Her films are worth seeing for her performances alone.

While she is always recognisably her same self, Isabelle Huppert is able to interiorise her characters so intently (though seemingly effortlessly) that they can seem vastly different one from the other. Most of her characters are quite serious. Copacabana provides an opportunity for her to bring a lighter, carefree, even irresponsible, woman to life.

She plays Boubou, an unconventional woman, often oblivious of others and of the effect she has on others. She can be really irritating. As the film opens, she is wandering the streets and the shops, trying on make-up which gives her a trollopy look, and then embarrassing her daughter, Esmeralda, at the restaurant where Esmeralda works. It might occur to you, as you look at the close-ups of Esmeralda's face, that the casting director has been adept at finding an actress who more than resembles Isabelle Huppert. But, in fact, it is Isabelle Huppert's actual daughter, Lolita Chammah.

In many ways, the plot is a take-it-or-leave-it one. But, as we see more of Boubou, her inability to hold down a job, her flirtatious ways, her attempts at a looking-younger-than-she-is wardrobe, her upset when her daughter forbids her to come to her wedding, we see that Boubou is a woman of more potential than she gives herself credit for – or that anyone has given her credit for. Stung by her daughter's reaction, she goes off to Ostend to apply for a job interesting tourists in time-share apartments. We think she will fail – au contraire. She does well at her job, proving herself a natural at meeting and communicating with people in the apartments. In the meantime, she clashes with her older and snobbish room-mate at work (but who wouldn't!), meets up with a charming Flemish cargo worker, is kind to a pair of vagrants, becomes friendly with her rather superior boss.

But, all the time, she would love to go to Brazil. Copacabana is a dream.

Actually, the more we see of Boubou – and this is the skill of Isabelle Huppert in creating a believable three dimensional character out of someone who seems in real life to be rather two dimensional – the more we appreciate her. She still does selfish things (ask the poor Flemish worker) but she does some really good things for Esmeralda and her fiancé. And, if she can't go to Brazil, then, as you will be pleased to see, Brazil comes to her.

LA DANSE

(US, 2009, d. Frederick Wiseman)

For decades, Frederick Wiseman has been making documentaries. He has covered a wide range of institutions, interested in presenting them, exploring them, and leaving his audience able to form opinions and make their judgments about the value and values of the institution. His documentaries tend to be long and thorough and offer the impression of objectivity.

This is what he has done here. The institution under observations in the Danse Theatre of the Paris Opera.

It is as if we were invited to go on a tour of the Opera House, not just the theatre auditorium (which appears only briefly with its Chagall roof). Rather, we go upstairs and downstairs, through corridors and basements, to offices and workrooms behind the scenes and, especially, to the rehearsal rooms.

It is a long tour, just under three hours. Those whose favourite music form is not ballet will enjoy it but perhaps want to move to other rooms. Those whose favourite music form is the ballet will not worry too much about the time spent.

The tour is mainly inside, though it is punctuated every so often by a breather. We look at Montmartre, the overview of the geometry of Paris boulevards, the gabled roofs, the Opera facades, local detail. We are definitely in Paris.

Ballet is the focus of the film and it stays. There are some scenes with the artistic director, her vision of the company and its program, some pep talks to the group and to a dancer, and some scenes of meetings about contracts and pensions, and the dancer's active career ending at 40.

But, most of the film is watching rehearsals and some performances. Anyone who thought that ballet might be a dance soft option will have to marvel at the strenuous rehearsals, the requirements of timing, balance, the tough physical realities of mime, motion and agility. We listen to several choreographers and instructors in action and pay attention to the small details they require of the dancers for greater perfection. We see the dancers repeat their lessons, sometimes failing, affirmed when they succeed. We see the dancers with natural talent and those who have to work on technique. We see the achievements in the selections of ballets, some classical but many quite modern in their visual style and action as well as musical score.

Interestingly, there is no real indication of house politics or disputes, though we can see where tensions could rise, bureaucratic and/or artistic temperament.

However, Wiseman and his director of photography (who offers models of framing, zooming quietly, blending medium shots and close-ups, with fine-tuned editing, for how cinema can unobtrusively capture the movement, grace and talents of the dancers in action) offer us the luxury of a visit and the observing of a world class ballet company in action.

DETECTIVE DEE AND THE PHANTOM FIRE

(China, 2010, d. Tsui Hark)

Tsui Hark was one of the veterans of the Hong Kong group of directors, like John Woo and Johnnie To, who directed classic martial arts films. He also went to the US to direct Jean-Claude Van Damme. With the incorporation of Hong Kong into China, including its film production, the directors have been able to find bigger budgets and broader stories.

This one sounds like a blend of Nero Wolfe and Hercule Poirot – in fact Dutch author, Robert van Gulik has written some Detective Dee mysteries, referring to the detective as Judge Dee. However, the setting is the Tang Dynasty, China in 689 AD, so not a simple or cosy mystery and detection.

In fact, the film, based on a Chinese tale of Dee, is very spectacular, re-creating the empire in lavish detail of costume, decor and courtly etiquette. A central location for much action is a 60 metre high statue of the Buddha in progress outside the palace. It is the interior of the statue, with extraordinary engineering devices, that is most impressive.

As with so many other historical epics from China, there is a great deal of martial arts fighting, swordplay and elegant leaping through the air a la Crouching Tiger.

On these levels, the film is worth seeing.

However, while showing foreign guests through the statue, a manager literally explodes. Not only whodunit, but how

was it done? And there are several more such startling deaths.

The social situation is tense as the wife of the dead emperor, Wu, is about to be crowned as the first (and, in fact, the only) female emperor in Chinese history. She has killed or imprisoned many of her enemies. However, she entrusts the investigation of the murders to an imprisoned rebel, the detective Dee.

We can enjoy Dee's pursuit of the solution to the crimes and, eventually, he and we realise who the murderer must be. In the meantime, there are servants of the empress, a loyal woman servant and an albino soldier, stalking Dee. There is also a talking stag who utters oracles and a great deal of Chinese ritual.

Veteran Andy Lau portrays Dee.

Spectacular, stirring and entertainingly investigative.

DINNER FOR SCHMUCKS

(US, 2010, d. Jay Roach)

Somebody must have written it, a reviewer or a blogger, but I haven't seen it, so I can take the liberty of saying, 'Movie for Schmucks'! While watching it – and it did have some amusing moments, but... – it gave me the opportunity to mull over the different nuances in 'daft', 'ditsy', 'silly', 'stupid', 'idiotic' and whatever word combines, laughing at, mockery and meanness.

Francis Veber's original film of the late 1990s, *Diner des Cons*, was a farce with French daft sensibility, a sense of the absurd, while keeping a perspective on snobbery and mockery. Jacques Villeret made a sympathetic 'con', now translated as 'schmuck'.

One wishes one could say the same of Steve Carrell, excellent comedian as he has proven himself to be. He does his best with the role of the idiot, Barry, invited to dinner to be mocked by arrogant businessmen. But his character is written so inconsistently, is too ditsy to believe so that, even as a schmuck, his behaviour does not make sense. At one moment, he is as simple as a dove, at another, he is the cause of sniggering (quite a lot of that) with a touch of leering. In the original, the con builds models of famous edifices with toothpicks. Here, quite a nice idea, he makes representations of famous paintings with mice. These dioramas look quite good. So, on the whole this character is a puzzle.

Paul Rudd has an easier time of playing the ambitious businessman who wants to provide everything for his fiancée (a pleasant Stephanie Szostak) and agrees to bring a schmuck to the dinner hosted by his boss (Bruce Greenwood) and encounters Barry and latches on to him. His dilemma, after Barry seems to ruin everything for him by intervening at the wrong time, mistaking identities and altogether acting schmuckingly, is whether he wants to do the decent thing or not and reclaim his life – and fiancée. It won't spoil anything to know that at the end, he does, and true friendship and some integrity win out.

The dinner itself mocks a whole group of eccentrics in a way that the film seems to be saying the audience should not mock when it comes to Barry. (But, the mean businessmen do deserve their ultimate mocking!)

Along the way, there are some amusing moments and many which seem just too laboured. Three bonuses occur in the presence of New Zealand comedian, Jermaine Clement (*Flight of the Conchords*, and a very funny turn in *Gentleman Broncos*) as a really oddball photographer, David Walliams as a wealthy Zurich art collector, and Zach Galifianakis doing another of his really peculiarly oblivious to reality characters (*The Hangover*, *Due Date*).

Jay Roach has been responsible for the *Meet the Parents* series and can do much better than this.

EAT PRAY LOVE

(US, 2010, d. Ryan Murphy)

For the many readers who liked Elizabeth Gilbert's book, they will know that the title refers to the twelve months that the writer took out of her life to take stock, enjoy and marvel at the world, and to come kind of self-forgiveness and acceptance. She spent four months in Rome (eat), four months in India (pray) and four months in Bali (love). For those who did not read the book, the film is an opportunity for them to accompany Liz on her geographical, psychological and

spiritual journey.

What makes the film easier for many audiences is the fact that Julia Roberts plays Liz Gilbert. Twenty years ago, she was the glamorous *Pretty Woman*. Ten years ago, she was the feisty saviour of victims, *Erin Brockovich*. Now she offers a character for women in mid-life who want to take an initiative to discover their better selves. Julia Roberts, looks beautiful at all times, but harried at first, becoming more radiant and then, without make up, her older, even plainer, self. Though we are conscious that it is Julia Roberts we are watching, she does transform herself into Elisabeth Gilbert making the journey credible.

Though the film is long, the first episodes are rather hurried, too hurried to really grasp the personalities of her husband who loves her (Billy Crudup) but whom she divorces, of her younger, actor partner (James Franco). We get glimpses (and during the journey some flashbacks) of the relationships and why they failed. Viola Davis is solid as her best friend.

Then the film settles down to indulge us with the vistas of Rome and plenty of food, glorious food, Italian-style. With good friends and learning the difference between entertainment and real pleasure (Italians pointing out that this is a mistake that busy Americans make), Liz puts on the kilos with happy abandon. And, then she is in India.

At the ashram in India, Liz assumes the dress styles, the rituals, the manual work of service (yes, that is Julia Roberts scrubbing floors), the silences, the hospitality and the meditative space that leads her to a conclusion that 'God is within me, as me', a reflection worth some more reflection. The film captures the colours of India, even at a wedding, and should entice happy visitors to Italy to take a second look at their affluent world in comparison with the poverty and hardships of India.

There is a standout sequence in the Indian episode, a clip that could stand alone for use in seminars on alcoholism and self-improvement. The writing of the film takes off and is brought to dramatic power by the performance of Richard Jenkins.

What do you do when you have purged yourself of some spiritual ailments? Go to Bali, seek the help of a wise man and some alternative healing – and allow yourself to fall in love. That requires inner freedom, an acknowledgement of past failures but, most importantly, discovering self-forgiveness. In the beauty of Bali and with Javier Bardem on hand, it is, after many difficulties, possible.

The trouble with *Eat Pray Love* is that one wants to respond to the character and how she handles her journey rather than sit back and accept the film and Liz Gilbert. This is very much a First World story, the aftermath of New Age fashions and the discovery of Eastern mystic practices if not Eastern religion. Very few (very few) women can take the time, let alone afford the time and expenses for such a journey. This is the spiritual trek of a wealthy woman. While holiday and break are necessary, and Liz is introduced to some mysticism and asceticism in India, we ask, 'to what purpose?'. By the time she has come to terms with herself and found love, we wonder what the moral bases of her life consist of, what is the nature of her integrity and the tension between some absolutes she has discovered and the relative importance of principles to be held on to or discarded.

Many men in the audience have found sharing this journey a tedious movie experience. Many women will be encouraged to follow Elisabeth Gilbert in her search in as much as their means allow them. Her story, book and film, is at least an attempt, in a pluralist world that has become even more pluralist, to attempt a search for life values.

GAINSBOURG

(France, 2009, d. Joann Sfar)

20th century music aficionados will be familiar with the work of Serge Gainsbourg, both music and lyrics. Film fans will remember that he was married to Jane Birkin and appeared in a number of films with her and is the father of actress, Charlotte Gainsbourg. Those with a memory for controversies and scandals will remember his record of 'Je T'Aime', which was considered too explicit in lyric, sentiment and breathing, when it first appeared.

This is a biopic but moves away from the standard storytelling although, despite some flashbacks, does have a linear plotline. But, realism is not of the essence. The writer-director, long a fan of Gainsbourg, his music and his paintings declares that he prefers the Gainsbourg lies rather than the Gainsbourg truths. Eric Elmosino seems a perfect incarnation of Gainsbourg, in odd looks, in manner and in singing the Gainsbourg songs. Gainsbourg died in 1991 at age 62.

The film opens quite strikingly reminding us of the Gainsbourg Jewish background. (In fact he was born Lucien Ginsberg.) It is occupied Paris and the little Lucien lines up to be the first to receive and pin on his yellow star. On his way home, a billboard image comes alive as a monstrous anti-Semitic creature who chases the young boy. This visual device becomes more imaginative as the film progresses, the writer creating a papier mache giant creature who accompanies Lucien and then Serge, something of his alter ego. This creature (in the subtitles referred to as his 'mug', his strange face and fool persona) continually reappears, a device that enables the film to have what might normally be an interior dialogue, up there verbally and visually. In this way, the audience grasps and emotionally responds to different crises, the different decisions, the mistakes, the successes.

Ginsberg grows up to be a short but gangly-awkward young man. He hates the piano despite his father's domineering insistence. He prefers art school, where he is somewhat precocious. But, as a young adult, he realises that he has a talent for music, for melodies, and for recitative lyrics that are poetically challenging as well as expressions of the ordinariness and, sometimes, the ugliness of life. His heritage is, in fact, hundreds of songs.

While he does have a kind of Gallic, raffish charm, sometimes with moments of charismatic personality, it is not always easy to see why women fall for him. And they do. He dances with Juliette Greco. Brigitte Bardot was besotted with him (and Laetitia Castel captures her mood and sexiness very vividly). Jane Birkin was attracted, pursued him, married him and stayed with him as long as she could. Lucy Gordon plays Jane Birkin well, but she looks too strong and healthy for the waif-like figure that Jane Birkin was (and still is).

What we have is a life story (with its truths, exaggerations, imaginations, and falsehoods). We have a portrait with plenty of warts – Gainsbourg can be a fickle lover, a fickle friend, a self-publicist with a high quotient of narcissistic nonchalance. We have the evocation of the Parisian music world, with the touch of the bohemian, of the 1950s to the 1980s. And we have an interesting device in the conception of the 'mug' in making a film communicate an inner life as well as the outer events and encounters.

THE HUMAN CENTIPEDE (FIRST SEQUENCE)

(Netherlands, 2009, d. Tom Six)

An example of a minor horror film (mad scientist experiments on abducted tourists) that has found its reputation growing as marketing informs prospective patrons (but, maybe, far more prospective non-patrons) what the film is about to capitalise on the disgust factor. It sounds repugnant, though its surprise value makes people think it is worse than visualising a chainsaw massacre (and there have been lots of those over the years on screen). It isn't.

Actually, this brings up the old question of making the distinction between 'what' is presented and 'how' it is presented.

The grisly 'what' of this film, a human centipede, sounds awful, and it is. However, it is not nearly so explicit in gore and ugly sequences as publicity would lead us to believe.

The plot is straightforward. Two American girls (the synopsis refers to them as ditsy but they seem much more sensible than most who finish up being tortured in movies like the Hostel series) get lost one night on a road in Germany. A mad man whom we have seen menace a stranger with a rifle offers to ring for help when they stumble on his luxurious home in the forest. As expected, especially from this doctor whose face is overtly reptilian, he drugs them, kills the man he abducted and finds a Japanese substitute. One of the girls breaks free and the doctor pursues her through his house – more time on this than on the actual surgery.

The doctor is famous as a surgeon for his skills in separating Siamese twins. In his madness, he wants to reverse his surgery and connect his victims and make them function as one, a human centipede. He explains with diagrams what he intends to do but, mercifully for those who watch it with good intentions, very little is actually shown of the surgery. We move to the fair accompli. However, the resulting creature, with the three joined together and suffering, shows his sadistic nature and, perhaps, our masochistic nature in watching it.

The rest is a conventional police investigation and search, the Japanese thwarting the intentions of the doctor and... Since the title of the film says First Sequence, the ending is an abrupt one. Presumably, the writer-director set off to find the money for his Second Sequence.

Much less repulsive than many a current slasher movie, the film has relied on word of mouth and marketing to gain its sensationalist reputation.

LEGEND OF THE GUARDIANS, THE OWLS OF GA'HOOLE

(Australia, 2010, d. Zach Snyder)

Impressive, but not quite satisfying.

The film is advertised as 'from the producers of Happy Feet'. While this is true, the implications are quite misleading. Yes, birds are involved, owls instead of penguins, but, while Legend may be a literal hoot, it is not a cheery, funny hoot as was Happy Feet. It is not a film for young children unless you want to frighten them. It is for an older children's audience. Had the poster said, 'from the director of 300 and Watchmen', that would have been more indicative of the tone.

The other difficulty is that while the owls don't exactly look alike, it is still hard to recognise one from the other (and their names aren't the easy Tom, Dick and Harry types either), so that a great deal of psychic energy is exercised trying to recognise who is who (actually, that sounds like an owl cry!).

That said, the film is visually strong, the forests, the seas, the rebels' retreat under the guise of an orphanage with captured owlets. The action is powerful, as good owl battles bad owl, in the tradition of The Lord of the Rings (and Soren, the little hero does have an Elijah Wood look at times).

The film opens in an Eden-like forest where good parents have two sons, rather Cain and Abel like, Soren a dreamer who loves to listen to the legends of the heroic owls, Kludd an unimaginative realist. When they get lost in the forest, they are abducted, along with their sister, and taken to the hidden fortress where a would-be-king and his imperious queen, are brain-washing the young owls into becoming a rebel army. Soren escapes but Kludd finds a congenial home.

Soren discovers the realm of wise owls and the home of his legendary hero, the island of Ga'Hoole. As expected, he trains, absorbs the ethos of the owls and, when the crisis comes and the owls are betrayed by an ambitious governor, battles ensues. It is the making of Soren and a duel with his brother.

The screenplay emphasises the vanquishing of evil by the good.

As mentioned, director Zach Snyder knows battles with his Thermopylae film, 300, and heroics with Watchmen. The voice cast is led by British Jim Sturgess as Soren. Helen Mirren is there but the rest of the voice cast list is an extensive catalogue of top Australian actors including Hugo Weaving, Sam Neill, Geoffrey Rush, Barry Otto, Richard Roxburgh, Anthony LaPaglia, Ryan Kwanten, Abbie Cornish, Emily Barclay.

Spectacular, but not as involving as one would like.

LET ME IN

(US, 2010, d. Matt Reeves)

A vampire film with a difference, a seemingly realistic story which becomes more surrealistic.

There is a movie mythology that remakes are intrinsically doomed to failure, especially remakes of foreign language films which, despite their qualities, American audiences do not watch because they are averse to sub-titles. And the taunt is that they become too 'Americanised' which usually means bland, or unsubtle, kitschy, sentimental or all of the above. There is no difficulty in a play being staged over and over again. It is just another version and interpretation. Kenneth Branagh did not re-make Olivier's Henry V or Hamlet. His films were different interpretations of Shakespeare.

So, why not accept the possibility of a re-make (or another interpretation, located even in a different culture) which might succeed?

Many critics and audiences seem to be agreed that Let Me In is quite an effective and respectful remake of the Swedish original, Let the Right One In from 2008. It has been relocated to New Mexico and the year is 1983 – though the reason for this time is not highlighted (except for President Reagan being seen on television), unless there is some allegorical meaning for the rise of AIDS at this period. Matt Reeves, who had success with his apocalyptic, 'realistic' drama Cloverfield, has worked on the Swedish screenplay as well as the novel, both written by John Ajvide Lindqvist, who, it seems, has given his approval to this version.

While Reeves has his own visual style, with sombre orange colour design for the outside meetings between Owen and Abby, with a suburban American look for the school sequences, especially the bullying of Owen, and the use of the dark for the vampire activities, the initial feel of the look and the storytelling is that this is being put across as plausible and possible. Gradually this changes as Abby attacks a victim in a subway for blood, as her father (Richard Jenkins) goes on his sinister and violent quests for blood to keep her alive, and her mysterious appearances, her flying and climbing until she is revealed as a savage predator.

The plot is reminiscent in some ways of the Twilight series. A human is in love with a vampire and, ultimately, is willing to forego ordinary life to be with the loved one. But Owen and Abby are twelve and their quiet relationship is one of friendship in a naive and innocent manner.

It is to the credit of the director that he draws such sympathetic performances from his two leads. Kodi Smitt-McPhee has proven himself a sensitive talent in *Romulus*, *My Father*, *The Road* and *Matching Jack*. Chloe Grace Moretz is the exact opposite of her vigorous and precocious performance as Hit-Girl in *Kick-Ass*. At one stage, the class is shown Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*, and there are overtones of the innocent side of this romantic tragedy for Owen and Abby.

There are quite some gory moments and some startling ones (as the vampire victim biting into her arm and then bursting into flame). But, while the story uses the traditions of the vampire's incessant search for blood, there is also a 'humanising' of the vampire which is unsettling, especially as the film moves to its conclusion and Owen's decision. Abby is monstrous while being a winsome 12 year old. She does wreak vengeance on Owen's taunters (the film not dwelling on detail or offering the audience much vicarious satisfaction as might have been expected). Owen is faced with moral questions especially concerning the fate of the investigating detective (Elias Koteas). But, he is only 12. His mother is preoccupied with religion and she and his father are getting divorced. Abby has urged him to hit back at life and its attacks on him.

This means that we have been lured into a horror story that is more intelligent than most, but that we have to deal with its moral ambiguities.

LIFE AS WE KNOW IT

(US, 2010, d. Greg Berlanti)

Every year there are quite a few romantic comedies. Here is another one. Katherine Heigl has appeared in quite a few of them in recent years, *27 Dresses*, *The Ugly Truth*, *Killers*. Here she is again.

It is easy to criticise this kind of popular genre, dismissing it as providing 'chick flicks', condemning it as trite or an indulgence in sentimentality. This reviewer saw the film with a paying audience, about twenty to thirty late teenage girls mostly and realised that they were really enjoying it, often laughing out loud at dialogue quips and the familiar jokes about babies and adult helplessness in looking after them.

Babies is the key idea. Life as they knew it for Holly (Heigl) and Messer (Josh Duhamel) was predictable. She, a control freak, who is a great cook with a popular and profitable bakery, he a television sports director who feels himself carefree and sees himself as a sex magnet (which he is). Holly and Messer are the close friends of Peter and Allison who have a young child, Sophie. They do not get on well together – to say the least.

When Peter and Allison are killed in a car accident, they are named in the parents' will as the guardians for Sophie. Can the hostile Holly and Messer really undertake bringing up baby, taking their responsibilities seriously?

There is a lot of familiar (but often enjoyable) jokes about crying, spitting – and a good example of nappy changing where nothing is actually seen but the comedy is entirely in the focusing on Holly and Messer. Visual restraint is possible, and works.

Josh Lucas is in the background as a sympathetic doctor whom Holly likes. But, as you will guess, he does the right and gentlemanly thing and steps away as the odd guardian couple, change and fall in love.

An easy-going, generally pleasant look at the importance of children and family and the possibilities for love and commitment.

MADE IN DAGENHAM

(UK, 2010, d. Nigel Cole)

The title probably says a lot for British filmgoers, but most of world audiences will ask 'where is Dagenham?'. This enjoyable film will go a long way to answering the question.

It is a film about industrial action in 1968. And, Dagenham is a suburb of London.

Interesting to wonder why this story was greenlit for the screen at the time of the global financial meltdown and released in October 2010, a period when the newly elected British government introduced austerity measures to bring down the budget deficit. Has this kind of working-class film and its appeal to some idealism, as well as pragmatism in the workplace, a role to play in 21st century financial and industrial crises? And how does it play to other cultures, especially western countries, where strike action and industrial demands have a long history? And what of other countries, especially in Asia, with the sweat shop conditions that are far worse than those that the women of Dagenham fought against in the 1960s.

Made in Dagenham is the story of the strike by the women who worked, 187 of them compared to the thousands of men, making coverings for the car seats in Ford's London factory.

In many ways, the film is quite conventional in its story of the factory, the episodes with the women, their inexperience of industrial unrest, the cavalier attitudes of the capitalist bosses, the arrogance of the American company heads, the stalwart action of the women (characters in themselves), the repercussions on families, the animosity of many of the men who objected to equal pay for women, the background of the Labour government and of minister, Barbara Castle, the emotions, the urgency, the victory. And many of the plot developments are signalled in advance, familiar scenes of husband clashing with wife or inept ministerial assistants who get their comeuppance.

That said, the film is still highly entertaining, except for those who see communists under the bed and social improvement as the first step towards a socialist state. Perhaps Americans who are suspicious of National Health benefits, Medicare or medical insurance as a surrender to the proletariat won't warm to the film. Actually, billionaire company directors may not like it much either!

The Dagenham strike led to demands for equal pay for women (which the US Ford representative (Richard Schiff) assures his listeners the company could never afford (and threatens Barbara Castle with withdrawing manufacture from the UK). This equality in pay was achieved by legislation in 1970.

The women are those familiar from so many working class films of the past, Thora Hird, Irene Handl, Dora Bryan.... But, the solid cast bring them to life. Sally Hawkins won acclaim and awards for her exuberant performance in Mike Leigh's *Happy Go Lucky*. She brings the same zest to her role here as Rita O'Grady, wife and mother, who found a voice and was able to lead the striking women. She makes this kind of unexpected leader both credible and sympathetic while not ignoring the nervousness, the possible cost to her family, and affirming the decency and honesty that she brought to the campaign.

Geraldine James is moving as the shop steward with a war-damaged husband (Roger Lloyd Pack different from his role in *The Vicar of Dibley*). Rosamund Pike is the well-to-do wife of a Ford executive (Rupert Graves) who treats her as a trophy wife and servant. Miranda Richardson obviously relishes the political bumptiousness of Barbara Castle. Most of the men are given less attention. Daniel Mays is Ed O'Grady who comes to terms with what his wife is doing. Bob Hoskins is the union man who supports the women while Kenneth Cranham is convincing as the quite self-serving union official. Harold Wilson (John Sessions) does not come off too well as a less than assertive, more pragmatic than hoped for PM.

This is a film that reminds its audiences of the dignity of women, the rights of women, women's equality. Many audiences and reviewers will be making comparisons with director Nigel Cole's other entertaining film about women, *Calendar Girls*.

PARANORMAL ACTIVITY 2

(US, 2010, d. Tod Williams)

Not finding the original *Paranormal Activity* an overwhelming terror/horror experience, expectations were low for this one – and were fulfilled. Audiences may not even be whelmed but underwhelmed – unless they psych themselves up

before they go in to have a terrifying experience.

Perhaps the psychological tactics of the writers and the director were to have the first hour so ordinary with the smallest of hints now and again that when the cupboards flew open at about minute 65, there was some cause to jump. Then there was some rough and tumble and a climax that moved beyond the realism the film seemed to be aiming at to have a hocus focus experience and explanation.

As with the first film, the camera work is handheld, often by one of the characters, so we have close-ups of the family, the rooms, the swimming pool, and are we jerked around quite a bit. Then the camera work is that of the surveillance cameras placed around the house after the residents come home and find most of the rooms trashed. But, mainly, we are looking at the most mundane of situations that do not really rouse much interest. Day after day, night after night, glimpses of the pool, the dog, the baby (very cute), the empty rooms...

While the first film left it much more to the imagination to speculate on where the paranormality was coming from, this time there is a great deal of superstition which, surprisingly, most of the characters seem to take on. There is a Hispanic maid who wafts smoke to get rid of evil spirits (and obviously that didn't work at all). Then the teenage daughter goes on line and finds out about deals done with demons for power and wealth and how the demon will return to take the firstborn male, however long it takes through the generations, as a sacrifice. This kind of mumbo jumbo, which most people in waking hours would not give a second thought to, is put forward as plausible – with some demonic possession to boot.

The films have been paranormally popular.

RED

(US, 2010, d. Robert Schwentke)

A very entertaining show.

Red does not mean the colour but stands for Retired Extremely Dangerous and refers to CIA operatives (a euphemism for licensed assassins). While that might put off some prospective audiences, especially when they learn that this is a screen version of a graphic novel, this is conspiracy with a difference. The difference is humour.

The witty screenplay, acted to the hilt by quite a top-name cast, each playing to their eccentric strength, is continually a blend of the deadpan and the droll. Most of the time, the audience will be smiling, despite the action up there on the screen. There are all kinds of little bits of play that are also amusing but presented in almost throwaway fashion.

In fact, it seems that the humour makes the action, preposterous as it sometimes is (in the vein of Salt), more acceptable because we are not looking at it in any realistic way. The exaggeration is part of the joke. On the other hand, had it not been amusing, there is enough CIA conspiracy theory and slambang action to satisfy the thriller fan.

Someone is out to kill a list of people who were in Guatemala in 1981 and are potential witnesses to a massacre that could undermine the career of a public figure. Since Frank (Bruce Willis), who, lives a dull life in suburban Cleveland (nicely satirised), finds himself an immediate target, he goes on the run and on the hunt, dragging with him an unwilling (yet increasingly willing) Sarah (Mary Louise Parker), a pension clerk with whom he has a phone friendship. Willis is at his sly-smile best and Parker plays along with gusto. They seek out the old team, Morgan Freeman doing his dignified thing with tongue in cheek, John Malkovich, who often seems a bit odd, even a bit mad in some of his roles, but here he indulges these idiosyncracies in one of his most engaging performances. And then there is Helen Mirren ('I kill people, dear'), having to give up her baking and flower arrangements, to get behind a machine gun once again, evening dress and all.

And there are more bonuses along the journey which seems to take them all over the eastern US (signalled on screen by postcards). Ernest Borgnine, looking fit, 92 at the time of filming, is the file keeper at Langley and Richard Dreyfuss enjoys himself as a crooked billionaire boasting insistently that he is the baddy. Karl Urban is the CIA pursuer and Rebecca Pidgeon his boss. And Julian McMahon finally turns up as the Vice President.

It's not great art, of course, and doesn't intend to be. But, it hits the spot of what it set out to do: bring to exciting and humorous life a graphic novel - with all acting and action stops out.

RESIDENT EVIL: AFTERLIFE

(US, 2010, d. Paul W.S. Anderson)

Resident Evil is a computer game movie that led to sequels and by this fourth instalment, the first in 3D, it has become a franchise – especially, since we are given the opening scenes for Resident Evil 5 at the end of this one.

It is only for the fans of the series. Those not in the know may well be confounded by the plot. They may well be intrigued by the action sequences – and that is for most of the running time – but they are exercises in director's skill, stunt work, computergraphics and 3D effects that are as eye-popping as the ads say, and the need to fill in plot time more than create plot or character development.

Even for those who have seen the other films, like the present reviewer, they are not masterpieces whose storylines remain etched in the memory. Fortunately, heroine (and that is an understatement watching her in derring-do, also an understatement, as she leaps and swings, unleashes her weapons and demolishes more opponents at a time than the stars of Kill Bill Part One – forgive this mouthful of a parenthesis but that is what the film is like!), Alice, initially fills in a few bits of information to keep us on track.

Basically, she is out to destroy the Umbrella Corporation which has been experimenting with drugs, has killed the odd thousands of victims, who have decided not to lie down but to become the living dead, and now wants to get rid of a liner, the Arcadia, where non-infected people are being used for further testing. Also, the large and brawny actor (no, he really can't act) who is in control wants Alice's soul and DNA so that he can become the exemplar of a master race.

Alice is joined by a survivor or two from previous films, especially Ali Larter who performs as though she is auditioning to join The Expendables.

Milla Jovovich (now the wife of the director) has been in all the films. She is a grim-faced (but, just to spoil the ending, she does laugh, completely unexpectedly, in some final scenes), fights with mind power, will power, gun power, sword power and acrobatics that defy belief, especially since the films give the impression that she neither eats nor sleeps but just keeps heroineing away.

The Resident Evil films are just entertainment concoctions, bringing the world and the impossibilities of computer games to the big screen and a blasting sound system. Anderson knows he can do this well, commands extraordinary looking sets, and just puts his cast through these outlandish paces.

SAW 3D (SAW VII)

(US, 2010, d. Kevin Greutert)

You need balance to see Saw.

You need a lot else as well. The series has built up a fan base, horror buffs who like to imagine the fiercest horror and gore nightmare scenarios, or horror buffs who like a good laugh at the increasingly ugly torture set ups and sadistic psychological games. The others who go to see them by now are probably completist film reviewers (as at present!).

There is a prologue with a grisly saw set up in a glass case in a prominent city square – with people gathering and gawping (as we are in the cinema), taking mobile phone pictures or just gasping with transfixed gaze at the deaths. The film is punctuated with other set-ups and, as with all the other films in the series, a quest where someone has to do superhumanly painful feats in order to save others (usually a futile hope).

Actually, there is quite some amount of plot. Tobin Bell's Jigsaw has the opportunity to appear in flashbacks. Rogue accomplice policeman, Hoffman (Costas Mandylor) is continuing the murders, even to pursuing Jigsaw's widow. He is also out for revenge for the policeman whose life he saved but who reported him to authorities (and is willing to let all the police who stand in his way die as well). The original bit of plotting is with an alleged survivor of a Jigsaw trap who has written a book, holds self-help groups for other survivors, has written a book (a nice touch in a flashback when Jigsaw himself comes to get an autograph) and has become a media personality. It is all lies, so the quest is his to save his co-conspirators and his innocent wife (her demise is too sadistic even for a Saw film).

There is also an inventive ending which unexpectedly takes us back to Cary Elwes, the first victim six films ago and allows for another sequel (which has been denied but the box-office may say otherwise).

But, in the realistic terms of what it shows and imagines, it is all rather horrible.

THE SOCIAL NETWORK

(US, 2010, d. David Fincher)

I really don't like Mark Zuckerberg.

That does not sound like a review. But, it is. And a favourable review at that.

Of course, I don't know the actual Mark Zuckerberg. I am responding to the portrayal in *The Social Network*, the performance by Jesse Eisenberg and the direction by David Fincher. They show his abilities and skills, his ingenuity – and his rather unpleasant personality (which some commentators endorse, though his smiling photo in Wikipedia looks far more genial than Jesse Eisenberg does).

Whether we are Facebook members or not, this is an intriguing film about the communications phenomena in our time, of the internet in general and of sites like Facebook in particular. With the introduction of Facebook we are dealing with a short time ago in the history of the world, quite some time ago in the history of the net, 2003-2004.

While the film shows the action of this period, it is framed by legal meetings where Zuckerberg is being sued by a group of Harvard undergraduates who had invited him to develop a site for students at the university, The Harvard/Connection. He didn't do this work. Instead, with the help of his best friend, Eduardo Saverin, he developed The Facebook, later, on the advice of Sean Parker, dropping the The. He is also being sued by Saverin. The settlement discussions provide quite some drama in themselves, with Zuckerberg showing almost supreme disinterest, doodling and occasionally intervening. He is sometimes referred to as nerd and dork – and that is how he comes across, the intelligent, obsessed, technically wizard creator who lacks person skills. Jesse Eisenberg, who has done some interesting variations on this type, including *Rodger Dodger*, *The Emperor's Club*, *Cursed*, *Adventureland*, *Zombieland* and *The Squid and the Whale*, perfectly embodies this interpretation of Zuckerberg.

The interpretation comes from writer, Aaron Sorkin, who has tackled the complexities of people in power and power struggles in the military (*A Few Good Men*) and in politics (*The American President*, *The West Wing*). It also comes from director David Fincher, who seems to revel in dark themes and psychological game playing (*Seven*, *The Game*, *Fight Club*, *Zodiac*). Fincher is always able to bring a dark visual look to dark themes.

The other two principal characters in *The Social Network* are Eduardo Saverin who was business manager but edged out by Zuckerberg's lack of trust in his abilities and on the advice of internet wiz, Sean Parker, who had founded such sites as Napster, for the downloading of music. If the film has a sympathetic focus for audiences, it is Saverin, played nicely by Andrew Garfield. Which leaves Parker (played with nasty arrogance by Justin Timberlake) as the unsympathetic focus, taking the heat off Zuckerberg.

There is plenty of dialogue that may delight geeks but will bamboozle the ordinary audience who will accept it as a necessary evil if they are to delve via the film into some of the history and mystery of the internet.

The final information reveals the results of the multimillion dollar settlements – and informs us that Zuckerberg is the youngest billionaire.

THE SWITCH

(US, 2010, d. Josh Gordon, Will Speck)

Another Jennifer Aniston romantic comedy. Yes, but not quite. It is more of a Jason Bateman romantic comedy, and that makes it far more interesting.

Like many American romantic comedies these days, it begins with some up front language and detail about sexuality and relationships. It also tackles an issue for some more 'trendy' (whatever that means) middle aged women who sense the biological clock is ticking and want to bear a child even though there is no husband or even father-figure at hand (more recently *Baby Mama*, *The Back-up Plan*). Advocates of marriage who are wary of surrogacy and IVF will not be happy.

But, as with so many of the same romantic comedies (especially those produced or directed by Jud Apatow), the initial shock, or even disapproval, has to give way to acknowledging that these are choices made by people in good faith and that there are consequences – which may be good. This certainly happens in *The Switch* which by the end advocates happy marriage and the strong presence of a father or father-figure.

Jennifer Aniston is Kassie who is determined to become pregnant and is on the lookout for the best possible donor. This does not include her best friend and confidant, Wally. He is a mope of a man and Jason Bateman makes him an interesting and entertaining mope. And, he is responsible for the switch in the semen for the impregnation. Then, time passes...

Jennifer Aniston does her usual performance. But, with Bateman on screen more than she is, and telling the story, attention is less on the rather self-absorbed woman who wants a baby but who then shows herself a devoted mother and more on the dilemma Will finds himself in as to whether he should tell her the truth, especially when he observes the character and behaviour of the son (an effective Thomas Robinson). Jeff Goldblum enjoys himself as Wally's friend and adviser. Juliette Lewis gives another of her getting near the top if not over it screechy performances. Patrick Wilson does a good job as the nice, rather naive and all-American putative father.

These are choices made by a number of Americans (and others) today. The film, with its comic touches and its sentiment, offer an easy-going opportunity to react to them and reflect on them.

THE TOWN

(US, 2010, d. Ben Affleck)

This particular town is Charlestown, a blue-collar neighbourhood of Boston. We are immediately informed that this town has the reputation for having the highest number of car thieves and bank robbers. Before you can say 'Boston', we are in preparation for a bank robbery and immersed in its brutal execution and getaway, with a hostage. Quite breathtaking stuff. Not entirely new. We have seen bank robberies before. But this one is filmed and edited with pace and panache – and the death's head masks and cloaks are menacing. Then the credits come on screen.

This is a Ben Affleck film. He worked on the screenplay, has the lead role and directs very effectively. Once upon a time, he and friend Matt Damon won an Oscar for their screenplay for *Good Will Hunting* and Damon went on to a top rank acting career, including *Jason Bourne* three times. Affleck went on to some romantic comedies and some thrillers and to ridicule for appearing in *Gigli* with Jennifer Lopez. Three years ago he wrote and directed an acclaimed adaptation of the Denis Lehane novel, *Gone Baby Gone*. It had a top cast. It had liveliness and excitement. It was hailed as a fine directing achievement. Affleck also won the Best Actor award at Venice for *Hollywoodland*.

This was not all a flash in the pan as is proven with *The Town*. This is a police and robbery thriller with the emphasis more on the robbers. As the story of Doug MacRay (Affleck) is revealed, we see he comes from a long line of Boston criminals, fated for a criminal career. And, in action, he can be quite violent, machine gun and all. Veteran Chris Cooper appears as his father, a brief but scene-stealing performance. But, Doug's close friend, Jimmy (Jeremy Renner whose career is developing after appearing in the unexpected Oscar winner, *The Hurt Locker*) is made of even sterner, mad and more savage stuff. He kills. It is he who takes the hostage from the bank, Clare (the versatile British actress, Rebecca Hall – Vicky Christina Barcelona, Please Give).

Meanwhile, an intense agent, Frawley (*Mad Men*'s John Hamm) knows who the criminals are but is out to prove their guilt and imprison them. Pete Postlethwaite gives a sinister performance as the drug-running florist who masterminds the crimes.

There are two more robberies (one with horror film masks and nuns' habits), a desperate car chase and a finale at baseball's Fenway Park which turns into something of a siege. Once again, they are filmed – and, especially, edited – for maximum effect.

And, yet, the film is also a love story, played quite tenderly by Affleck and Hall, he deceiving her and wanting to protect her from the mad Jimmy, she succumbing to his charm, not suspecting him. It is one of those ill-fated, star-crossed relationships that spells doom. Affleck can do both rough and charming, so the falling in love is quite credible.

It is interesting to watch how the moral angle is treated, possibilities of redemption, admiration of criminal prowess and quick-wittedness, and the issue of paying the price for wrong done.

Affleck's directing style relies on a great number of close-ups, often profiles, so that we are in direct touch, it seems,

with the characters. He also inserts quite a number of aerial shots of Charlestown as well as authentic street scenes which means that we feel we have visited Boston.

The Town shows how a familiar genre can be re-invigorated.

YOU DON'T KNOW JACK

(US, 2010, d. Barry Levinson)

There was a time, especially in the 1990s, when most people had heard of Jack even if they did not know him. They knew of him. He was Dr Death, the American who not only advocated assisted suicide but actually helped clients to die – and scenes of death were shown on television. He was Jack Kevorkian.

This is the kind of biography which, when advocates for life issues hear about it, sets off alarm bells. (And there is a slang tone in the title which may be a cheeky challenge to opponents.)

However, what Home Box Office in the US have done is to commission a portrait of Jack Kevorkian, some warts and all. The director is Barry Levinson, Oscar-winner for Rain Man. The writer is Adam Mazer who also wrote the interesting film about the FBI traitor (a devout Catholic), Robert Hanssen, Breach. The action takes place during the 1990s when the retired doctor decided to go into action, advocating changes in consciousness and in legislation concerning euthanasia issues and practice.

Those against Dr Kevorkian will not change their opinions. Those in favour of Dr Kevorkian will not change their opinions. An audience which is still considering the ethics and morality of the issues as well as the legal ramifications, will find a film which presents people suffering and wanting to end their pain by death, a very emotional and humanitarian approach to decision-making, evoking sympathy for assisted suicide. This is a reminder that the visual media make their impact through story, identification with characters and their crises, and through sympathies while the print and radio media offer more of an opportunity to listen to different views, listen to them more objectively and consider principles.

That said, it is important to recognise that in contemporary societies where basic values are shared but where there is also a diversity of opinions held in good faith, this kind of film, even if it were propaganda for the issues, which it is not, has a place for points of reference for discussion and debate. (We are usually pro films which support our outlooks, even when they take stands, but get our backs up – perhaps wishing that they be banned - for those which challenge us and differ from our points of view.)

This film has special credentials. Al Pacino gives an award-winning performance, entering completely into the persona of Dr Kevorkian. Kevorkian is not a particularly likeable personality. He is determined, a zealot, who has an abrasive manner, easily accused of hubris. On the other hand, he is a committed doctor who wants to heal people but also treat their pain. He is an isolated man, supported principally by his sister, Margo (a fine performance from Brenda Vaccaro) and his friend who assists him in his work with clients (John Goodman). He advertises for sufferers to come for interviews which were taped. These are interspersed throughout the film. While committed to providing opportunities for death (even inventing a machine to administer lethal doses), he tries to ensure that he has a thought-out decision from those wanting to die.

Protestors and Michigan governor and law enforcement are hostile to Kevorkian and his actions. He is charged. Kevorkian clashes with his legal adviser (Danny Huston) and undertakes his own defence, hindered by his lack of legal know-how and spoken to severely by the presiding judge. He is found guilty and serves eight years in prison, emerging in 2008 at the age of 79. Clarification is needed on whether Kevorkian's actions are murder or not, and what his intention in his actions really is.

With legislation passed in countries like Holland, Switzerland and the state of Oregon, many nations are opening up discussions again (as in Australia). Any principled and intelligent discussion will not be simply ideological rhetoric but will be involved in listening to and evaluating opposing opinions, appreciating the human suffering dimension so that, whatever the outcome in terms of legislation, the debate is a debate rather than a crusade from either side.

In that sense, You Don't Know Jack offers some preliminary contributions to the debate.

Further to discussion on assisted suicide, there have been a number of films in recent years, Million Dollar Baby, The Sea Inside, A Short Stay in Switzerland (based on an actual case). In the past there have been television films on mercy killing: The Greatest Show on Earth, Murder or Mercy, Right of Way.

END

THE FESTIVAL

The Berlinale consists of many sections. The principal competitive sections are the Competition, Panorama and Forum. The SIGNIS reviews are those of films in the Competition and Panorama.

CHILDREN

The current emphasis of SIGNIS is children. The motto for the 2009 Assembly was 'Today's Children, Tomorrow's promise'. SIGNIS wants to draw attention to children in films. There were several notable examples in the Berlinale selection which would repay consideration.

The Golden Bear winner, and the winner of the Ecumenical Prize in competition was *Bal (Honey)* from Turkey. At the centre of this film was a six year old boy. The film showed the strong bonds between father and son as well as the child's speaking difficulties and some bullying at school. Another focus was grief for death and how the child handled it.

The Amnesty International award went to *Son of Babylon* from Iraq, the story of a Kurdish woman and her grandson coming from the north to Baghdad and the south to search for the boy's father. It offers an opportunity through storytelling to understand something of the plight of children. The setting is 2003.

In Panorama, *Die Fremde (When You Leave)* also had a very young boy at its centre, maltreated by his father in Istanbul, then going with his mother to find her family in Germany – where she does not receive support from the family who feels its honour has been stained. There are sad repercussions for mother and son.

The Danish *Submarino* has grim moments in the story of two brothers who experienced tragedy with their baby brother when they were young. At the end, it is a child who provides some hope for the future.

The American film, *The Kids are All Right*, takes up the issues of artificial insemination and same-sex parents and their rearing of their children.

Prejudice against Muslims and ethnic groups in the US in the aftermath of 9/11 is the theme of *My Name is Khan*. Once again, there is tragedy for the children as a result of prejudice and violence.

ISLAM, TRADITIONS AND CHALLENGE

Three films dealt with strict interpretation of Islamic tradition and law: the German *Shahada*, set amongst the Turkish community in Berlin, the German *Die Fremde* mentioned above and *Na Putu (On the Path)* a Bosnian story about rebuilding lives in Sarajevo in the aftermath of the Balkan wars, and the influence of strict Islam and Western secularisation.

CONTROVERSY ABOUT VIOLENCE

The Killer Inside Me. The reason for mentioning this – though it should not have to be said for an audience who understands films and how they work in their conventions of storytelling – is that there was some uproar concerning the tone of and reasons for showing these brutal actions and so viscerally. Because the violence was perpetrated on two women, some comments were made that film was misogynistic. (A film showing Catholics being martyred by vicious authorities is scarcely anti-Catholic.) This violence against women is shown as abhorrent in the plot and condemns the brutal beater as mentally disturbed. Director Michael Winterbottom suggested that any other reading of the sequences would be perverse.

It is the question of that distinction between what is shown and how it is shown that is always important. There is a context here – the portrait of a deeply dysfunctional man. Whether the scenes in question are too long or are too much is always a matter of personal sensitivities and debate: what is too much for me may not be too much for the person next

to me and the question arises whether my sensitivity is superior to that of the next person or just different, and who imposes the sensitivity norms? (Not all of us, to take a neutral example, are able to watch surgery procedures.)

Michael Winterbottom said that he stayed close to Jim Thompson's novel and that the rhythms of what is presented is his judgment and his editor's work.

It seems that there is a 'fundamentalist' approach to the presentation of sexuality and violent sequences on screen sometimes by earnest and devout people who concentrate over-literally on the immediate content, the 'what', without spending reflection on the context, the 'how' and move immediately into protest and campaign mode.

It is often said that much should be left to the imagination – and that opinion has great value. On the other hand, faced with harsh or repellent images of reality, the imagination might not work. It blocks. It avoids. It can refuse to imagine or go beyond a brief suggestion of the sexuality or violence.

L'ARBRE ET LA FORET (FAMILY TREE)

(France, 2010, d. Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau. Panorama)

This is a particularly French film. The French excel at making films about family gatherings, sketching characters and developing portraits as the characters talk and engage in conflict. There are usually meal sequences which offer opportunities for revelations.

The occasion here is a funeral or, after the funeral. The father of the deceased (Guy Marchand) does not attend, which irks his surviving son and his dead son's daughter (Sabrina Seyvecou) who is there with her partner (Yannick Renner). He seems a haughty man locked into his own life. His wife (Françoise Fabian) seems the strong, sometimes silent type.

In the aftermath we learn the life story of the father which helps the audience and the family to understand him and, perhaps, sympathise with him. He reveals that he was a young homosexual amongst those rounded up by the Gestapo in 1941 and deported to a concentration camp. He suffered, felt his life was ruined but escaped in 1943. With more secrets in that era, he married, had two sons. His wife decided that they should stay together.

The other character explored is the granddaughter, a fragile personality who relies on her supportive boyfriend.

So much of the film is talk and discussion, emotional talk that demands and commands our attention, especially when the father does tell the family his story.

As the film notes at the end, it was only in 2001 that the French government acknowledged the persecution and imprisonment of the homosexual minority in wartime France.

L'AUTRE DUMAS (THE OTHER DUMAS)

(France, 2010, d. Safy Nebbou. Special screening)

Alexandre Dumas, pere's, life may not have been exactly the same as the adventures of the three musketeers or the count of Monte Cristo nor had the connections with royalty as his tales of Queen Margot or Louis XIV. However, this part portrait, part adventure, does bring something of the excitement that he put in his pages.

Who better to be Dumas, a larger than life, flamboyant character, than Gerard Depardieu. As always, he so inhabits his character (usually looking the same but here he has a frizzy hairdo) so that we believe he is Dumas. He is excellently counterbalanced by Benoit Poelvoorde as Dumas' writing partner, August Maquet who can be called the 'other' Dumas since he may have written far more of Dumas' work than he has been credited with.

The picture of their collaboration in ideas, plot development and writing is intriguing. Later Maquet was to sue Dumas and was awarded 25% of authorship but was not allowed any explicit credit, finally buried in a pauper's grave while Dumas was eventually interred in the Pantheon.

How much of the adventure side of this film is fact? Who knows?

There is a Dumas' plot device where a young woman (Melanie Thierry) mistakes Maquet for Dumas and enlists his help to petition for freedom for her imprisoned father. Maquet is smitten, prepared to give up everything for her. There are

home complications, property-selling complications, republican and monarchist complications. There is a network of spies and some revolutionary activity. The identity issue is resolved at a lavishly costumed banquet and dance. And Dumas and Maquet, after angry interchanges, return to their writing.

A colourful re-creation of 19th century France and an entertaining tale.

BAL (HONEY)

(Turkey, 2010, d. Semih Kaplanoglu. Competition. Golden Bear for Best Film and winner, Ecumenical Award)

Bal is the third in a trilogy by writer and director, Semih Kaplanoglu, the previous two films being Egg and Milk. They look at contemporary Turkish life and focus on work and change as well as family.

Bal is a truly contemplative film, long takes for audiences to observe and feel (far too long for audiences with shorter attention spans). Into this contemplation of reality, come a number of dreams (which, the father of the family warns should not be told to others).

The focus is a 6 year old boy, a wonderfully lively and innocent performance by Bora Altas, who lives with his father and mother in a remote village in north eastern Turkey. In private with his father, he can read and shows great signs of intelligence. At school, he stammers and is generally silent. The director does wonders with the boy who has a vibrant and engaging screen presence. The warm scenes at home and out in the countryside where he bonds with his father (a manager of beehives in the trees) are very moving. But, the distance between the boy and his mother is dismaying. The film has many classroom sequences: reading, forming letters, sums where children can be hurtful as they laugh. But, the teacher is a fine affirming man.

This beautiful film is a feeling immersion in this Turkish way of life.

DAVID WANTS TO FLY

(Germany, 2010, d. David Sieveking. Panorama)

Quite a journey. No, that's an understatement! This is a very significant journey. I am glad that I saw the film without knowing anything about the journey and where it led. But, the word is out now. This is a movie expose of Transcendental Meditation. And quite a piece of movie investigative research it is.

David Sieveking, a German, looks almost the cliched description of a nerd – a touch gangly, bespectacled and with a face that shows everything is being absorbed seriously. He is also more than a bit of an extrovert.

At film school, David Lynch was his cinema idol. Discovering that Lynch meditated and was, in fact, a strong supporter of the Maharishi and TM, as well as a celebrity fund-raiser for them, he traveled to the US to interview Lynch on film and fell even further under his spell and began to learn to meditate himself, being given his own personal mantra. This was the foundation for a documentary film, enhanced by the footage of the Maharishi, his enthusiastic followers, testimony from Donovan, Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr. And he went to India to film the rituals of the Maharishi's funeral.

He had on-and-off support from his partner, Marie Pohl.

Buoyed with enthusiasm and spiritual zest (though he could not emulate the strange phenomenon of the Flying Yogists who, to facilitate focus and intuition, could bounce and bounce and bounce along in the lotus position). But, at the grand assembly following the death of the Maharishi, he begins (as does the audience) to wonder. Pompous crowned kings vie for power. Ideological clashes break out – and David is requested to stop filming.

What follows is a journey of doubt and disillusionment, the realisation that TM had developed the characteristics of a cult, that money (lots of it) had become paramount, that projects were ambitious, buildings and peace centres in India, US and Germany, and many were not achieved, that rumours about the mores of the Maharishi and inconsistencies about his celibacy needed to be followed up. There are meetings and interviews with a woman who had had a relationship with the Maharishi, his 'skin-boy' (whose title referred to his solemnly preceding the Maharishi into meetings holding a deer skin) had been ousted by a peevish boss, and a Colorado financier who had contributed over \$150,000,000 and found it had gone nowhere – or to a family in India.

David Sieveking brings this phase of his quest to a close at the Ganges and the search for the source of the river as well

as at the monastery from the Maharishi came and made his claims – which were not endorsed by the current leadership there.

The film is always interesting, increasingly intriguing and challenging to attitudes to faith, spirituality and double standards. At the time of the film's release, David Lynch, a staunch disciple of TM, was in India making a movie about the Maharishi.

EXIT THROUGH THE GIFT SHOP

(UK, 2010, d. Banksy. Competition)

In the UK and, according to this eccentric documentary, street artist, Banksy (a hooded figure who speaks with an echo and has a grip on and is articulate about popular culture) has a strong, if at times, controversial reputation.

He puts an emphasis on the fact that he is not a film-maker and that this film came about a bit by accident and is more of a film about an even more eccentric character, Thierry Guetta.

It is a blend of documentary and mockumentary – at times reminiscent of a Christopher Guest film only a lot of this is true – or is it?.

At first, we have ardent disciple, Thierry, with his video camera on the loose in LA (where he has moved from France). He gets an interview with Banksy and follows up filming (and getting caught and questioned by security) in a theatrical art event critical of the US and Guantanamo, staged in Disneyland. Thierry then records the preparation for Banksy's successful LA exhibition which helps street art become both trendy and pricey.

Banksy suggests to Thierry that he edit a film from his hundreds of tapes. It results in a 90 minute film of arbitrary selection and intercutting of art and events that is avant garde and unwatchable (Banksy's verdict). So, Banksy suggests that Thierry get into art, not realising he is encouraging Thierry to turn into a kind of Frankenstein art monster of ambition and celebrity. Thierry chooses the street art name of Mr Brian Wash and organises the exhibition to end all exhibitions. Thierry loves his fame, bestows interviews, is shrewd in business, hires companies to mount the exhibition which, against all odds, opens on time and becomes a huge LA event.

So, there we have a slice of art life – sincerity, phoniness, pretension and pomposity and some quite arresting work (playing with Warhol portraits amongst other experiments). Many exited via the gift shop and shelled out for collector's items.

EN FAMILIE

(Denmark, 2010, d. Pernille Fischer Christensen. Competition)

A Danish family. Their ancestor once walked from Germany to Denmark with a sack of flour on his back and started a bakery which flourished and is now, by appointment, supplier of bread products to the royal family.

The focus, however, is on the younger generation. Ditte (Lene Marie Christensen), who is a talented gallery director, is being offered a prestigious art position in New York City. Her partner, Peter, an artist, is supportive of her.

Two crises arise which challenge Ditte. She is pregnant and faces the question of career and abortion vs having a child. Once again, Peter is supportive though he feels Ditte is dominant in her decision-making for them.

Secondly, her father (Jesper Christensen) who has brought the bakery to its present successful status has been cleared of lung cancer after a year of treatment, but soon collapses with brain tumours. Should Ditte stay during her father's illness and death? And, what if his wish is that she should give up her ambitions and take over the management of the bakery? The audience is drawn into the detail of the life of the family: Ditte's sister (who was not asked to manage the bakery), the father's partner with whom he has two young children.

Because of the detail and the emotion, the audience is made to ask itself how they have managed or would manage in such life/death situations. There is a particularly long death and preparation for burial sequence (echoes of Ingmar Bergman) that gives audiences time to feel and think – especially if they can ignore the background song with its appalling lyrics, 'what is the truth behind your innocence', which makes no sense at all in the context and which is repeated and repeated. It does not destroy the film but it is a great pity to spoil the serious presentation of death and the response of the family. The film does end with some moments indicating hope.

FATHER OF INVENTION

(US, 2010, d. Trent Cooper. Panorama)

A generally genial tongue-in-cheek satiric comedy except when the audience finally gets the sniffles during a sentimental, heartfelt speech and reconciliation as the film ends.

Kevin Spacey has done some offbeat films while he has been absorbed by directing the Old Vic Company in London. Shrink was unengagingly eccentric. Father of Invention, however, is quite engagingly eccentric.

It benefits immediately from a full-on opening as Kevin Spacey as Bob Axle, a master of infomercials bursts on to the screen with his spiels – he is funny as an over-the-top enthusiastic salesman. Professionally, he is a 'fabricator' (not an inventor) who brings unlikely ideas together, like a spray can which also photographs an assailant.

But, careless users of a machine for exercising while watching TV and changing channels, lose fingers and he is jailed for a depraved carelessness concerning his customers. His wife (Virginia Madsen) has received half his large fortune. The victims were awarded the rest.

Eight years later, he is out, mistaken for a vagrant. He is unwelcome at his own house where his wife has a new husband (Craig Robinson) who is an admirer of Axle's enterprises. His daughter (Camilla Belle) runs a centre for women's employment. She does let her father stay for a month on trial. One roommate (Anna Assimova) is sympathetic. The other (Heather Graham), who considers herself a lesbian gym teacher, is not. Within days, Bob Axle loses his job at Family Mart, managed by the by-the-book, Troy (Johnny Knoxville).

However...

Fate allows Axle another chance, another 'fabrication', despite his sometimes thoughtless and stupid actions. Which eventually leads to the aforementioned sniffles happy ending.

Spacey is very adept at creating characters and he brings verve, energy and comic timing to this one.

Postscript: during the final credits, not to be missed, Virginia Madsen and Craig Robinson are at a piano singing (?) a mesmerisingly awful song completely off-key. And, for the fun of it, they wrote the song too.

FREMDE, DIE (WHEN YOU LEAVE)

(Germany, 2010, d. Feo Aladag. Panorama)

A women's film in most senses. And a strong feminist film challenging some traditional Turkish attitudes towards women. It was written and directed by a woman, Feo Aladag, photographed by a woman, produced by several women and some men. At the centre is a strong performance by Sibel Kekilli.

The English title is 'When You Leave'. Umay has grown up in a family of Turks who migrated to Germany and have made their home there but are also part of the Turkish community in Berlin. Umay has married a Turk and lives in Istanbul. Her husband has violent moments against her and her little son, Cem. Umay impulsively leaves her husband and returns to Germany.

Were this a film about a western family, she and her son would probably be welcomed back. She would get a job, study and make a life with wider family support. Not here. Family honour is stained, gossip feared, the family being sidelined in the community is unthinkable. Umay is rejected by her parents, treated brutally by her older brother who has absorbed the complete male honour code and does not hesitate to hound Umay and resort to physical violence.

Umay does fend for herself but the film shows how entrenched customs can be and dramatises the dire results. Performances are convincing. We feel that we have been immersed in a difficult community. And the ending in no way lets the audience off.

GREENBERG

(US, 2010, d. Noah Baumbach. Competition)

Noah Baumbach has made some small idiosyncratic films about family, the dysfunctional family in The Squid and the Whale, the family assembling for Margot at the Wedding. This time, he offers a portrait of a strange, or not so strange 40 year old American male, Roger Greenberg. Along with this picture of Greenberg, is a side portrait of the 25 year old

Florence, the next generation to Greenberg.

The setting is straightforward, contemporary LA. Florence works as an assistant to a family and is asked to keep an eye on the husband's brother, just out of a mental institution who will babysit the house and the dog while the family has six weeks in Vietnam.

While the setting is straightforward, Greenberg is certainly not. It is an advantage that he is played by Ben Stiller, not in raucous comedy mode, but more like the put-upon Greg in the Focker comedies, except that he is messed up psychologically. He has a past with drugs, with a band that never achieved the single record because of his dominating interference. He writes paranoid letters of complaints to companies and can burst out in hurtful 'plain truths' as the mood takes him. Greenberg is a case.

Florence herself has the makings of a case: broken relationships, pregnancy, abortion, educated but little job satisfaction, a would-be singer who is attracted by Greenberg though his responses to her can be particularly insensitive, nasty and hurtful. Greta Gerwig is very good in this role.

There is no particular ending in view of this portrait. The film just stops – but could go on in the same way.

A great plus of the film is the restrained performance by Rhys Ifans as Greenberg's best friend who has made more positive efforts with his own life.

JUD SUSS: RISE AND FALL

(Germany, 2010, d. Oskar Koehler. Competition)

Josef Goebbels' hand-picked film with hand-picked cast, Jud Suss/Jew Suss, the 1940 anti-Semitic propaganda film he wanted the world to see as art, is still banned in Germany. There had been an earlier, sympathetic British version with Conrad Veidt who had left Germany. The novel, Jew Suss, was written by, a Jewish author, Lion Feuchtwanger, and tells the story of a merchant, Suss, who wants to better himself in 18th century Germany. Goebbels wanted an actor who would portray Suss humanely, even sympathetically, the more to dramatise his anti-Semitism agenda, an exercise in cinema manipulation.

The story of the making of this version of Jud Suss and its effect on the actor, Ferdinand Marian, is told in this rather unwieldy drama. And Goebbels and his machinations are to the fore.

Perhaps there is too much going on in the film for audiences to digest it well. The film's parts are intriguing and worth seeing. The overall impact is mixed, especially after the screenings of the film throughout Germany and for the troops, Goebbels succeeding with its impact and effect. The film dramatises Florian's subsequent wanderings, cabaret in Prague, the aftermath of the war in Munich in 1946, the year of his death. (The Internet Movie Database, however, lists 8 films he completed in Germany after Jud Suss, from 1940-1945.) These sequences seem something of a dramatic anti-climax to the story of the film and they might have been absorbed into the final credits information about what happened to those who participated in the making of the film.

Florian was a matinee idol (and here looks and acts like an ageing Errol Flynn with touches of contemporaries, Ronald Colman, Robert Donat and Don Ameche). He did not want to play Suss and feared it would ruin his career. His wife was of Jewish ancestry (though aspects of her life and death are fictionalised here) and she and he were hiding a Jewish actor colleague in their garden shed. Goebbels was determined that Florian play the part and manipulated, cajoled, announced it publicly at a reception. Florian tried to fail the screen test but Goebbels applauded him and his later determination to invest Suss with humanity and dignity. Florian's wife eventually concurred in his taking the role. Extras (including the now interned actor he harboured) from the ghetto were rounded up to act as Jewish background characters.

This film is very interesting with its several re-enactments of key sequences, giving a flavour of its style and treatment of its subject. We see Goebbels triumphing at the 1940 Venice Film Festival and then at the Berlin premiere and on the road for screenings to the people and to the troops.

Tobias Moretti embodies Marian in a fine performance – a weak, vain, womanising man who may have meant well but who took to drink and was crushed by the film experience. Goebbels usually looks small, gaunt and grim (as was Ulrich Matthes in *Downfall*) but Moritz Bleibtreu (who has appeared in the director's *Agnes* and *his Brothers and The Elementary Particles*) is short but extremely healthy, loud, bumptious, aping Hitler in his speeches and radio broadcasts, relishing his triumphs (with glimpses of his wife and their children, all of whom died in the bunker in April 1945).

A very interesting and disturbing curio of a film.

THE KIDS ARE ALL RIGHT

(US, 2010, d. Lisa Cholodenko. Competition)

Writer-director Lisa Cholodenko has been interested in relationships and families and, especially, the role of women, their behaviour and feelings.

This is a serious comedy with verve which keeps audiences interested, often amused, often challenged.

The two kids belong to a nuclear family, two parents, two children, one parent a doctor, the breadwinner, the other usually stays at home but has tried some careers and now intends to do garden landscaping. One kid is 18, going to college, a science buff, the other 15 with the usual adolescent problems. The difference is that the kids have two mums who have been in a relationship for the best part of twenty years. Each has borne a child through artificial insemination.

The plot development shows the two mums, their personalities, the strong and controlling doctor (Annette Bening) and the softer, home mum (Julianne Moore). While their own relationship has its particular characteristics and gender consequences, their parenting and dealing with their children's issues seems only too familiar from husband-wife marriage and rearing.

The son (Josh Hutcherson) wants to find out about the sperm donor for his and his sister's conception. The daughter (Mia Wasikowska – Tim Burton's Alice in Wonderland) makes enquiries and quite easily discovers Paul (Mark Ruffalo) and they meet.

As might be expected, Paul, now older and wiser and running a restaurant, is drawn into being something of a father-figure. The mums have mixed feelings, the doctor hostile, thinking her role has been invaded. Paul gives the landscaper a job and emotional complications follow.

Media often focus on issues of same-sex male families, parenting and adoption. Here the drama is of female same-sex parents managing families.

There are funny moments, some serious reflection on contemporary issues. Audiences who have previous views may not alter them one way or the other. But, while the kids are all right, the presence of the male father-figure sometimes makes them better.

THE KILLER INSIDE ME

(UK, 2010, d. Michael Winterbottom. Competition)

The title might indicate some caution to audiences who do not like murder thrillers and whatever violence they might portray. Murder will out. And here it comes out very brutally – twice.

The reason for mentioning this first – though it should not have to be said for an audience who understands films and how they work in their conventions of storytelling – is that there was some uproar concerning the tone of and reasons for showing these brutal actions and so viscerally. Because the violence was perpetrated on two women, some comments were made that film was misogynistic. (A film showing Catholics being martyred by vicious authorities is scarcely anti-Catholic.) This violence against women is shown as abhorrent in the plot and condemns the brutal beater as mentally disturbed. Director Michael Winterbottom suggested that any other reading of the sequences would be perverse.

It is the question of that distinction between what is shown and how it is shown that is always important. There is a context here – the portrait of a deeply dysfunctional man. Whether the scenes in question are too long or are too much is always a matter of personal sensitivities and debate: what is too much for me may not be too much for the person next to me and the question arises whether my sensitivity is superior to that of the next person or just different, and who imposes the sensitivity norms? (Not all of us, to take a neutral example, are able to watch surgery procedures.)

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And, the film itself. Very well crafted, an arresting adaptation of the Thompson novel. It is a film noir – very noir despite the bright West Texas sunlight back in those days where the film is set. Thompson died in 1952. The British *Winterbottom* brings an outsider's perceptions to this basic American story, the madness that sometimes underlies the surface innocence and respectability and erupts unexpectedly and brutally.

Performances are striking. Casey Affleck, plays the young policeman, fresh-faced and unsuspecting, who harbours deep secrets, abusive experience in his family, and who lets go, even against those he loves, leading to a climax in the vein of much American literature, a fiery apocalyptic consummation.

Affleck is in every scenes and shows how effective he can be as he did with his Bob Ford assassinating Brad Pitt's Jesse James. Here is another Ford, Lou, who loses control of himself sinisterly, shrewdly and destructively. Jessica Alba is striking, Kate Hudson less so, mostly a foil for Affleck. A strong supporting cast brings to life the local sheriff, tycoons, wastrel sons, investigators, union leaders: Ned Beatty, Tom Bowers, Elias Koteas, Simon Baker, Bill Pullman.

So, this is genre material for a psychosexual case study. It is an American story. The US is a land of serial killers, impulsive mass shooters who make regular headlines as they break out. This has to be faced by American audiences and *The Killer Inside Me* and its issues may be a brief but properly challenging experience.

MINE VAGANTI (LOOSE CANNONS)

(Italy, 2010, d. Ferzan Ozpetek. Panorama)

For more than a decade, Turkish-born but Italian resident and film director, Ferzan Ozpetek, has made a series of films about families and/or special groups (*Fati Ignoranti*, *Facing Window*). He also made the evocative *Sacro Cuore* about service of the poor and self-sacrifice.

Here is another family portrait, the Contante family of Lecce who owns a pasta-making factory. Some magic realism inserts itself into the realistic narrative, especially with the free-spirited (loose cannon) grandmother who founded and guided the enterprise with the brother-in-law she loved. Flashbacks to her wedding recur through the film.

Concerning family: the patriarch, Vincenzo, needs to do a business deal to consolidate his firm. His older son, Antonio, runs the factory well. The younger son, Tommaso, plans to tell the truth about himself at the special business dinner – that he has studied literature in Rome rather than business, that he is a writer and that he is gay. The dinner turns out rather differently from what was anticipated. Ozpetek has always had gay themes and acceptance of the reality of homosexuality in his films. It is to the fore here, criticising traditional Italian homophobia and inserting some camp, caricature humour. This is a *commedia sul serio*.

MY NAME IS KHAN

(India 2009, d. Karan Johar. Special screening)

This is not a typical or traditional Bollywood movie. While it has some scenes in India, where two brothers grow up with their mother but who go to live in the US, the main part of this long film takes place in the United States.

The film stars one of India's most popular heartthrobs, Khan. However, he takes on a quite different role from the usual singing and dancing hero. He is Khan, a Muslim, an earnest and good man who has Aspergers' Syndrome. This means that he has characteristics of the idiot savant (remembering Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man* and Tom Hanks in *Forrest Gump*), an encyclopedic amount of information on topics that create interest and a direct way of reciting facts and figures. More recently, Hugh Dancy portrayed a man with Aspergers' Syndrome in *Adam*. The other principal characteristic, which Khan explains to mystified people, is that the Aspergers man or woman does not pick up emotions and feelings if they are not expressed verbally. And metaphorical language and colloquialisms are taken literally.

As a child, Khan is bullied by other children and despised by his brother. When his mother sends him to San Francisco, his brother gives him a job selling beauty products which he does in his encyclopedic way but ingratiates himself with many customers. He also falls for a beautician, a divorced woman with a little boy who relates wonderfully with Khan.

It would be pleasant to say that all goes well in the land of opportunity. While Khan and others experience some prejudice against Muslims, it is the experience of 9/11 that transforms their lives. They become innocent targets of the war against terror and there are some tragic repercussions for Khan and his wife. He interprets some words of his wife that he should meet the president of the US and assure him, 'My name is Khan and I am not a terrorist'. Like Forrest Gump, he crosses and re-crosses America, meeting a group of Christian black people in a small town in Georgia, eventually helping them when a hurricane strikes. In the meantime, Khan has experienced arrest and some inhuman interrogation and, by accident, becomes a national figure.

The overt emotion in Indian film-making is akin to the heart on sleeve style of American storytelling. More reticent tastes might find the strong and unabashed feelings too much. A pity, because the film invites western audiences to empathise with this different culture and approach to life, with its emotional message and appeal – and a challenge, especially to American audiences, but not exclusively, to look beyond narrow national and cultural confines.

NA PUTU (ON THE PATH)

(Bosnia, 2010, d. Jasmila Zbanek. Competition)

In her Golden Bear award winning film (and winner of the 2006 Ecumenical Award), Gbavica, writer-director, Jasmila Bjanik, raised the issue of women raped during the 1990s Balkan wars and the fate of children from the rapes. The film contributed to changes of the law in Bosnia.

Four years later, she looks at Sarajevo and Bosnian society to examine how it has dealt with re-building. How much does the West influence Bosnian life – and many secularised Muslims – with its more open morality, its materialism and its sense of personal freedom? How much does traditional Islam influence modern Bosnia? And, more to the point here, how does a renewal of stricter living of Islam which intends to purify (as well as isolate) the devout while emphasising the dominance of men and the subservience of black-clad women wield an influence?

These themes were to the fore in Berlinale films about the Berlin Turkish community, *Shahada* (Faith) and *Die Fremde* (When You Leave).

This film focuses on Luna, a flight attendant, modern, pretty, comfortable, and her partner, Amar, a flight controller with a fondness for drink and joviality. When suspended for an error, he literally crashes into a friend from the war years who offers him a job, teaching computers, at a camp for a Muslim group of very strict observance. Amar becomes absorbed in this new way of life, an antidote, with religion, prayer, control, to his life during the war and after. Luna cannot understand this at all.

The screenplay presents the options clearly, detailing manners, customs, clothes, music, rituals, to make their point. But the key issue is marriage according to ritual and pregnancy within marriage.

On the Path (of Islam) also means pregnancy, the situation in which Luna eventually finds herself. It shows how change is occurring and how resistance to change (and western permissiveness) is also taking hold.

OTOUTO (ABOUT HER BROTHER)

Japan, 2010, d. Yoji Yamada. Closing film)

Director Yoji Yamada directed this film in his late 70s. Like the slightly older Clint Eastwood, he has come to know human nature over a long period and tell a movie story well.

His previous film, *Kabei – Mother* (a SIGNIS award winner in 2009) covered the period from 1938 to the end of the war and us into the detail of the lives of a family and the hardships of those difficult times, both Japan's vainglorious ambitions and its defeat.

This film highlights events of the 1950s to the present, opening with a collage of significant happenings, pacts, transport disasters and the changing attitudes of the Japanese as the 20th century wore on and they experienced greater independence.

However, the focus is on a mother, a fine woman, a widow, a pharmacist in a quiet Tokyo suburb (facing the incoming supermarkets threatening small and personalised businesses). She has a daughter who is about to be married.

And the title character? Well, to all intents and purposes, and in most people's estimation, he is a buffoon and a

nuisance. And we see him at the wedding reception (to which he was not invited but came), after more than a few quick drinks, disrupting the event with his dramatic performance and collapse. He drinks, he gambles, he is a would-be actor. He borrows money and spendthriftly wastes it.

And yet... He knows he hasn't grown up. He exasperates his sister and his niece. His sister, with huge magnanimity, repays a large debt to his woman friend.

But, when he is dying – and the film does not hurry the death scenes – the managers of the shelter who have taken him in, treat him with fellowship and dignity. And his sister is there to care for and love him.

Every person, the film movingly reminds us, despite everything, is worthwhile.

PLEASE GIVE

(US, 2010, d. Nicole Holfcener. Out of Competition)

Nicole Holfcener has made several comedies, contemporary comedies of American manners, with a range of female characters, their issues, their concerns, the details of their lives (Lovely and Amazing, Friends with Money). Please Give is in the same vein. Its 90 minutes pass quickly, giving the impression that this is a series of light anecdotes. Along with the light touch is a more serious vein of felling bad about the marginalised (socially, physically) but not knowing how a comfortable furnishings shop owner should manage this concern and act on it in practice. And the screenplay is sometimes sharply barbed which has us smiling though we disapprove of some of the characters who utter them.

The cast also sustains interest in the anecdotes, especially the reliable Catherine Keener as Kate, wife and mother (with Oliver Platt doing a relaxed but ambiguous turn though surprising and disappointing himself with some of his behaviour as the husband). Sarah Steele is their self-conscious, bad-skinned and sometimes thick-skinned concerning those in need, fifteen year old daughter. Next door is cantankerous 91 year old Andra, looked after by a shy granddaughter (a charming Rebecca Hall) and barely tolerated by the other granddaughter (Amanda Peet getting lots of the harsh lines).

Please Give won't make many demands. It passes time entertainingly but it is more than a time-passer.

RED HILL

(Australia, 2010, d. Patrick Woods. Panorama)

Bad day at Red Hill.

19th century outback Australia was a frontier which many have compared with the American West. John Hillcoat's The Proposition (2005) was a striking case in point. Would it be possible to make the same comparisons for anywhere in Australia in the 21st century? Outback, of course. But what about the Victorian high country around Omeo?

Red Hill shows that it can – and uses the conventions of horses, prison escapes, guns and shootouts, along with cars, radio phones, to advantage. It is the work of Patrick Hughes, a first feature which he wrote, produced and directed in only 40 days. For quite an elaborate plot and use of outside locations, this is an achievement and Red Hill was selected for the Berlinale Panorama section and was well reviewed.

The action takes place over a day and a night. It is the first day on the job for Constable Shane Cooper who had transferred from the city to a quiet country town to help the health of his heavily pregnant wife. It all seems very ordinary, especially when he listens to the police chief at a pre-breakfast town meeting bemoaning the changes and the likely death of the town.

Cooper's first job is to ride a horse to investigate a mauling of stock – allegedly by a rogue panther descended from animals who had escaped from a travelling circus. The panther makes later symbolic appearances.

However, if we had been listening attentively to the incidental television reports at the police station, we would realise that the film is being set up for a confrontation between an escaped prisoner and the local police.

However, the condemned murderer is an aboriginal brumby tracker who was found guilty of killing his pregnant wife and attempting to kill the police chief. So, as now might be expected, it is a bad day at Red Hill, the police mounting a road blockade and then a hunt, Shane confronting Jimmy Conway, the prisoner, High Noon style shootouts in the main

street, ambushes and a final showdown.

The aboriginal issue is the question – as might be guessed about a 2010 film. All is not as it might seem and truth will out.

Tom E. Lewis, more than thirty years after he appeared as Jimmy Blacksmith, is once again an iconic aboriginal figure, his face half-scarred by fire, making it like a horror-movie mask. He stands like an outlaw and speaks only one line, just at the end. Thirty years on from riding with Mad Max, Steve Bisley is the hardened police chief. And Ryan Kwanten, into international stardom in TV's True Blood, is a credible rookie, both naïve and pleasant.

A genre film with an Australian flavour, re-visiting Australian issues.

SHAHADA (FAITH)

(Germany, 2010, d. Burhan Qurbani. Competition)

A film that provides a challenge to many devout Muslims.

The setting is Berlin, especially amongst the Turkish-German community. It could be paralleled with a film set in a Catholic country that dramatises issues, especially moral issues, that are the subject of official statements and teaching but aspects of which are controverted, even by some devout believers.

The first issue to come up is abortion with a pill-induced illegal abortion for the daughter of the local Imam. Her pain is excruciating and compels her to do the famous bargain with God, to do anything for him as long as he heals her. This experience turns her into a zealot, blaming her father for being too tolerant and invoking apocalyptic language (and Revelation 12) and fierce punishment.

The second issue is infidelity. A policeman (Muslim) who had an affair with a pregnant woman whom he had accidentally shot in a raid for illegal immigrants promises his wife and son to be faithful, but...

The third issue is homosexuality. A sincere young African German who lives with his mother and works in a factory becomes aware of a deep attraction to a fellow-worker. They go to Quran school together and meet the Imam. The young man prays intensely against his urges and desires, becomes self-loathing, rejecting his friend. He goes to the Imam for advice. The Imam says that the Quran is a book for Islam as a religion of love.

The film, made by a student director, originally from Afghanistan and a practising Muslim, will ask audiences to test their beliefs and principles.

SON OF BABYLON

(Iraq, 2010, d. Mohamad Al-Daradji. Panorama)

What would a 2010 movie made by Iraqis be like in the aftermath of the invasion and fall of Saddam be like? Here is the answer.

Son of Babylon is a simple film in outline, focusing on survivors, a grandmother from Kurdistan travelling south with her grandson to try to find her son, the boy's father, a musician who was conscripted to fight in 1991 by the Baath administration and then imprisoned.

The setting is April 2003, three weeks after the fall of Saddam.

What is essentially an Iraqi road movie becomes the opportunity to remind the Iraqi audience of what it was like in those days: the bombings, the American roadblocks, people searching for loved ones, the finding of mass graves – and the helicopters hovering overhead.

The grandmother speaks only Kurdish, a solemn devout woman. The actress who plays her is still missing her husband in real life, searching for him for 22 years, so the performance is truly heartfelt. The boy is one of those naturally talented performers, lighting up the screen.

The film shows the relationship between the old woman and the boy as she struggles to communicate, as he impetuously acts like a boy and runs off at times. Incidental characters like the driver who gives them a lift, a Baghdad urchin who sells cigarettes in the street, a bus driver, the mosque imam and Musa, a former soldier from the south who

had been forced to participate in northern massacres and is trying to atone, all offer a more rounded picture.

After years of headlines, TV coverage of the invasion and the subsequent years, the terrorism and the suicide bombers, it is still important to communicate with the world via storytelling so that the feeling behind the reports comes to life and makes an impact.

SUBMARINO

(Denmark, 2010, d. Thomas Vinterberg. Competition)

A Danish drama blending grit and sentiment. It is the story of two brothers who experience both joy and trauma as young boys with their alcoholic mother and their loved baby brother.

The film tells its story in two parts covering the period of about a month or two in grey and snowy Copenhagen.

First, we glimpse the life of Nik, the older brother, who is full of anger and resentment and just out of prison. But, he is, as we know from the opening, capable of deeper feelings. Secondly, we see the younger brother who is a follower, who loves his little son dearly but is an unreformable and deceitful drug addict.

So, it is two tragic slices of life which intersect. The theme of children offers a sad but not hopeless ending.

WHEN I WANT TO WHISTLE, I WHISTLE

(Romania, 2010, d. Florian Serban. Competition)

The Romanian cinema of the first decade of the 21st century continues. With a capacity for choosing down-to-earth contemporary stories of post-Communist Romanian society, the films have been acclaimed worldwide and have become festival favourites. This film won the Jury Prize in Berlin.

It has a prison setting, a jail for younger offenders. With an eye for the detail of day-by-day life in this institution, the director (as he did in real life with his cast of many actual prisoners playing life-like roles) has immersed us in this world. The same power and hierarchical games are played. Warders can be brutal. But these are young men whose life is still ahead of them. The drama focuses on an 18 year old youth, Silviu, on the eve of his release after four years. He is more genial than many of the others but is trying to resist being provoked to ensure his freedom.

A visit from his little brother whom he raised because his father was in hospital and his mother worked in Italy leads to a confrontation with his mother so that she does not repeat her neglectful treatment of Silviu.

But, calm release, as we guess, is not going to be easy and the film builds to a melodramatic climax as well as a quiet culmination.

At first, this seems an ordinary enough film but the performances (his first) by high school student, Geroge Pistereanu, gets to the audience and by the time his mother visits him and tempers and resentment flare, we are fully involved.

An effectively realised contemporary social drama.

A WOMAN, A GUN AND A NOODLE SHOP

(China, 2010, d. Zhang Yimou. Competition)

In this era of international remakes of films, were a competition to be held to suggest the least likely combination, a sure winner would be celebrated Chinese director, Zhang Yimou (Raise the Red Lantern, The Road Home, Hero) re-making a Coen Brothers film. But, Zhang going back to the Coens' first film, Blood Simple, here it is.

After a series of stages in an illustrious and colourful career, a highlight being the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics, Zhang Yimou can do what he likes. He has obviously decided to amuse himself and amuse his audience. At the time that Blood Simple was released in 1985, Zhang Yimou was a cinematographer with an eye for beauty, colour and composition. His first series of films was a fine evocation of Chinese domestic history. In the late 1990s, he directed more quiet and simple masterpieces, Not One Less and The Road Home. Whether influenced by the awards and acclaim for Ang Lee's Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, he embarked on a new phase with spectacular and exquisitely designed epics, Hero, House of a Thousand Daggers, Curse of the Golden Flower.

In the meantime, the Coens have shown an extraordinary versatility in subject, style and genres and have won many

awards. These careers highlight the range of cinema, Chinese and American, in a quarter of a century.

Zhang has taken the basic plot of *Blood Simple* and transferred it to an exotic and exotically-landscaped China. At times, it is farcical – the hero is a klutz and accident prone. He and the noodle shop servant offer clumsy comedy, except for a wonderful display of pasta-twirling. The boss and his wife are melodramatic. The local police chief is cross-eyed.

However, the corrupt and conniving officer is played straight and gives the bizarre proceedings more gravitas than they deserve and provides effective suspense and drama for the Chinesisation of the Coens.

AGORA

(Spain/Malta, 2009, d. Alejandro Almenabar)

Agora is not a film which will draw large audiences. It is a film for those who are interested in and entertained by historical films and by those who would like to see a film which dramatises a period, not well known at all, in Christian history.

Some reviewers who have seen the film suggest that there is a need for some kind of historical background, especially about the Church in Egypt, in the city of Alexandria, at the end of the 4th century and the beginning of the 5th century. But, first some words about the overall impact of the film itself.

The film is impressive to look at, a combination of sets and computer generated locations. It was filmed in Malta (with a fair percentage of the population seeming to be present as extras, lots of crowd scenes). It runs for 128 minutes, which is quite demanding for a film about such an unfamiliar period. It was directed and co-written by Spanish director, Alejandro Almenabar (whose varied films include, *Open my Eyes* (remade as *Vanilla Sky*), *The Others* and the drama about assisted suicide, *The Sea Within*).

Some review comments

The film is also quite demanding in its content and dialogue. The central character is the renowned pagan philosopher, Hypatia. She is played with some authority by Rachel Weisz. Her philosopher father, Theon, is played by the French actor, Michel Lonsdale. Several sections of the film, some lengthy, are classes and discussions about the nature of the universe and speculation on the Ptolemaic theories of the relationship of the earth to the sun and the planets and how the stars move - or does the sun, or does the earth? Audiences who are not strong on astronomy or geometry may find these sequences too difficult, even baffling. But, it is quite a daring thing to present a feature film which raises these issues and asks its audience to think about them.

However, it is the religious background of the film which needs some explaining. By and large, the screenplay is accurate enough, especially about Hypatia, Orestes the governor of Alexandria and Sinesius, bishop of Cyrene, a pupil of Hypatia, who demands an assent of faith from her at the end of the film but who actually wrote in defence of her theories and died before her murder. There are problems with the presentation of Cyril of Alexandria, bishop of the city, later declared a saint and an important doctor of the church with his contributions to the theology of the humanity and divinity of Jesus.

The film might have been more satisfying for those who know something of the period had it alerted the audience to the fact that relations between pagans, Christians and Jews were not quite as straightforward as they are presented here. While it is accurate enough in general, there is much more to the feuds, hostilities, persecutions and massacres.

391-415 AD

The 4th century was one of the most difficult in the Church's history and the source of much of the difficulty was, in fact, Alexandria.

From the 2nd century AD, the centres of intellectual debate and theological argument were in the schools of Alexandria and Antioch. By 300 AD, there were great developments in sophisticated theological thought in Alexandria. Agora does not really reflect this reality of the Alexandrian Christians. We see the Christians reflecting on the Scriptures (the Beatitudes in particular), the bishop preaching to the faithful and, later, the reading of texts from Pauline letters which are restrictive on the activities of women in the Church. But – and this may have been the case – most of the Christians are not well educated and easily swayed by populist demagogues, one of whom challenges the pagans to walk through fire unharmed as he does. He is seen as a miracle worker – the dared pagan goes up in flames. However, this is balanced by the same man showing a convert slave the ordinary miraculous in supplying bread for distribution to the poor. Reasonable enough and a fairly sympathetic view of Christians.

But, what had been most important in Alexandria at the beginning of the century was the teaching of the local priest, Arius, whose understanding of the relationship between the Father and the Son emphasised the humanity of Jesus as somehow making him inferior to the divine Father. His opponent was the bishop of Alexandria, St Athanasius, who found himself exiled from his city more than once. The historical complication was that this was the time when the emperor Constantine declared that Christianity not be a banned religion, 312 AD. Clashes, both ideological and physical, between pagans and Christians, spread throughout the empire as did the response of governors to the new situation, some for, some against.

While the Church resolved the Christ issue at the first of the ecumenical (worldwide) councils in Nicaea, a suburb of Constantinople, in 325, and enshrined it in a creed formulation that is still recited on Sundays at Masses around the world, the followers of Arius, maintained their stances and influenced a number of political rulers who used their adherence to Arianism to combat bishops. This would have been the case at the time of Hypatia. This could have been incorporated into some of the discussions in the film which would have heightened the reality of the persecution of the Christians by the pagans which resulted in fanatical and violent response, massacres in revenge for the killing of Christians and vandalism in destruction of the world's greatest library.

Hypatia, declaring herself a seeker after truth and an investigator of the universe, escaped the attacks and survived.

Further councils in 431 (Ephesus) and 451 (Chalcedon in Constantinople) led to further work on the theology of the humanity and divinity of Christ.

The second half of the film takes place in 415, the year of Hypatia's death. The bishop of Alexandria is Cyril. Checking Google references for him shows that he was as irascible as portrayed in the film. He fomented clashes with Orestes who had become a Christian as had many of the pagans and rulers. Another of his targets was the Jewish community. There is a similar difficulty in the portrayal of the Jews as stone throwing zealots and then victims, though not as viciously fanatic as some of the Christian zealots, especially a group of monks who patrol the city supervising morality.

There are records of Jews being in Alexandria since the early 6th century BC, the prophet Jeremiah and others fleeing there after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 587. Much intellectual reflection on the Jewish scriptures and the translation of books from Hebrew to Greek were done in Alexandria. The book of Wisdom, accepted in the Catholic biblical canon comes from this city in the 1st century BC. It is said that John's Gospel was influenced by the Alexandrian philosopher, Philo. Which means that at the time of the Jewish-Christian clashes in the film, Jews had been a significant part of Alexandria and its intellectual life for about a thousand years.

An Egyptian historian, Damascius, claimed that Cyril was responsible for the death of Hypatia and her very cruel martyrdom. Agora's screenplay follows this. Historians say there is no other evidence that this is exact – some 19th century authors took it up again. However, historians do say that Cyril's bitter approach fomented the pervading atmosphere of hostility which led to Hypatia's death.

So, there is much in Agora for audiences interested in films which dramatise unfamiliar periods of history. And, it may be more accurate than many others. The above background might have been incorporated into the screenplay to make it more solid and nuanced.

Hypatia the martyr

While initially the pagans are shown as clinging to their gods and to their own civil status and initiating persecution of the Christians, the Christian response (which was regrettably repeated down the ages, think St Bartholomew's Day massacre of 1572 against the Huguenots) is rabble-roused fanaticism. With the Jewish-Christian clashes, there is a huge heritage of history and persecution which puts the sad experience of the 20th century in the audience's mind.

At the end, Hypatia is presented as a martyr and quite movingly declaring her own integrity (rather than faith) and bravely and heroically facing her death. This is strongly reminiscent of, even parallel to, the way that the Christian martyrs were portrayed in the storytelling of the early church.

[Actually, there was much more vitality and sophistication in the Christians churches of this period. St Ambrose was bishop of Milan at this time and St Augustine repented of his past in 397 and became the leading theologian of the western church. When Hypatia died, he was bishop of Hippo further west from Alexandria in north Africa, not all that far from the film's real character, Sinesius, bishop of Cyrene. By the middle of the 5th century Attila the Hun was at the gates of Rome, barbarians at the borders and the western empire was on the verge of collapse.]

Amenabar himself says that the film is not against Christianity but 'a film against fundamentalism, against those who defend their ideas with weapons. It is not against Christians and most certainly not against the Christians of today'.

THE CALLING

(UK, 2009, d. Jan Dunn)

The Calling is a small-budget British film that will probably not be distributed or seen widely. However, with its Catholic themes and the treatment, it comes within the range of a SIGNIS Statement.

The film is about a community of Benedictine Nuns in Kent, England, and a young woman who feels she has a calling to the contemplative religious life. What promises to be an interesting portrait of an enclosed community is not. (A helpful comparison is Michael Whyte's 2009 documentary on the Carmelite Sisters of Notting Hill, London, No Greater Love.) Diocesan Offices may be getting calls from those who want to complain about The Calling or from those who are asking for some explanations. Those who complain certainly have grounds for this. For audiences willing to give the film a go, they will probably be quite irritated and words like 'absurd', 'preposterous' and, at times, 'idiotic' may spring to mind.

The actual Benedictine Abbey of Minster in Kent provided help for the film and some groundwork for the plot. However, a glance at the Abbey's website shows how different the reality is from the melodramatics of the screenplay. Not that the screenplay is necessarily written in bad faith, though there are some shots at Vatican documents and official Catholic teaching on sexual issues (though Sister Ignatious (I'm afraid that's the way it is spelt for the film but this statement will take the liberty of writing the name correctly) makes the distinction necessary in speaking about abortion.

She is anti-abortion but pro-choice at a crucial dramatic stage of the film; for her pro choice is, in essence, is a legal consideration rather than a moral one, a legal consideration for something which one does not approve, like St Augustine's supporting the legalisation of prostitution for the protection of the women and to try to preclude criminal elements exploiting the women, while he did not approve of it morally.) This is, in fact, a current issue for nuns in contemporary US health care discussions which may have influenced Jan Dunn in including it and discussion about contraception and the use of condoms in Africa.

One of the difficulties with the screenplay is the frequent use of the word, 'calling'. Catholics do not normally use that word. They use 'vocation' – and, in fact, this is the word used on the Minster Abbey website. This means that from the word go, or from the first use of the word 'calling', the film does not sound Catholic. Some of the ecclesiastical buildings look Anglican and the soundtrack chant is sung by the Canterbury Cathedral choir.

While important issues are interestingly dramatised, usually, they are outside the abbey of St Bertha (St Bertha!!!): the hostility of the mother of the young woman (Joanna/ Emily Beechum), her best friend's carping, ridiculing and offering advice whereas she is more concerned about herself than wanting Joanna to be happy and have her own peace of mind. The local parish priest is common-sensed and kindly. Psychological concern is rightly raised.

However, inside the abbey!

I suppose there are priests like Fr Kieren, the chaplain, a rather younger, self-righteous imperiously critical man. Yes, there are. However, by the end, he has a list of sins that have been exaggerated for plotline (and not every effectively).

The nuns are really a strange lot. Since they are Benedictines, in real life, the local bishop might have intervened more quickly (though he is not without skeletons in his cupboard, piling on screenplay exploitation and exaggeration). The Abbey would belong to the worldwide Benedictine Union and there would have been visitation and intervention long since. These sisters have a correct autonomy but locally are a law unto themselves.

Susannah York plays the prioress with huge emotional, psychological and vocational problems, ruling her small roost like someone who would have been rejected from *The Nun's Story* and who makes Meryl Streep's Sister Aloysius in *Doubt*, seem severe but normal. Her fate at the end is tragic but incredible. Rita Tushingham and Pauline McLynn (who knows a thing or two about religious houses since she played Fr Ted's housekeeper on television) are two of the cattiest nuns you would wish not to meet, trying to drive Joanna out of the community. There is a sister who has been the victim of trauma and does not speak (but plays the organ beautifully) and there is a novice who has a dubious past and a dubious present. All in all, a dysfunctional lot who remind us of the classic film of a dysfunctional community of nuns, Michael Powell's 1947 *Black Narcissus*, the story of an Anglican community in India after the war.

Which leaves Brenda Blethyn's Sister Ignatious (Ignatius). She is the contact with the outside and deals with Fr Kieren, interviews Joanna and befriends her and is the novice mistress. Though at one stage, she goes quite out of character and upbraids Joanna for her vegetarian choices and calls on obedience for her to eat the meat before her. That seems quite out of keeping with Sister Ignatious who is reported to have joined pro-choice protests, can make a sly remark about the Vatican, and has her own past secrets.

By this stage, Catholic audiences may be wringing their hands or planning a letter to the editor. Audiences who are hostile to the Church will feel that all their suspicions have been justified (and some!).

As with so many films which deal with the Catholic church in some detail, there has not been nearly enough seeking of technical advice to make it plausible if not accurate – or, if sought, not understood or not heeded. The screenplay's idea of a postulancy, a novitiate and the nature of vows is not well-informed and details are not correct, making it all seem more unnuanced and severe than it really is. (The nuns of Minster do have details of their postulancy and novitiate on the website.) For those who have some experience of religious life, some of the hymns and canticles chanted in the chapel are not apt, though some scenes like that of communion or someone reading *Catholic Life* with Cardinal Murphy O'Connor on the cover are pleasingly real.

It's a small film which does not claim to be The Nun's Story – although it may have borrowed its ending from that film. It might have been much more interesting had it been more accurate and the cumulative melodrama both inside the convent and outside (there are a number of surprising deaths) not overdone.

Re: Attention Jennifer - review (Catholic!!)

...

Jennifer Ussi <jenussi@optusnet.com.au>

From: ...

Add to Contacts

To: "petermalonemsc@yahoo.co.uk" <petermalonemsc@yahoo.co.uk>

Cc: Margaret Casey <info@excelsiormangement.com.au>

Peter,

You are a wonderful man, thank you so very much!

It was fantastic meeting you, I hope our paths cross again one day soon.

All my best and all my thanks,

Jennifer

Jennifer Ussi

Producer/Director

Girl Clock!

www.girlclockthemovie.com

Tel: 0431 169 216

Sent from my iPhone

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END

Some interesting films in this list, including Harry Potter's latest. The King's Speech is a very entertaining film – a

most for royalists and some grudging admiration from republicans. Winter's Bone is an excellent independent American drama. Quite a few horror/terror films of which Devil is not bad. Horror also from Finland in Rare Exports with Santa as we never imagined him. Beneath Hill 60 (with a World War I trenches setting) and Sisters of War (with a New Britain World War II setting) are fine Australian films.

SIGNIS FILM REVIEWS DECEMBER 2010

BENEATH HILL 60
DEVIL
DUE DATE
HARRY POTTER AND THE DEADLY HALLOWS I
HEARTBREAKER
KING'S SPEECH, The
LAST EXORCISM, The
LOVED ONES, The
MACHETE
MONSTERS
RARE EXPORTS
SISTERS OF WAR
SKYLINE
SOMEWHERE
WILD TARGET
WINTER'S BONE

BENEATH HILL 60

(Australia, 2010, d. Jeremy Hartley Sims)

World War I took place nearly a century ago. However, it is still vivid in the minds of many whose family members fought and died in the alleged war to end all wars. The cinema has a strong tradition of World War I films from the silent *The Big Parade* in 1925 to *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), through stories that had war episodes like *The Razor's Edge* (1946) then Australian stories like *40,000 Horsemen* (1940), *Gallipoli* (1981) and *The Lighthorsemen* (1988). *Beneath Hill 60* is a significant contribution to this tradition, something of which director-actor, Jeremy Hartley Sims can be proud.

One of the features that makes an immediate impact is the production design, especially the detailed attention given to the re-creation of the battlefields and the barren darkness, to the stark realities of the trenches and the dugouts and, particularly, to the tunnels under the battlefields. The film immerses its audience in this first hand warfare experience.

The story is of particular interest to Australians and the contribution to this war effort made by the literal diggers of these war tunnels. Much of the screenplay by David Roach is based on the diaries of Oliver Woodward, a mining engineer who had worked in Papua New Guinea and then in Queensland and joined the war effort bringing his expertise to the excavating of tunnels in France and, then, to Messines in Belgium and the use of the tunnels under the German occupied Hill 60 for one of the biggest explosions of the war.

The film opens with his arrival in the tunnels and not finding his way, a cinematic means of putting the audience right into the darkness of the tunnel mazes. At one stage, the bombardments and casualties in the trenches makes the miners realise that they may be safer underground.

The film offers almost documentary sequences of the men in the tunnels, their work, their camaraderie, the dangers.

Oliver Woodward is played by Brendan Cowell with a sense of authority and dignity which is innate. The supporting cast includes Steve Le Marquand as a down to earth digger, John Stanton as the commanding officer and Chris Haywood as an old-school, by the book officer.

There are glimpses of German diggers, making them the equivalent of the Australians in their ordinariness, the background stories, their skills and their clashes with authorities.

And, breaking the grim tension on the front, there are flashbacks for Woodward to his life in Queensland, his friendship

with a family (Jacqueline McKenzie and Gerard Lepkowski and Isabella Heathcote as their daughter whom Woodward wants to court). The bright Queensland sunshine contrasts with the general darkness of the war and the fighting.

There is a finale not unlike that of Gallipoli which shows the hard human decisions that have to be made if military success is to be achieved. And the final information reminds us of so much of the futility of war – and that Hill 60 was re-taken by the Germans not long after the episode that is dramatised here.

DEVIL

(US, 2010, d. John Erick Dowdle)

With a title like Devil and the publicity highlighting the horror-diabolical elements of the plot, it is obvious that this is a film for fans of the genre. Personally, I thought it was very good. I jumped several times and actually felt a bit eerie at key points. At just 80 minutes, it sets out to tell a tale of a haunted elevator, of the presence of the devil, the power of vengeance and judgment for evil deeds. And that is what it does, efficiently and effectively.

Set in Philadelphia, whose skyline appears vividly during the credits – but upside down. We are disoriented from the start. And we are told that this is the first of a trilogy of Night Chronicles.

In a very modern office block, five people find themselves together in the lift, going up. Then it stops. The effect of this kind of story is that it could happen to any of us (and having been trapped with 25 people in a hospital lift for a half hour or more, I can vouch for this). We identify with these characters. We know that they will clash, be afraid, become desperate, even though they can be seen from security cameras and they can hear the voices of the officers as well as the police who arrive on the scene because there has already been a suicide jumper from the 35th floor and detectives are investigating. But, they cannot be heard, only seen.

The same song plays over and over. The lift jolts. Lights go out. The five bicker... and then a succession of deaths. But, who could be doing it?

A Hispanic security guard tells a voiceover story of how the devil disguised himself and takes people to himself who deserve it. So, which one of the five is the devil - or not?

The film builds the tension. Mechanical difficulties are not solved. There are more deaths.

And, the investigating detective has his own back story of grief at his family's death in a hit-run accident, his drinking, his feelings of hatred for the unknown perpetrator.

Lots of little clues are scattered throughout the film – often to mislead the audience into rash opinions about the killer and the devil.

It all comes together by the end – and the devil doesn't always win.

Many of the reviewers and bloggers attack the producer of the film, M. Night Shyamalan, who won friends with The Sixth Sense but whose reputation has gone downhill and become the target of hate bloggers. They seem to be reviewing him rather than the film, even though he is responsible for the story, not the writing and direction. The director is John Erick Dowdle who directed the remake of the Spanish horror film, Rec, the American film, Quarantine. Shyamalan also gives his name to the Night Chronicles. He was even condemned by one reviewer for moralising, being didactic, at the end of the film. In fact, the film does, especially in terms of redemption and forgiveness. But, it fits with this kind of terror-horror fable.

DUE DATE

(US, 2010, d. Todd Phillips)

Maybe the tagline for the advertising is enough of a review, 'From the director of The Hangover'.

More than a year on, it is rather difficult to remember why The Hangover, despite its often crass approach, was so

successful and so funny, a guilty pleasure. But, the tagline does set up some expectations.

Some of them are fulfilled. It is not as hilarious as some of the scenes in *The Hangover* were. It has its crass moments, of course, but they are not so numerous in fact and the main ones (about the oafish character and his dog's behaviour) are continually referred to as crass and disgusting, so no one is trying to trick us – though the makers have obviously enjoyed including the sequence). This means that the comedy depends on whether you take to the characters well or not.

Watching the trailer (several times in the cinemas), one gets the impression that Robert Downey Jr plays an ordinary put-upon citizen who deserves sympathy as he has to deal with the aforesaid oaf, played in a manner comedy fans expect from Zach Galifianakis – including *The Hangover*). The film is much more complicated than that and the better for it.

Downey's architect, Peter, has a short fuse, (his wife (Michelle Monaghan) reminding him and us about his severe flying off the handle propensity. He is not as sympathetic as all that from the start – he actually deserves a bit of what he gets, and finally confesses to it as he ultimately learns his lessons. And Zach Galifianakis's would-be actor, Ethan, is certainly dumb about many things but does have a heart. What he does is set up by the screenplay to be annoying to Peter and to us, but Ethan is not altogether unlikeable. Even though you wouldn't want to share much of this journey with him if you found yourself in the same situation. It is Peter's fault more than Ethan's, when they find themselves on No Fly lists. They both want to get to LA, Ethan for an interview, Peter for the birth of his first child. (That is the due date.)

What happens is a lower-brow version of that very funny film of the 1980s, *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*, with Steve Martin and John Candy in exactly the same kinds of roles. So, we have crashes, motels, verbal interchanges, a side trip to Mexico and another to the Grand Canyon (this a nice one as Ethan has his recently deceased father's ashes to scatter). Some help is gathered along the way from one of Peter's best friends, played by Jamie Foxx.

Downey is such a good actor that he makes his character more real and credible than another actor might have. Galifianakis looks like a bear on the loose but tends to behave less intelligently. But, when you see him do auditions, like reading Brando's wedding day speech from *The Godfather*, and then play out some scenarios that Peter suggests, we realise that he is quite talented. Which means that the film has a happy ending, a nice baby, happy marriage and Jon Cryer and Charlie Sheen being good sports in a playful spoof of *Two and a Half Men* (the show that inspired Ethan to want to go to Hollywood after he had managed a website on details of the show for six years).

And, if you were disappointed with *Due Date*, rest assured that they have finished filming *The Hangover 2* (which even has a cameo from Bill Clinton!).

HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS PART I

(UK/US, 2010, d. David Yates)

Harry, Hermione and Ron have become part of our lives, well, of the lives of those millions who have read the books, learned the language, absorbed the world and its characters and who have appreciated the films bringing the Harry Potter experience to the screen. It is far too late for a moviegoer to decide to start with Harry Potter with this episode, so to that extent the film is review-proof. It is there for those who want to see it and like it (to say the least).

Actually, there are some critics who look down their noses at the films without having read the books and have dismissed this one as boring and cynically dividing the final novel in two just to make money. Be that as it may, said critics are not against making money badmouthing the film! But, fans have said that the previous films have left out parts of the novels they held dear. With *Deathly Hallows* making a combined four to five hours, that should do justice for all.

Part of the complaint of those who did not find this film so interesting is that it focuses most of its attention on Harry, Hermione and Ron. But, this is the nature of the journey here. Part 2 promises the great climax in the struggle with Voldemort. This is the pre-climax where Harry has to be hurried into seclusion and safety and then must go on his quest to find the means to combat Voldemort. This means that this part is interim, with Voldemort brandishing, at the end, the special wand from Dumbledore's grave. Harry and Ron have found the sword but that ragingly made character, Bellatrix, has outwitted Harry. So, how will the combatants be ready?

This film is stylishly photographed with a production design that takes us away from Hogwarts and, apart from an

episode in London's Shaftsbury Avenue, and some adventures in the ministry of magic, the action tends to take place out in the countryside, in some bleak and wintry forest and lake locations.

Not that there isn't action. Early in the film, we have the volunteers becoming Harry look-alikes so that he can escape Voldemort's minions who have discovered the plan to shield him. We have a meeting of Voldemort (Ralph Fiennes looking particularly reptilian) and his council. We also have a wedding that is rudely interrupted and a confrontation with Bellatrix with the aid of the elves.

But it does mean that this is a kind of Potter 'road film', with Harry and Hermione coming to rely more on each other, with Ron getting the sulks but returning at just the right time. Along the way are so many of the adult characters we have enjoyed seeing over the years, sometimes just glimpses, the Weasleys and the Dursleys as well as all the Malfoys, a sinister Severus Snape (but no Professor McGonagale), Hagrid and Wormtail, Dolores Umbridge, Mad Eye Moody. Some new characters appear, Bill Nighy as the minister, Peter Mullan as Yaxley of the ministry and a very effective Rhys Ifans as Xenophilius Lovegood. It is he who provides the meaning of the title as he tells a story about three knights and death – which is shown in quite vivid animation rather than live action.

Of course, we would like to see more of them – and we hope that when Part 2 arrives, we will be more than satisfied, and that Harry Potter will have achieved his destiny (and that Daniel Radcliffe, Rupert Grint and Emma Watson, having completed this marathon so well, will have new lives).

HEARTBREAKER (L'ARNACOEUR)

(France, 2010, d. Pascal Chaumeil)

Romain Duris (of the extraordinary strong jutting chin) usually appears in very French dramas, often as a pensive, even melancholic, type. Here he has the opportunity to be a charmer, a comedian, do some Dirty Dancing and be a heartbreaker.

We wonder what is happening as the film opens and a young woman on holidays in Morocco leaves her worthless fiancé at a swimming pool while she goes on an expedition with a doctor to see the dunes and to visit his patients, including some Siamese twins divided at the head. Too good to be true. Yes. It is all an entertaining set-up because Alex, along with his sister and her husband, specialise in breaking up engagements considered unsuitable by families and friends. Alex makes the women fall in love with them and backs off as he tells them (with crocodile tears which he produces often during the film) that he is in a place of grief. We see the routine speeded up in a collage with several more unwitting fiancées.

Then, Alex gets the chance at the big money (which he needs because he is in debt to gangsters, with huge, very huge, Serb bodyguards) to sustain his sense of himself and fashion. He has ten days to break up the engagement of a wealthy girl, Juliette (singer-actress Vanessa Paradis) and her British fiancé, also wealthy (Andrew Lincoln).

Of course, the audience finds Alex seductive as well and we become complicit in all his plots and plans and devices to make Juliette fall in love with him and call the whole engagement off. He outwits her but she can also outwit him. But, with extraordinary technological resources plus the fact that his sister can be seen doing umpteen jobs around the hotel, he keeps his plan more or less on track. His brother-in-law fancies himself as an actor wanting to live some of his fantasies and steps in, sometimes quite hilariously.

In real life Alex would be a cross between an unwelcome stalker and technological Peeping Tom but this is going to turn out like a fairy tale, the princess and the commoner Prince Charming. Or is it?

The screenplay is often witty, sometimes quite funny – and there is a knocking out of a character that brings on a laugh more than it should. George Michael and Wham's songs get something of a wham, but the distributors of Dirty Dancing could not have asked for more promotion.

Light-headed, perhaps, light-hearted certainly, and quite amusing as we watch it.

THE KING'S SPEECH

(UK, 2010, d. Tom Hooper)

King George VI does not seem a likely contender for a film hero. There have been several films and mini-series on his brother, Edward VIII, and his abdication. Helen Mirren made George's daughter, Elizabeth, a very interesting subject as *The Queen*. Nevertheless, here is a period drama that is strong on character and tension, insightful on the monarchy and its crisis in the mid-30s with the abdication and the outbreak of World War II, with George as the reluctant king. He also had a debilitating stammer. And it is the stammer that makes the film.

The film opens with his Duke of York 1925 speech at Wembley, a humiliating experience of awkward silences, and ends with his regal speech that stirred all of Britain and the empire.

Colin Firth has been around a long time and made impact with his Mr Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* in the 1990s. But, in recent years, despite some reputation for being stolid, he has made quite an impact with *Easy Virtue*, *A Single Man* and many other roles. As George VI, he shows how you can still make an impact as a stolid man who has a desperate speech impediment and a bad temper. You believe that Firth is George VI and Firth makes you believe he has a stammer. He is well supported by Helena Bonham Carter as Elizabeth, who was an extraordinary strength for him during his reign – and did live on into this century as the Queen Mother. Good to see Helena Bonham Carter do something normal after her recent films, including the deranged Bellatrix in the Harry Potter films.

But, the point and the central relationship of the film is one of friendship and mentoring.

The speech therapist, Lionel Logue, a would-be actor from Australia, and subject to English sneering (especially from Derek Jacobi, sneerer par excellence as the Archbishop of Canterbury), but who possessed great self-confidence and skill in helping clients overcome their disabilities. Much of the film shows the interaction between the two men, not always easy, especially for the Duke who confesses that he has not met and does not know any ordinary people. (Some easily offended audiences may be surprised by some of the four letter aspects of Logue's methods.)

Geoffrey Rush is at his best as Lionel Logue, a genial man who has learned his craft by experience and is determined that the Duke will speak confidently and that he will succeed when he makes king's speeches. Jennifer Ehle (Elizabeth Bennett to Firth's Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*) appears as Logue's wife, Myrtle.

Fans of British film and television will be delighted with many of the character actors who appear: Michael Gambon who brings George V to life, Claire Bloom as Queen Mary, Anthony Andrews as Stanley Baldwin, Timothy Spall as Churchill and Guy Pearce as Edward VIII.

As background to the speech therapy, which took place over years, we are invited to watch the formal style of George V and Queen Mary in bringing up their children at a distance, to feel the unprecedented national and political effects of Prince of Wales, David's lack of interest in being king and his passion for Wallis Simpson (who is not presented sympathetically), the reluctance of the retiring Bertie to becoming king, the advances of Hitler and the declaration of war against Germany. It is well-known how much the British people admired the royal family, especially during wartime when they felt that the family was one with the people. The film offers solid grounds for this, which will do monarchists a power of good and will draw from republicans some quiet admiration.

The screenplay creates the characters well. Tom Hooper (*Red Dust*, *Elizabeth I*, *The Damned United*) has directed with wit and polish. Writer David Seidler had a speech impediment when he was young and admired George VI. The Queen Mother was willing to have her husband's story told but only after she had died. So, here it is, belatedly but still most welcome.

THE LAST EXORCISM

(US, 2010, d. Daniel Stamm)

So much storytelling is fact told as fiction. With reality TV and the post Blair Witch Project genre, so many films are really fiction told as fact. The same here. While it does have one eye on *The Exorcist* and its story of demonic possession of a girl, the other eye is on the hand-held camera techniques that could make the initially unwary (but much less so now) believe that what they are seeing actually happened just as it is there on the screen.

Acknowledging the popular success of such terror films as *Cloverfield*, *The Diary of the Living Dead* and the *Rec/Quarantine* series as well as the alleged authenticity of the *Paranormal Activity* films, *The Last Exorcist* purports to give us interviews with the reverend Cotton Marcus, with his wife and son. It then makes us complicit with Marcus and his producer and cameraman as we visit a farm where Marcus will go through the ritual of an exorcism, get his fee and go on his way proving that possession' is only a state of mind, heightened and/or hysterical and that God and the

devil seem to have very little really to do with it. A one-time child prodigy of a preacher and with his first exorcism at ten (and his picture and the story proudly in the paper), he is a credit to his hyper-evangelical congregation-rouser of a pastor and a dab hand at raising alleluias himself.

But, with the birth of his deaf son, he has lost faith in what he is doing and just keeps going for the money to support his family.

So, (with the actor playing Marcus presenting a nice clean-cut image – we first see him shaving – a mixture of Michael Douglas and Robert Redford), the film is set to debunk possession, exorcisms and religion.

And he does it, with a few props to help things along and a few winks to the producer. He feels sorry for the 16 year old who seems to have been slaughtering cattle overnight and slashing her brother. He finds himself back at the farm where 'legion' seems to have come back to occupy the cleansed soul and body of the girl.

It gets quite complicated as he invokes the help of the local Lutheran pastor and his chubby assistant who is delighted she is in a movie. The father of the house has his problems when he discovers – you might have guessed it – that his daughter is pregnant. Plenty of suspicions as to the father, but...

Just when you might be suspecting that this is a case of real possession, the film-makers overdose on Rosemary's Baby and give us a rather hurried ending which is big on shock but not on credibility, certainly as to how the film got rescued, edited and marketed at all. But, of course, that is not the point.

While there are references and biblical quotes, observations on Vatican exorcists and their increasing numbers, on how possession and exorcism are common to all denominations and religions, this is a religious film only in name. It does, of course, raise many questions about God and the devil, about faith and prayer, about superstition and credulity. But, the ending reminds us that this is just a movie concoction rather than, as it alleges to show, the real thing.

THE LOVED ONES

(Australia, 2010, d. Sean Byrne)

When the poster tells you that this is where Pretty in Pink meets Wolf Creek, think Wolf Creek... and then some.

Yes, there is a Pretty in Pink connection because this is a film about the school dance night, where those about to leave celebrate – it would be Prom Night if this were America. But, this is a country Australian story, filmed in and around Kyneton, Victoria, with Australian accents and flavour. But, you can tell also from the poster that there is death around just by looking at the picture of the two central characters and the way they are dressed.

It all starts happily enough with a father and son yarning as they drive, slinging off at each other's musical tastes. Suddenly, the car crashes (with the explanation coming later). Brent (Xavier Samuel who has been specialising in suffering and torment lately, Road Train, Twilight – Eclipse) becomes morose after the accident as does his mother. He has a girlfriend at school but is asked by Lola, who is on the outer with the students, to take her to the dance. He says no. So far, so reasonable.

However, Lola must have seen Misery and decided that she and her gentlemanly insane father (a really frighteningly persuasive performance by John Brumpton) think that Brent should have said yes. So, they abduct him (and wound his dog fatally).

What follows is a bizarre prom night variation including a fair amount of torture that makes the endurance of The Passion of the Christ seem plausible. There are few holds barred. Just as you think, 'they won't show us that', they do. In fact, they do more. And they reveal some ghastly secrets. But, it moves in an out of the abduction to a sub-plot about a sex-obsessed friend and his Goth partner at the dance who is the daughter of the policeman searching for Brent – and another tie-in to the initial accident.

Xavier Samuel does his best with a role that scarcely lets him speak or make sounds, just suffer in enforced silence. As said, John Brumpton, coat and tie and forever praising and pandering to his little princess, Lola, uses his face to indicate all kinds of morbidity and morbid satisfaction. It is left to Robin McReavy as Lola to combine a pretty in pink (literally) sweetness with complete vindictive madness and mayhem. While you guess that it won't end 100% badly, you will feel that you are behaving badly with attitude as you side emotionally with Brent and his lashing out at his tormentors.

While well made, it goes in the madness-and-torture thriller file.

MACHETE

(US, 2010, d. Robert Rodriguez)

Could there be a película mas loco than Machete? Yes, but they tend to be released on DVD and disappear into mad movie limbo (or on to the shelves of the completely dedicated cult fans).

Should you stray into Machete (unlikely, given its title with its implied warning), if you last the first five minutes, then you have enough fortitude to stay for the rest. Others, who like their movies sane and quieter, will have exited. There are decimations, decapitations, slicing, dicing and gouging as Machete goes into action. And, every so often, the plot is interrupted by more of this mayhem until an all-out finale.

This is a Robert Rodriguez film. While he does make some of his movies for children (notably the Spy Kids series), he has a passion for on-screen violence, influenced by his friend, Quentin Tarantino, who would be giving full marks to Machete. There is something schoolboyish (in the bad, immature sense) about Rodriguez and Tarantino in the way they put violence and brutality on screen and then invite us to gloat with them at what they have achieved. It is not all that malicious in itself, it is just as if they are daring each other as to how this time they might outdo the previous episode. They may not have pulled the wings off flies when they were kids, but they probably looked on with a mixture of gleeful horror.

It is not as if Rodriguez can't tell a story and get you in with some of the characters and plot turns (even when you have seen them before). He is a storyteller with verve, and so he is with Machete. And, for visual effect, he has one of the most lived-in faced actor, the lined (ravined) fearsome, Danny Trejo.

Machete came to life first in one of the fake trailers in the middle of Grindhouse, the Tarantino-Rodriguez collaboration of 2007 that had two features and trailers as if the audience were at a 70s drive-in show, no holds barred (especially in Tarantino's ugly Death Proof). They had film stock that was grainy and scratched (as are the credits now in Machete). There was a B-Budget look that meant you were not to think 'highbrow'.

So, Machete, an earnest Federale in Mexico is betrayed to a drug lord by his boss, his family is killed and he almost dies after his machete performance (and that is the first five minutes). Three years later, he is a labourer in the US and is picked up by a wheeler dealer to be an assassin. This part of the plot is very like Shooter and other assassination-conspiracy thrillers. He doesn't kill. They pursue him. He is rescued by a woman involved in helping Latinos across the border and by an Immigration officer. And, it becomes even more complicated with Machete's priest brother (who, I'm sure never went near a seminary, or missed out on what he was supposed to learn if he did), the assassin-hirer's wife and daughter and the senator who was supposed to have been shot.

One of the reasons for that paragraph, besides a bit of plot information, is to be able to list the cast – Rodriguez must have huge powers of persuasion. The drug lord is Steven Seagal, with an accent, but still sword-wielding. The hirer is Jeff Fahey who used to be a tough screen hero. The officer is Jessica Alba who starred in Rodriguez's Sin City. The migrant helper is Michelle Rodriguez. The priest is Cheech Marin. The hirer's daughter is Lindsay Lohan (living up to her off-screen reputation – or, rather, notoriety). And, as they say, wait for it: the senator is Robert de Niro.

Actually, the core of the plot is rather topical. De Niro is a xenophobic and madly patriotic politician who wants to preserve the American way of life, so no change. He even shoots wetbacks and has himself filmed doing it. He is a demagogue seeking re-election with speeches about 'stopping the...' (well, there are only small boats on the US-Mexican border), but the screenplay lays on the redneck campaigning to make it like the bigotry it is. Audiences who stay to hear De Niro will be amused at the poetic justice of how he gets his in the end. Who says a loco film, despite all its blood and guts, can't have a message?

MONSTERS

(UK, 2010, d. Gareth Edwards)

There certainly are monsters in this brief drama about an alien invasion but, compared with an effects-governed matinee show like Skyline, which abounds in visuals of the monsters, this is a rather more modest film, a bit more thoughtful too.

We are informed at the outset that there have been NASA explorations of outer space and that, on its return, one vehicle crashed in Mexico, letting loose a mutating virus that is monstrous and devastating to humans and to civilisation as well. (Have we forgotten all about Roswell and all those aliens by now and concentrated in the movies on variations on The War of the Worlds and Independence Day!)

While there are some visuals of the monsters, they are brief and all the more effective for that, until a final vision which is not quite what we expected.

In the meantime a journalist-photographer is asked by his boss to forego his opportunity to make a name for himself in this crisis and to accompany the boss's daughter back to the safety of the US. We see the devastation that the monsters have wrought on cities and buildings (very effective because director, Gareth Edwards, has been working solidly in these departments for films and television for almost ten years).

This means that Monsters is more of a journey film than a horror film, although there are quite a number of episodes, especially in the Mexican jungles, that offer some tingles of terror.

The focus is on the couple and the difficulties in their journey: finding a ferry to take them to the US and the exorbitant prices, passport restraints and robberies, kindly members of an outlying village, trekking on foot with people smugglers, the decreasing number of guides.

Then you begin to wonder what the film-makers had in mind when they set the film in Mexico. On the map shown, half of Mexico, the part adjacent to the US, is seen to be the infected area. The Americans have built a huge wall, with ramparts, to keep the illegals out as they journey north to the border against difficult odds. An allegory of self-centred and xenophobic Americans and the fear of monsters and infection from south of the border? (In Roland Emmerich's The Day After Tomorrow, when the northern part of the world froze, the Americans were making their way in droves to cross the Rio Grande to find safety in Mexico!)

Be that as it may, Monsters is a more 'art-house' terror film than a multiplex horror show.

RARE EXPORTS

(Finland, 2010, d. Jalmari Helander)

Forget miracles on 34th Street and Kris Kringle, forget Tim Allen and Santa Clauses – even forget St Nicholas. While it is sub-titled for English language distribution, A Christmas Tale, this is not anything like what you may have been expecting.

Whether it's the climate in Finland or something in the venison diet, the Finns have made a succession of films which are heavily ironic, black comedies from directors like Aki Kaurismäki (he of the Leningrad Cowboys). Writer-director, Jalmari Helander, is obviously in this tradition. It is his story, his writing and direction as well as the striking production design. His brother collaborated with the effects and the computer work.

In under 80 minutes, we are taken into another world, way up north in Lapland where we might have thought a nice Santa Claus and his elves work heartily away making the toys for all the gifts for children everywhere. But, this Lapland is a rugged place, peopled by tough men and labourers with reindeer herds and butcheries, trying to earn their living in snowbound villages.

But, there is a mysterious company excavating a mountain, with a mysterious, English-speaking entrepreneur who has been wanting to dig into Santa's workshop since he was a child.

Ah, Santa. Two young boys trespass and hear some of the plans. Our hero, a younger boy who lives with his father, finds as many books as he can to discover what the truth is behind the Santa story. What is revealed is even grimmer than some of the Norse myths. Santa looks like a monster who, elsewhere, would surely be serving a long-term jail sentence for his brutality against children. He seems to have been into spanking. The books show us some alarming images.

When the reindeer herd is killed, there is a herdsman uprising against the excavators. The fantasy then gets fiercer as a motley group of elderly naked elves are rounded up and the little boy confronts a monstrous Santa.

Obviously, this is not a Christmas film for children (unless you empathise with this Santa and want to frighten and punish them!). It is very much a Christmas film for adults who like an intriguingly offbeat dramas which are haunted by the eerie wintry atmosphere of the Arctic Circle and get audiences thinking about Christmas (without reference at all to the gospel and historical origins) and, especially, its commercialism.

However, the twist at the end is not in the direction of idealism at all. The pragmatic Laplanders are unhappy about losing their livelihood and, after their confrontation with Santa's helpers, they find their own way of exploiting the situation with some rare exports.

Someone who really won't like this film is red-nosed Rudolph!

SISTERS OF WAR

(Australia, 2010, d. Brendan Maher)

A World War II memoir that re-creates events in New Britain during the Japanese invasion and occupation, a story of interest to all Australians who want to know more about the war and the experience of Australian soldiers, nurses – and nuns. Screened in the aftermath of the celebrations for the canonisation of Mary McKillop and extensive media reporting about Mary and about the Josephite sisters, here is a story about the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, especially Sister Berenice Twohill and her working with and growing friendship with nursing sister, Lorna Whyte. Audiences expecting a treatment in the soft vein, will be surprised at the tough core of the film.

The background of the mission in Vunapope outside Rabaul is a story in itself. It was established by German Missionaries of the Sacred Heart and staffed by the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart (of French origin) who were excluded from working in German territories at the end of the 19th century, so a new congregation of Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart was established with German sisters. By 1940, when Vunapope had been built up into a thriving mission town, the priests, brothers and sisters were mainly German and Australian.

As the film shows, the Australians pulled out leaving the nurses and wounded who took refuge in Vunapope. They were captured and about to be executed when Bishop Leo Scharmach MSC bluffed the Japanese by saying that he was the representative of Hitler and his people could not be executed. This saved their lives but, especially for some dramatic tension in the film, Lorna Whyte is suspicious of the bishop and thinks he is an informant for the Japanese, especially for the rounding up of Australian soldiers hiding in the jungle. Bishop Scharmach had a Germanic autocratic touch but was constant in his attempts to deal with the Japanese to save lives.

However, the bishop plays a supporting role in the film which is the story of the nurse and the nun. Lorna Whyte, along with the squad of nurses, does her best with their limited resources to save soldiers' lives. The sisters become gradually involved, especially when they are confined to the convent/hospital area. Sister Berenice is awkward at first, devout in the style of the 1930s and 1940s, but with a blend of common-sense and faith. The two women get to understand one another – and their friendship has endured for the best part of seventy years.

The performances in the film are strong and credible. Sarah Snook has to carry most of the dramatic side of the film as Lorna Whyte, Aussie woman in captivity, dealing with uncertainties and sudden atrocities, with a certain Protestant scepticism about nuns. The final years of the war were spent in Japan by the nurses in hard labour until they were liberated by the Americans. The film does not shirk any of this hardship. And earlier scenes of hospital treatment are quite graphic.

The sisters stay in Vunapope until it is flattened by bombing raids and the Japanese transfer the mission personnel to Ramale valley where they are finally found by Australian troops.

It should be said that the production values are quite high, the use of Queensland locations for New Britain, with an authentic feel and look. The film does not look like a low-budget feature.

The cast is strong as well. Sarah Snook is able to combine fortitude with vulnerability. Claire van der Boom has the more difficult role playing Sister Berenice, helping the audience understand the transitions that happened in her life, from a devoted missionary with the people of New Britain, to a necessary 'worldliness' to deal with the Japanese physical and psychological violence, to help the soldiers, to be sensitive to frightened young Japanese soldiers, to learn that wars begin with hatred, to draw on inner strength for leadership.

Susie Porter does fine work as Kay Parker the matron and stands out in several scenes, defying the advances of the Japanese commander, rallying the nurses, hands on with tending the soldiers, and a final moving scene in Japan where

an officer, crazed with grief and the death of his wife and children, threatens the women and the matron offers an empathy that contributes to the officer's backing off and weeping.

Bishop Scharmach is played by Scots actor, Gerald Lepkowski, an ambiguous figure for the nurses and, perhaps, for the audience, as we see his efforts to save people's lives which some, like Lorna, initially interpret as collaboration. He has the touch of the prince bishop until Lorna removes shrapnel from near his carotid artery and he has to bend – until he finally feels he has dried up inside. Nevertheless Sister Berenice demands that he assist a dying indigenous sister.

In fact, there are many fine vignettes in John Misto's screenplay with Brendan Maher's sympathetic direction. Some are surprising, like Bishop Scharmach going from giving communion to his congregation to the wire fence where three Japanese Catholic soldiers also receive. The women put on a musical evening with songs from *The Mikado*, Sister Berenice intoning 'Deferred... to the Lord High Executioner' when the commanding officer arrives. It could have cost them their lives, as they realise, but they also say it was funny. And it is.

The happy ending comes with many tears but some of the tears are from seeing Lorna and Sister Berenice in 2010, still admirable women who show us the value of life.

From a Catholic point of view, we can be pleased that a film has been made about these people and these significant events, with respect and with insight, that shows religious men and women with their strengths and their weaknesses – and heroism.

[Yes, the script does have Bishop Scharmach saying that he 'ordained' Sister Maria; and there is a picture in the background of Saint Maria Goretti who was not canonised until 1950. But the screenplay overall gets it right.]

Bishop Scharmach wrote a memoir, *This Crowd Beats Us All*. Ken Scully, Catholic Weekly journalist, wrote the story of Fr Ted Harris MSC, who helped Australian soldiers escape from New Britain and was executed by the Japanese, *Every Man for Himself*. Gillian Nikakis wrote *He's Not Coming Home* about Rabaul. Sister Berenice's memoir, *Just one of the Crowd, The internment of Sister Berenice of Rabaul*, is from Austinmer, 1983.

Sisters of War was based on research by auctioneer, Rod Miller, who came across a journal by a nurse in Rabaul and continued to gather more information about the events in New Britain.

The ABC also screened a 10 minute 'extra' for the DVD release, a meeting between Sister Berenice and Lorna Whyte, a vigorous exchange and vivid memories still, which shows how full of life, despite their hardships, these two women still are, over 65 years later.

[Audiences may be familiar with *A Town Like Alice*, from Nevil Shute's novel, the 1956 film version and the later television mini-series. A fine treatment of women interned in Sumatra (including a Dutch nun) is in Bruce Beresford's *Paradise Road*. For Catholic interest (and beyond), John Duigan's film of war photographer, Damien Parer, *Fragments of War*, shows the war in the Pacific.]

SOMEWHERE

(US, 2010, d. Sofia Coppola)

Somewhere could have been called Anywhere or even Nowhere. The writer-director is best known for her Oscar-winning screenplay for *Lost in Translation*. This screenplay is just about someone who is lost.

There is an emotional problem with *Somewhere*, in identifying with the central character, your average film star, Jack (played with a blend of conviction in his performance and the lack of conviction required of his character by Stephen Dorff who has himself been around for a long time in the movies). Jack is not the kind of celebrity you would be eager to meet. He does the expected PR things, but there is a hollowness underneath this tinselly behaviour. We would not be satisfied if we were to spend time in his company. He is too shallow and too self-centred.

Sofia Coppola has set herself a very difficult task: how to make an interesting film centred on an uninteresting character. She has not always succeeded but, if we are willing, we can make allowances for that because she is showing the US movie industry and its hoo-ha – and its potential for destroying those who are lost in it. As the daughter of Francis Ford Coppola, and appearing in some of his films, she has a fair amount of background to draw on. And what she brings up for her film is not exactly flattering.

But, what she does do is introduce a character to be interested in, Jack's eleven year old daughter. She is played effectively and interestingly by Elle Fanning. She is a young girl of imagination, has quite some poise (but she does not come across as a mini-adult as her sister, Dakota, did in so many films at that age and even younger) and really loves and is devoted to her father, no matter what. There are many scenes between father and daughter, even meals and cooking while he is carrying on with some woman or other. His wife has walked out on him.

While Jack is caught up wherever *Somewhere* is, we do see a lot of what is expected of the star: appearances and smiles for fans, supplying copy for interviews, spending lots of time in make-up (and being still for the setting of a face mask), being whisked off to the media rounds in Italy, especially for appearing on idiotic Italian TV shows and required to perform inanely, and relying on minders. Then he has a lot of free time where he presumes he must go womanising. Be with friends, hangers-on, surrounded by people who ultimately couldn't care less about him.

There is a lot that is admirable in the making of and the performances for *Somewhere* but, maybe it couldn't, it doesn't completely grab attention or feelings.

SKYLINE

(US, 2010, d. Colin and Greg Strause)

WILD TARGET

(UK, 2010, d. Jonathan Lynn)

There is an increasing number of droll films about these days. These are smiling rather than laughing films which leave the raucous shenanigans of *Hangover*-like comedy behind and opt for some wit, some satire, some black comedy with touches of the absurd which is just that bit realistic so that we believe in the characters and what they are up to despite our knowing that it is all far-fetched. (To check on *Wild Target*'s veracity and realism, you would need a review from a full-time hitman, preferably British, who has eluded arrest and lives an elegant 'good life' in private, preferably on a country estate.)

Bill Nighy is the hitman here. Emily Blunt is his erratically and moodily wild target. Rupert Grint is an apprentice (but does not realise what for.)

If that cast is not good enough, there is quite a funny and ironic turn from Eileen Atkins as Nighy's demanding mother (she gave him a Baretta for his 7th birthday – she is that kind of devoted mother with high expectations). Martin Freeman is the most deadpanly calm of deadly assassins, with Geoff Bell as his sadistic but dumb assistant (asking for Rembrandt's address during art forgery case) and Rupert Everett is obviously enjoying himself as an art connoisseur who is hoodwinked about the Rembrandt but has more than enough money left over to hire the best hitman to get rid of the swindler.

There's enough plot to keep one interested and amused.

Bill Nighy is particularly good as the nearing-55, gentlemanly, impeccably dressed and spoken, expert at disposing of people, who is about to get rid of Emily Blunt, a skittish instant kleptomaniac if ever there was one (but not against selling off a fake Rembrandt for a million dollars) but finds he cannot. He finishes up accepting a role as her security agent – and this transforms his life and his ability to defy his mother. And Rupert Grint, on holiday from Hogwarts, gives a nicely judged performance as a young man who happens to be in the wrong spot (or the right spot depending on how you judge job opportunities) when the attempt is made on the *Wild Target*'s life.

Obviously, it's a farce. In fact, it is a very British re-working of a French farce, filmed by Pierre Salvadori as *Cible Emouvante*, with Jean Rochefort in 1993. It is so British in its manners, its buttoned up behaviour, its well-mannered and bad-mannered thugs, and its continually humorous spoof of British ways, that, even though it is really a very slight film, you enjoy it all the way through (unless you believe that justice must be seen to be done at the end, well police and legal justice anyway. It does not.)

Jonathan Lynn was one of the writers and the director of *Yes, Minister*. He has spent a lot of time in the US on more broadly comic movies. This is a welcome return home.

WINTER'S BONE

(US, 2010, d. Debra Granik)

A fine and serious drama, chilling in many ways, and demanding in terms of watching what is, for most audiences, an unfamiliar American mountain backblocks society.

The setting is Missouri, the Ozarks. The focus is on 17 year old Ree who is managing to bring up her younger brother and sister and care for her mentally disturbed mother. She has to find her drug-dealing father or the banks will foreclose and she and the family will lose their house with nowhere to go – despite the fact that there has been quite some inbreeding in the mountains and so many of the neighbours are cousins or related.

The film stays focused on Ree, a capable young girl despite the difficulties and her lack of experience. Her quest for her father takes her to her uncle, an addict, who warns her off but who does step in finally to support her. The other cousins are far tougher and won't reveal what has happened to her father though she suspects he has been killed. In the meantime, the local sheriff is demanding that the father turn up to court or else the house will be handed over. The sheriff is rather cowardly at heart as is shown in a later sequence, but he lives in a tough society that is anti the law.

The scenes with some of the relatives are quite brutal and frightening, especially the harsh and cruel behaviour of some of the women. While they have television in the Ozarks, the society is inward-looking, meets in bars for drinking and singing, makes money from illicit drug production (the successors to moonshine) and, despite the money they seem to make, live in fairly ugly, sometimes squalid conditions.

And the look of the film matches the storytelling. The wintry, cold and bleak lack of colour corresponds to people's grim lives. Ree has a plan to join the army to get a financial grant to support the family but even that is impossible for her.

There are some moments of give towards the end, some expressions of emotion and support for Ree despite the animosity and even physical violence towards her.

Audiences will be most impressed by Jennifer Lawrence's assured performance as Ree. We do believe that she is Ree and we believe all that she is trying to do for her family. The supporting cast certainly looks the part, gnarled, sometimes frazzled, often menacing.

While the families would not necessarily think of themselves as deprived, they are, deprived not only of material goods, but of a broader and kinder social awareness beyond survival and family close-knittedness.

Winner of the main award at the Sundance Festival, 2010.

END